Bound by Love

by Raberba girl (Raberba_girl)

Summary

[Only the first story is in script format; the rest is in prose.] Sora tries to get a job with the synthesis guild; Organization XIII has a Christmas party; Isa, Roxas, and Xion have to figure out how to share Lea after the Final Battle; and much more. My Kingdom Hearts fanfiction has so much cross-referencing that I'm just going to collect most of my canon-based KH fics here.
(Not so) Fun Kingdom Hearts Switches!

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Xemnas comes up with an evil plan to switch people's personalities around. So now Goofy and Demyx are engaged in an epic battle, as Sephiroth trains with his Dancers and Sora tries to summon Kingdom Hearts....

SORA is acting like Xemnas; DONALD is acting like Leon; GOOFY is acting like Sephiroth; LEON is acting like Donald; AERITH is acting like Axel; CLOUD is acting like Goofy; SEPHIROTH is acting like Demyx; XEMNAS is acting like Aerith; AXEL is acting like Sora; and DEMYX is acting like Cloud.

O.o.o

XEMNAS: Mwahahahahahaha!

DEMYX: Eep! *leaps into Axel's arms* Axeeeeeel, the boss is scaring me again!

AXEL: *dumps him on the ground* Get away from me.

XEMNAS: Kingdom Hearts, I have done you proud! For I have now produced: *brandishes a purple potion* THE ULTIMATE EVIL PLAN!

AXEL: I'm out of here.

XEMNAS: NOT SO FAST, MINION.

AXEL (indignantly): Who're you calling a minion? Hello, I'm only one of the most popular members of this stupid Organization, yo?
XEMNAS (not listening): You will drink this potion, Axel and Demyx. You will drink it NOW.

DEMYX: *bursts into tears*

AXEL: What? Why us?

XEMNAS: Because you are the only ones around at the moment.

DEMYX (confused): I thought it was because we are the only Nobodies whose personalities R.girl knows enough to write about....

AXEL (to Xemnas): Oh yeah? Well, check this!

He opens a dark portal to Hollow Bastion, where Sora & co. conveniently happen to be consulting with Leon, Aerith, Cloud, and Sephiroth. Well, with Leon and Aerith, anyway; Cloud and Sephiroth are too busy trying to reduce each other to lots of tiny pieces.

LEON: Would you guys either cut that out or take it somewhere else? I can't hear myself think with all that sword clashing.

GOOFY: I think that there Dark Depths place is still clear.

SORA: Yeah! You can fight there, and we'll come watch!

DONALD: Heheh, watch Cloud beat the livin' daylights outta Sephiroth, that is.

SEPHIROTH: Fools. I will decimate you all. *starts casting Meteor*

AERITH: Oh no! You can't destroy the town again, Sephiroth - Yuffie will be so upset because we just fixed it.
CLOUD: I don't think he cares, Aerith!

_Sora notices the fact that they have just been joined by three Nobodies. He whips out his Keyblade and leaps into a fighting crouch._

SORA: Organization XIII!

DONALD: Wak!

GOOFY: Uh oh!

DEMYX: Noooo, it's the little monster with the Keyblade! Axel, don't let him hurt me again!

AXEL: Demyx, has anyone told you lately that you are pathetic?

DEMYX: Yeah, why?

AXEL: Just curious.

XEMNAS: Mwahaha! Protagonists, prepare to face my dreaded Plan of Ultimate Villainy!

SORA: Oh no!

LEON: Quick, someone bash that nut over the head before he--

_Xemnas explodes the bottle so that purple potion goop gets all over everyone._

CLOUD: Too late.
Strange things start to happen.

GOOFY (coldly): Now, Cloud, shall we get ta business? Or do ya want ta eliminate them Nobody fools first?

CLOUD (cheerfully): A-hyuk, I think yer talkin' to the wrong guy, Goofiroth! *points at Demyx* I think that's yer man!

GOOFY (turns to Demyx): So, it's you who so foolishly thinks that ya have any hope of escapin' the darkness in yer heart.

DEMYX: *snarl* I'll never lose to you, Sephi...Goof...whoever you are! Dance, Buster Sword, dance! Or whatever my attack phrase is now!

Demyx and Goofy pick up where Cloud and Sephiroth left off.

XEMNAS: Oh dear, Demyx and Goofy are fighting, the poor boys. I shall clasp my hands together and fervently will that they stop.

LEON: Forget that! Fight, Demyx! Bonk that dummy on the head! Oh, wait, I'm supposed to be cheering for Goofy, right? Or...wait.

AXEL (confused): What?

AERITH: GOT IT MEMORIZED? Heh heh, I've always wanted to say that!

DONALD: *raises an eyebrow* You have?

SEPHIROTH (whining): I don't have anything memorized! I don't get what's going on. Suddenly, I want to go swimming, and now I'm getting glomped by Dancer Nobodies instead of fangirls.

XEMNAS: Tee hee, but the little Nobodies are so cute! When they're not, you know, attacking the town or my friends. Except that they never attacked my real friends. *pause* In any case,
they're still cute! *pets them*

AXEL: Oh, wow, this is crazy! Hey, Leon - or Donald, whatever - should we go find Merlin and ask him if he can switch us all back to normal?

CLOUD: No way! I like bein’ happy for once, a-hyuk!

AERITH: You know what, Cloud, that is kind of pathetic.

CLOUD: Yup, yup, yup!

DONALD: Leave him alone, Aerith, he's had a rough time of it in ALL the Final Fantasy VIs and in Kingdom Hearts. At least you're, you know, not dead in this universe.

AERITH: Heh, true. Got it memorized?

AXEL: Hey, you're making fun of me, aren't you!

DONALD: No, just your senseless catchphrase.

XEMNAS: Well, I think I'm going to try to find Merlin before Goofy and Demyx hurt each other too badly.

SORA: Mwahaha! Not so fast, minion - I hold the power now, and I shall erase people's memories and fanatically release hearts until my dream of being a real person again at last comes true! Mwahaha!

AXEL: Well, that's kind of silly, seeing as how you're the only Somebody who's still alive....

AERITH: For crying out loud, Xemnas, I can't believe you were stupid enough to switch your OWN personality, too.
XEMNAS: *smile* Don't worry, Aerith, everybody makes mistakes. I will always forgive you, and I'll be waiting until you find your light again!

LEON: Huh?

Xemnas hurries away to find Merlin; Sora drifts around joyfully killing Heartless and eating their hearts; Sephiroth starts coaching the Dancers on a routine to his "One Winged Angel" theme; and Donald, Leon, Cloud, and Axel go to watch Goofy and Demyx fight, as Aerith leans against a wall with folded arms to observe the proceedings with a smirk.

AXEL: Oh man, you think Goofy - I mean Demyx - can beat him?

LEON: He'd better!

CLOUD: Gee, I hope he don't get hurt or anythin'...maybe we should help?

DONALD: This is Demyx's fight. Leave him be.

AXEL: But that's kind of weird, seeing as how you're supposed to be on Goofy's side, since you're his friend, though I guess you feel like you should be on Demyx's side because he's actually got your friend's personality. And I feel like I should be on Goofy's side even though I should really be on Demyx's side, but I don't really like Demyx anyway...wait, I'm confused....

CLOUD: Uh, I think we all are, Axel.

AERITH: Got it memorized?

DONALD: Shut up.

AXEL: *sob* Seriously, you are mangling my catchphrase!

AERITH: Oh, for crying out loud, it's a stupid catchphrase to begin with!
AXEL: Don't make me go over and hit you with this Keyblade! I mean, these chakrams! In fact, since I'm really a member of the villainous Organization XIII instead of the virtuous hero of the story, I think I will!

Aerith grins and whips out her materia-laden staff.

AERITH: Bring it on, kid.

Axel brandishes his weapons, then pauses. Leon and Cloud watch him anxiously. Axel slumps in defeat.

AXEL: I can't do it! I can't hurt my friend! Even though you're not really my friend!

AERITH: Ha ha, loser.

LEON (indignantly): Say that again!

AERITH: Loser, loser, loser. Got it memorized?

AXEL: Argh!

DEMYX: Argh!

Everyone looks over and realizes that Demyx, battered down to, like, 5 HP, has just been impaled by Goofy's...shield. Somehow.

AXEL, LEON, & CLOUD: *GASP* DEMYX!

DONALD: Come on....

DEMYX: *silent manly wince*
GOOFY: Hyuk hyuk hyuk. Ya thought ya could overcome the darkness in yer heart, didn'tcha. Now ya know that you'll never beat me. Prepare ta face yer doom.

AXEL: No, Demyx! Don't give up!

LEON: Yeah, you can't throw in the towel, you're a hero!

CLOUD: Remember your friends, Demyx! Remember the power of the light! Here, have some sparkly happiness!

DONALD: Cloud, you are not a Disney character, no matter how much you may think you are at the moment. You do not have any sparkly happiness to dispense.

CLOUD: Aw, shucks.

DEMYX: *hardened resolution* Raaagh! *wrenches free of the shield* I won't lose, Goofy!

*Goofy laughs sarcastically and raises his shield to attack again.*

DEMYX: Dance, Omnislash, dance! Or whatever!

GOOFY: Yow!

*He glowers as he assumes his magnificently dignified Dying Pose. The effect is pretty much ruined since he's a goofy dog-thing rather than a gloriously beautiful one-winged swordsman.*

AXEL: Yeah! Way to go, Demyx!

LEON: Hooray!
CLOUD: We knew ya could do it, Demyx!

DEMYX: *small manly smile*

SORA: Mwahahaha!

DONALD: Oh great.

Everyone turns to find that Sora, in AntiForm, is snuggling an armful of panicked Heartless and has heart crumbs scattered around his mouth.

SORA: Kingdom Hearts! Take these last hearts, and make me real at last!

AERITH: Delusional idiot....

SEPHIROTH (happily oblivious): Dance, little angels, dance! Hey, ominous Latin chanter, tone it down a notch, no one can hear me singing!

AERITH: *applauds sarcastically*

SEPHIROTH: Oh look, a fangirl! Would you like an autograph?

AERITH: No.

SEPHIROTH: Don't worry, you can have one anyway!

*He scribbles his name (Sephyx) on a scrap of paper and presents it to her, beaming.*

AERITH: ...Oh well. At least I can sell it on eBay for a million munny once this personality-switching craziness blows over.
Xemnas hurries back with Merlin in tow.

XEMNAS: Look everyone, I brought Merlin! I hope I didn't take too long convincing him that I wasn't going to gobble up his heart, steal all his magic spells and blow up his hometown. I'm sure he can switch our personalities back!

DONALD: Uh, problem? *points at the maniacally-cackling Sora*

MERLIN: Oh dear.

CLOUD: Sora, come on down! Yer actin' all confuzzled!

SORA: Silence, emo-bish-turned-cheerful-dog-thing! My dream is about to come truuuuuue!

Sora is filled with light so blinding that everyone covers their eyes. He slowly descends to earth, where he is revealed to be...Sora.

SORA: YEEEEEESSSS!!! I AM REEEEEAAAALL!

CLOUD: Uh...but haven'tcha always been real, Sora?

AERITH: Somebody shoot that idiot.

AXEL: Oh man, I'm glad Roxas isn't around to see this...heh, he's probably cowering somewhere in Sora's mind, terrified of getting involved in this loony bin.

MERLIN: Hm, yes, I see the problem. All right, everyone! I want you all to join together and hold hands.

SEPHIROTH: But we're in the middle of practice!
DEMIX: I am NOT holding hands with HIM. *points accusingly at Goofy, who has not quite died yet and is ignoring him*

AERITH: I'm too cool to hold hands with people.

SORA: MWAHAHAHAHA! KINGDOM HEARTS! KINGDOM HEEEEAAAARRRTSS!!!

*Looking fed up, Donald goes around threatening to beat people up if they don't do as Merlin says.*

DONALD: I want my real personality back. That is, Leon does; I think it's kind of interesting not being the comic relief for once.

MERLIN: All right now; everyone concentrate very hard on your true personalities. Are you concentrating?

SEPHIROTH: No! I like being strong and sexy and so scary that no one can ever make me do stuff I don't wanna dooooo! *bursts into tears*

GOOFY: CONCENTRATE ON YER TRUE PERSONALITY OR I'LL CHOP YER HEAD OFF.

SEPHIROTH: *whimper* Okay.

SORA: Nooooo, I want to keep being a reeeeeeall person!

*Aerith impatiently whacks him on the back of the head with her staff. Sora crumples to the ground, unconscious.*

AERITH: That felt good.

LEON (interestedly): As Axel hitting Xemnas or as Aerith hitting Sora?
AERITH: None of your business.

CLOUD (thoughtfully): Or it could be as Aerith hittin' Xemnas or Axel hittin' Sora....

AERITH: I SAID, NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS. Actually, I'm not even sure myself. GOT IT MEMORIZED?

Eventually everyone gets serious enough to concentrate, and their personalities are finally restored.

DEMYX: Eep! I didn't do it! *flings himself through the dark portal back to the World That Never Was*

GOOFY: Yowch...I think I need a Hi-Potion.

Cloud stalks off in a mortified huff.

AXEL (thinking sadly to himself): Man, now I miss Roxas more than ever. Stupid Sora. *disappears*

XEMNAS: ...All that work by the boy who had my personality, and yet I am still not real. *dramatically flings his arms up to Kingdom Hearts* ONE DAY, I SHALL GET MY REVENGE!

SEPHIROTH: Shut up. *skewers him and flies away*

AERITH: *wince* Ouch...that brought back some bad memories. Which I technically shouldn't still have in this universe.

LEON: *releases a breath of relief* Looks like we're back to normal.
DONALD: Yay!

GOOFY: Uh, Sora? Sora...?

_He and Donald anxiously revive their friend as Saïx shows up to drag his unconscious leader's butt back home._

MERLIN: Oh, what a shame. I'd hoped to be able to have a captured Nobody to study.

SORA: Oh well! At least the original plot is back on track, right?

R.GIRL: Unless I get an idea for a sequel.

EVERYONE: Noooooo!!!!

THE END

_Author's Notes: When I first wrote this story, I'd only played Kingdom Hearts II, so I knew Organization XIII a lot better though other people's fanwork than through canon. I apologize for the OOCness. Ftr, I've now played five of the currently-released six games and have watched all the cutscenes for Chain of Memories, so I'm much more familiar with the Org._
Sora's Job Quest {Sora}

Sora's Job Quest

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Sora has decided on the career path of his dreams - synthesizing items with the Moogles! Will he make it into their ranks? Or will the challenges of job hunting be enough to overpower our favorite Hero of the Keyblade?

o.o.o

The Moogle's pom-pom bobbed in surprise. "Pardon, kupo?"

"I wanna apprentice with you guys!" Sora repeated enthusiastically. He was in Traverse Town, talking to the head of the Synthesis Guild. "I wanna synthesize items and stuff!"

"And stuff,' kupo," the Mooge repeated dubiously. "Um...well, we're not really hiring right now, so...."

"You're not?" The young Keybearer's adorable crestfallen expression was too much, even for a non-human entity, and the Moogle gulped.

"Uh...well, you can fill out an application, I guess...but really, we've got all the help we need right now, kupo," it added hurriedly as Sora's face transformed into a blindingly cute smile.

"Really? Thanks! People can never have too much help!" Sora gushed, swiping up the form that the Moogle handed him. He scanned it quickly. "Cool, I'll get this filled out right now!"

"Uh, wait, kupo," the Moogle managed. "In addition to the application, you need a résumé, a cover letter, your school transcripts, and three-- no, four letters of recommendation." It was pretty sure that the Keybearer had no idea what those things even were, much less already had them on hand. This would be a good thing, since the only creatures in the synthesis business were Moogles, and somehow they had to stop this block-headed human from pushing his way into the monopoly.
Apparently the Moogle had guessed right, because Sora was now looking at it blankly. "A rezzu-what? Is that like a new Keyblade model?"

The Moogle repressed an urge to giggle in relief. "Maybe you should go ask Merlin, kupo," it suggested.

Sora brightened. "Great idea! I'll be back soon!"

"Good-bye, kupo!" the Moogle said, watching as the boy raced out of the shop. Hopefully the whole incident was over now.

O.o.o.o.o

"Hey, Merlin!"

The wizard jumped as the door to his cottage banged open, prompting a delicate-looking set of test tubes on the table in front of him to suddenly emit crackly bursts of light. "Confounded it, I TOLD everyone to leave me undisturbed! Oh. Oh, it's you."

Sora rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Sorry, Merlin. Did I mess up your experiment?"

"Oh no, no," the wizard said briskly, striding over to the Keybearer. "Nothing of value lost, at least not when the fate of the worlds is at stake. What's the problem, dear boy?"

"Well, see, I wanna get a job doing item synthesis, and they gave me this form thingy to fill out, but they also said I have to have a bunch of other stuff like...like a rezzu-whatsis, and some letters or whatever, and I thought you might know what they were talking about."

Merlin stared at him. "Am I to understand, young Sora, that you've come barging in here because you need help getting a job, and not because the worlds are once more in dire peril?"

"Uh...yeah, I need help getting a job," Sora said, sounding a little confused.
"Agh...! But...! Urgh...!" After some angrily incoherent stuttering, Merlin finally sighed and regained his composure. "All well...bound to happen sooner or later, I suppose. Now then, I suppose you don't happen to know anything about writing a résumé, do you?"

"I still don't know what a résumé even is!"

"Hm, yes, I see...looks like we've got a lot of work to do," Merlin sighed.

o.o.o

SORA

1415 Paopu St., Destiny Islands
keyblade_master@tronlink.net

WORK EXPERIENCE

- Acquired all 70 synthesis items
- Completed all 50 synthesis material collection lists
- Twilight Town: Delivered mail, transported cargo, performed entertainment, posted fliers, exterminated bees, disposed of debris

EDUCATION

Destiny High School, freshman

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

- Keyblade wielder, two years
- Led up to three other party members in intense battle sequences in twenty worlds
- Successfully located and assisted in the rescue of ten missing individuals
- Encouraged three disheartened heroes
- Took problem-solving initiative with inhabitants of 100 Acre Wood in ten instances
**ACTIVITIES**

- Collecting item synthesis materials, two years
- Battling Heartless, two years
- Battling Nobodies, one year
- Completing missions such as Olympus Coliseum tournaments, two years

**NOTABLE BOSSES DEFEATED**

- Xemnas, Superior of the In-Between, Organization XIII
- Heartless of Xehanort
- Hades, King of the Dead
- Sephiroth, One-Winged Angel
- Maleficent
- Xaldin, Whirlwind Lancer, Organization XIII

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

- Other skills: Swimming, fishing, climbing, sailing, flying, skateboarding, singing
- Interests: Item synthesis, helping people, making new friends, visiting old friends

o.o.o

Sora flopped back in his chair and groaned as if someone had just stabbed him. "We're...are we done...?" he whimpered, his eyes glazed. The sky outside the windows was black, and the clock on the mantelpiece proclaimed that it was past midnight.

Merlin, who looked a bit haggard himself, got up and stretched awkwardly. "Yes, I...I don't think we're going to get your résumé any better than that," he said faintly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, young Sora, I must be getting along to bed now...immediately, I think...."

"G'night," Sora moaned. He dragged himself out of the chair in front of Cid's computer and limped over to the printer, where he picked up the (hopefully hopefully hopefully) final copy of his résumé and stared at it. "Now, you be a good boy and get me a job, okay?" Sora told it, too tired to sound as stern as he meant to. Then he stretched hugely, yelling at the ceiling. "Man, I've never worked so hard on anything in my LIFE! I can't BELIEVE we spent hours and hours on ONE PAGE!
Give me a fight with Xemnas any day!"

"It's a fight with a wizard that you're going to get if you keep making that racket," Merlin called grumpily as he leaned over the wash basin to clean his teeth.

"Thanks for everything, Merlin," Sora called back with a tired smile. "I'll be...I'll be back tomorrow." Then he trudged out to go find an inn and crash for the night.

o.o.o.o.o

"Good morning, Mr. Moogle!"

"Kupo!" Radiant Garden's resident synthesis master yelped in surprise. "Oh...uh, hello, Keybearer," it said nervously as it saw Sora walking up.

"Hey, so I was talking to the guy in Traverse Town, and--"

"Yes, we are all aware of your...career interest," the Moogle murmured unhappily.

"Oh. Cool! Well, sorry I haven't got all the stuff you asked for yet, it's taking a little longer than I thought; but don't worry, I'll get that application and everything turned in really soon!" Sora said cheerfully, looking refreshed and back to his usual high spirits after getting some sleep.

"L...Looking forward to it, kupo," the Moogle said weakly.

Sora waved again and continued on to Merlin's house. "Merlin, are you up?" he called, pushing the door open even as he was still knocking.

"What? Ah, Sora. Yes, of course I am." The wizard smiled in slightly harassed greeting, then set down the stack of books he had just fetched and made irritated faces at his sugar pot. "When, WHEN, confound it!" He flapped his hands at the enchanted vessel, which huffily slammed its lid back on and scampered to safety on the other side of the table. "Blasted thing," Merlin grumbled, swiping off the mound of excess sugar in his cup. "Would you like some tea, Sora?"
"Nah, I just want to get to work and get this over with," the boy said, hopping into the computer chair. "So, what now?"

"Ah, well, let me see, there was..." Merlin fiddled with a bunch of papers and notes until he found what he was looking for. "An application," he read, mentally checking off items, "a résumé, a cover letter, school transcripts, and four references. Let's see, so we've got that blasted résumé finished, and we've sent, ah, e-mails to a few people for those recommendation letters--"

"E-mails," Sora corrected.

"Whatever; we'll give them a week or two to respond-- I say, did you stop by your hometown this morning to pick up a copy of your transcripts?"

"Yup!" Sora said proudly, waving a sealed envelope at the wizard. "So that's two down and three to go! Guess I should finish filling out the application while you write the letter, right?"

"Now, if you think I'm going to be writing your cover letter for you, you will be sadly disappointed, my dear boy!" Merlin exclaimed disapprovingly.

"Aw, Merlin, you know I can't write." Sora snapped his fingers as an idea came to him. "I know! I'll get Jiminy to write my letter for me."

"Now, Sora," Merlin said sternly, "you are going to sit there and write your own letter like a man, or do you not want to get this job on your own merit?"

"Uh...I don't really get it, but I'll try, Merlin."

"That's the spirit!"

Deer Mooguls,
Hi! I'm Sora and I'm a KEYBLADE WIELDUR! I rilly rilly rilly want to do item synthethes for a living cuz wen I was going threw all those worlds trieing to save everyone I kept having to pick all these stuff up from enimees and I take it to you guys so you cud sinthiszie rilly cool stuff for me! Thanks so much for all the wepans and armer and axesseris and items you made for me the last cuple years! ULTIMA WEAPON is my favrite! I rilly want to nowe how to make that stuff for myself that wud be awsum. Plz hiyer me!

Sinerly,
Sora

0.0.0

"Finished!"

Merlin looked up to find Sora triumphantly waving a piece of paper at him. "Really?" the wizard said. He would have been pleasantly surprised, except that yesterday's experience had taught him more than he wanted to know of the Keybearer's incompetence in matters like this, and he was rather dreading what he would find on Sora's piece of paper. "Well, then, let's take a look."

Merlin stared at the letter, aghast. "Sora, my dear, dear boy, you cannot submit this atrocity!"

"What's wrong with it?" Sora asked in bewilderment.

"Why--! Of all the--! Confound it--!!!" Merlin growled and shook his head, trying to calm himself. "Now, see here. Don't you remember what I told you yesterday about using a standard size and style for the text?"

"But I thought that was just for résumés," Sora protested. "You mean I have to write the letter in boring font, too?"

"Of course, of course, my boy!" Merlin cried, exasperated. "You cannot submit a professional document in size 20 Comic Sans MS! And, dear me, did you even use that infernal 'Spell-check' on this?"
"I tried," Sora insisted. "But some parts didn't make any sense and it said my name was spelled wrong even though it wasn't-- See, look." He picked up a paper ball that he had tossed over his shoulder earlier, uncrumpled it, and showed it to Merlin.

O.o.o

Deer Moguls,

Hi! I'm Sore and I'm a KEYBLADE WEELDUR! I rally rally rally want to do item syntheses for a living cut went I was going threw all those worlds treeing to save everyone I kept having to pick all these stuff up from enemies and I take it to you guys so you cud synthesize rally cool stuff for me! Thanks so much for all the weans and armor and accessories and items you made for me the last couple years! ULTIMA WEAPON is my favorite! I rally want to now how to make that stuff for myself that wood be assume. Ply hiker me!

Sincerely,

Sore

O.o.o

"Hm, yes, I see what you mean," Merlin grumbled. "Well, I say, we've certainly got to do better than this, Sora! Now, let me see...."

O.o.o

Sora

1415 Paopu St.

Destiny Islands

Synthesis Guild

406 West St., First District

Traverse Town
To Whom It May Concern:

I am Sora, wielder of the Kingdom Key, and I am interested in taking on an apprenticeship in the field of item synthesis.

As a Keyblade wielder, I have had the opportunity during my numerous interworld travels to collect many items used in this line of work, including rare pieces such as Gales, Mythril Crystals, Twilight Crystals, and Orichalcums+. My interest in this field has grown from cooperation with several of your representatives, when I agreed on more than one occasion to seek out recipes and synthesis materials not only in exchange for the produced items, but also to complete collection lists and assist these Moogles in experience accumulation. It is my understanding that you now have several Level 9 Primo Moogles in your ranks due both to these efforts and to my support as a regular customer.

Although I am a resident of Destiny Islands, I have access to several Gummi Ship models, which can travel quickly between worlds. I will easily be able to perform duties either at the Traverse Town headquarters or on collection trips. I have extensive battle experience and am confident of my ability to defeat any enemies carrying synthesis materials.

I enjoy building relationships with others and have made many friends throughout my travels. I am eager to get to know the Moogles of the Synthesis Guild on both a professional and personal level, and to apply my skills and interests to further the Guild's work. I look forward to hearing back from you about an apprenticeship opportunity.

Best regards,

Sora

Keybearer

---

Sora flopped face-first over the table and fully stretched his arms out in front of him, practically drooling with happiness as he gazed at the final copy of his cover letter. "Yaaahahaaaaaay, it's done." Glancing over the words, some of them with meanings he was not sure of, he thought that the letter writer sounded like a completely different person, not like him at all. He sat up and grinned over at the wizard. "Ha ha, you ended up pretty much writing it for me after all, Merlin."

"At least I made you work for it," Merlin grumbled, pouring himself a huge cup of tea and this time
not minding when his sugar pot dumped an obscene amount of sugar into it. "Tea?" he offered wearily, sinking into his easy chair.

"Nah. Do you have any ice cream?" Sora asked hopefully.

"Hm...unfortunately, no. I think Yuffie finished off the last of it the other day." Merlin glanced at the windows, which were golden with late afternoon sunlight. "Now then, I suggest that you take a little break and then start on that application."

"Whaaaat?" Sora whined. "But I thought we were done for the day! That letter took FOREVER!"

"Well, it's your career, not mine," the wizard huffed. "The application is the last thing you have to do, other than waiting for your references to respond. Might as well get it done now."

"I guess you're right," Sora agreed, looking glum. "Hm...speaking of references, I should probably check my e-mail again." Sora was delighted with his brand new e-mail account. He had asked Tron to set up for him the day before, when Merlin had said he would need a form of communication where anyone could reach him no matter where he was.

Unfortunately for his job prospects, the only new messages he had received were from other friends like Kairi ("this is so great, sora! now i can talk 2 u even when ur far away!"), Riku ("why havent you been hanging out with us loser"), Olette ("cool! hey sora, u wanna go shopping sometime this week?"), and Pence ("Hey, I've been talking to your friend Tron, he's great! We're trying to work out a way to expand the computer network to even more worlds than we've presently got connected").

Smiling, but still a little disappointed, Sora logged out and then hurried to go buy an ice cream from Uncle Scrooge, who was just getting ready to close up shop for the day. He walked around licking at it as twilight began to approach, and caught sight of Cloud being emo in a corner of the marketplace.

"Hey, Cloud!" Sora called enthusiastically he walked up. "You want some ice cream? I bought extra."

The spiky-haired swordsman glanced dubiously at the ice cream bar in Sora's hand, then down at his own dark outfit and elfin good looks.
"Aw, come on, Cloud," Sora insisted. "I won't tell anyone you stopped being cool for a few minutes."

"...It's not like I care," Cloud mumbled, taking the ice cream and giving it a small lick. "This is good," he noted morosely.

"Hey, Cloud," Sora asked casually, leaning against the wall, "did you get the e-mail I sent to your phone?"

"Yeah."

"You did?" Sora said in surprise.

"Of course I did." Cloud took another lick of ice cream. "I never respond to messages on my phone. I just like to listen to them and read them. They make me feel...." Cloud sighed, his distant expression swimming with a wistful longing.

The Keyblade bearer understood at once. "You should answer your messages," Sora told him confidently. "If you talk to people, then you'll hear in their voices how much they care about you."

Cloud glowered. "I didn't say I wanted to be cared about," he growled.

"Everyone wants to be cared about!" Sora stated matter-of-factly.

"I'm not the kind of person people would want to care about." Cloud snapped off too large a chunk of ice cream between his teeth and suddenly gasped, crushing a palm against his forehead.

"Brainfreeze?" Sora said sympathetically.

"...This sensation has a name?" Cloud ground out, squeezing his eyes shut in pain.

"Yeah. You get it when you eat ice cream too fast. It'll go away in a second." Sora took another
lick. "Man, you should eat more ice cream, Cloud. I can't believe you've never had a brainfreeze before!"

"I've never had a lot of things," Cloud moped, licking his ice cream very gingerly this time. "A home...family...."

"Love?" Sora suggested obligingly.

Cloud closed his eyes, momentarily lost in a blindingly emo moment.

"CLOUD! You're DOING it again!"

Both young men looked up in surprise as Yuffie somersaulted into view and waggled a finger at Cloud. "Geez, I turn my back for two seconds and you're off being mopey again. For one thing, you did have a home and a family!"

Cloud blinked. "Oh yeah." Then he frowned. "I used to. Before Sephiroth completely shattered my life, my dreams, and my illusions, set them all ablaze, and smirked mockingly at me with his malignant emerald gaze before stalking away over all the burning pieces."

It was difficult to hear him, because Yuffie was talking over him in a no-nonsense tone. "Plus, you've got TWO girls who are crazy about you, not to mention a bunch of friends who really wish you'd answer your stupid phone once in a while." She blinked. "Cloud, are you eating ice cream?"

Cloud stared at her, then at the melting dessert in his hand.

"Sorry I don't have one for you too, Yuffie," Sora apologized.

"That's okay," Yuffie said, her mouth slowly stretching into a truly evil grin.

"Please don't tell anybody," Cloud whispered pitifully.

"Don't worry, I won't!" Yuffie assured him, in a tone that said she was going to send a mass text
message to everyone they knew as soon as she was alone.

"It's okay, Cloud," Sora said, patting the older warrior on the back. He finished the last of his ice cream and tossed the stick into a nearby trash bin. "Well, guess I'll see you guys later, I've got a job application to fill out."

"Good luck!" Yuffie called.

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Days passed. Sora, delighted with the fact that he now had his transcripts, a complete application, and final copies of his wretched résumé and cover letter, waited eagerly to receive his letters of recommendation so that he could submit the whole mess. He soon got a letter from Cinderella's Fairy Godmother, which was complimentary but rather short.

0.0.0

My very dear Moogles,

I can't tell you how happy I am to recommend this young man. He is a very kind, energetic boy with such a beautiful determination to protect our worlds. He treated the poor dear souls in his care with much respect and affection as he called on them for help during his adventures. I know that my dear Cinderella adores him, and I am quite sure that you will, too.

Best wishes!

The Fairy Godmother of Princess Cinderella

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"All right! One down and three to go!" Sora whooped as he added the letter to the basket of paperwork in Merlin's house (he was afraid that he would lose it all if he kept it himself). "I'll be a synthesis master in no time!"
Unfortunately, it did not seem to be that easy. Sora was not very good at waiting, and after receiving no other responses for what felt to him like an eternity, he set out to seek out some responses on his own.

"Good morning, Uncle Scrooge!"

"Oh! Why, hello there, Sora."

"Hey, Uncle Scrooge, did you get a chance to write a letter of recommendation yet?"

"Letter of...?" The old duck looked puzzled and irritated for a moment, then brightened. "Ah! Yes, I remember now, you asked me the other day. Well, don't worry, I talked to that pom-pom creature for you, told him he ought to hire anyone who'd come up with something as brilliantly crazy as sea-salt ice cream!"

Sora tilted his head. "Oh - actually I didn't come up with it, it's just that everyone seemed to be in on the sea-salt thing except you, and you're so interested in ice cream and all that I thought you'd like it."

"Yes, well, brilliant, absolutely brilliant," Scrooge said, taking an appreciative lick of the ice cream bar he held. "I say, would you like one on the house, Sora?"

"Sure!"

For a little while the two of them enjoyed their desserts in amiable companionship. "So," Sora finally mused, remembering why he had come, "you said you'd talked to the Moogle...I wonder if that's all right, or if he wants an actual letter."

"He'd better not," Scrooge grumbled, chucking his ice cream stick in the trash and turning back to the ice house. "I've got too much to do to be writing letters and whatnot."

"Oh." Sora thought a minute, then polished off his treat and walked over to the Moogle. "Hi there!"
"Eep! I mean, er...how may I help you, kupo?"

"Hey, um, I was just wondering if Uncle Scrooge can still count as a letter, even if he didn't actually give you one."

"Pardon, kupo?" the Moogle said, politely playing dumb.

Sora waved his hands helpfully. "You know. Like, he recommended me. So that counts, right? Even though he didn't write a letter?"

"Er...sorry, kupo," the Moogle said nervously. "I'm afraid you have to have four letters of recommendation, not just four, er, recommendations. Kupo."

"Hm...." Sora thought some more. "Maybe I'd better go ask the others...."

\[o.o.o.o.o\]

"Good morning, Leon!"

"...Hi, Sora." The gunblade master watched warily as Sora grinned and waved, walking into the study with Yuffie.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Tracking the movements of this terrorist group," Leon sighed, looking back down at all the maps and reports that covered his desk.

"Terrorist group?" Sora peered down at it all. "So you guys are having trouble in Hollow Ba-- I mean, in Radiant Garden, that's not from Heartless?"

"That's correct," Leon said. He lay down the green pen in his hand, picked up a purple one, consulted one of the reports, and made a mark on the master map he was constructing, which was rather colorful by now.
"Wow! I didn't even know that could happen," Sora exclaimed interestedly. "You want me to go hit them with the Keyblade for you?"

"No thanks, it's fine," Leon said quickly. "I actually...I actually have a really good feeling about this, it's just a matter of locating Rin-- of locating their headquarters, so that I can get their activities under control. Good thing Aerith offered to do some recon, I've got my hands full as it is...."

"Hey Leon, Sora's come to ask you something!" Yuffie said mischievously.

Leon sighed and laid down both the report and the pen. There was no use putting it off any longer. "About the recommendation letter?"

"Yeah! Didja finish it, Leon? Hm, but I guess I need to give Aerith some more time, since she's out working, right?"

Leon winced and rubbed the back of his neck tiredly. "Look, Sora...it's not that we don't want to help. We're all really proud of what you've accomplished so far, and we want to support you. It's just that right now isn't really the best time...." He eyed his work meaningfully.

"Oh," Sora said. Even the spikes of his hair were drooping.

Leon rolled his eyes. "Look, I'll try. If I get a spare moment, or need a break, I'll see what I can come up with - but no promises."

"Okay," Sora said.

"But you have lots and lots of friends, Sora," Yuffie pointed out. "Isn't there someone else who can write you a letter?"

"Well, I guess I can try to e-mail some more people," Sora said thoughtfully. "And-- Oh! I can ask Merlin! See you guys later, okay?"
"Okay. Bye, Sora!" Yuffie called, waving as Sora dashed out of the house.

"Gah--! If--! Did you--?! For heaven's sake, I said no!"

"Aw, come on, Merlin! You're really good at writing and stuff, you can write me a good letter!"

Merlin frowned and waggled his finger sternly. "I think I've done quite a lot for you, young man, including virtually writing your cover letter."

"Pleeeeeease?"

Merlin was a crotchety old man, but even he was not wholly immune to Sora's Puppy-Eyed Stare. "Now...now, now, Sora, I...." Merlin slapped a hand over his eyes. "Dash it all! Look, boy-- Just first see what you can dig up on your own. You've got plenty of friends, I'm sure you'll do well for recommendations. If, however, you still find yourself having trouble, I...." He sighed in surrender. "I will write you a recommendation. But only if! And not a moment sooner!"

"Okay," Sora said. "Thanks, Merlin."

The old wizard softened a little. "Don't worry, my dear boy," he said, putting a hand comfortably on Sora's shoulder. "There's still time. I'm sure some letters will start trickling in any day now."

With renewed determination, Sora sat down and made a thorough list of people who might be able to write him good letters, and he sent e-mails to all the ones with Internet connections. Then he boarded a Gummi ship and set off to visit the others in person.

About half an hour after his departure he received a response from Stitch, but unfortunately it was in an alien language and ended up unnoticed in the spam folder, where it was automatically deleted twenty-four hours later.

Meanwhile, Sora landed in Agrabah, got happily distracted for a while by the peddler's newest skateboard challenge, then fought his way through groups of Heartless to the palace...
...where the door was still locked. "Still?!" Sora pounded on the door. "It's been, what, five games now, and they haven't gotten around to designing the interior of the palace yet?!" Just for kicks he tried his Keyblade on it, but as usual, the weapon only worked on locks that served as plot points. "Argh!"

"SORA! I KNEW THAT SPIKY HEAD LOOKED FAMILIAR!"

Sora had not finished turning around before he was swept up in a giant blue hug. "Urgh...good to see you too, Genie," he grunted, trying and failing to breathe.

"I'M SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU! It's been boring as all get-out ever since Al and the princess left. I admit, I've been feeling a teeeeesy bit lonely - BUT I WON'T ANYMORE, NOW THAT YOU'RE HERE! Let's go have fun, Sora! We'll bring Rugman and the monkey, too! And maybe the bird, I dunno; whaddaya think about Iago tagging along, eh?"

Sora coughed and wobbled, trying not to fall over; each sentence had been punctuated by a poof of smoke and the genie's abrupt short-range teleportation. "Uh - fun sounds good-- but wait a minute, are you saying that Aladdin and Jasmine are gone?"

Genie flopped over in a caricature of Utter Gloom. "Yeah...trying to sneak off on another attempted honeymoon, poor things."

"Whoa, they got married?!!" Sora exclaimed, happy for his friends but also a bit disoriented from Genie's theatrics.

"They've been married," Genie insisted, "ever since the end of the first movie! Er, game. But those goons up at Disney keep putting off their onscreen wedding, trying to milk out more adventures for Al!"

"Gee, that's tough," Sora said sympathetically, trying very hard not to daydream about a honeymoon with Kairi.

"It's all about MONEY!" Genie declared angrily, poofing into a manically-cackling green imitation of Scrooge.
"I know what that's like," said poor Sora, because he did. "So...I guess I'm not gonna be able to talk to Jasmine, huh." He sighed. "Oh well...."

"What's eatin' ya, little buddy?" Genie asked, poofing way too far into Sora's personal space again.

"Eep! Uh - well, nothing, it's just that I kinda thought the princess could write a letter of recommendation for me," Sora said sheepishly.

"You need a RECOMMENDATION? Well, why didn't you say so, pal!" Genie then dove right into a colorful, fast-paced musical number about Sora's awesomeness that rather delighted the boy, though when the flamboyant genie finally finished, Sora blinked and found himself back at square one.

'...Oh well. Better move on to the next world,' he decided, and headed back for the Gummi ship - that is, after being obliged to join Genie in some raucous Heartless-slaying, a humorous skit in which Genie played six out of nine roles, and some practical jokes on Iago.

"That was really great and all, but - I'm serious, Genie! I really have to go!"

When Sora had finally managed to extricate himself, he headed off to Traverse Town. Gepetto's house was dark and a little dusty, as if no one had been home for a while. After asking around, Sora discovered that the clockmaker was off searching for Pinocchio, who had given in to temptation again and run away in search of fun. Sora slipped a note under the front door just in case, then set out for Beast's Castle.

When he arrived, he was greeted enthusiastically by the servants, who treated him to lunch and another song-and-dance number, which Sora enjoyed. This was a good thing, since it meant that he was still feeling pretty cheerful when he discovered that Beast was off sulking somewhere and that Belle had apparently gone to look for him. "Hm...well, can you ask them to write a letter for me when they get back?"

"Of course, mon ami!"

"Thanks, guys." Sora smiled, knowing that he should probably go, but he was unable to help eyeing the vast dining table again. "Hey, you got any more of that gray stuff?"
The visit to the Land of Dragons was a little more encouraging. Although Mulan and Shang were away on a mission, the Emperor said that they were due back soon, and that he would pass along Sora's message. He also hinted that he might personally be able to contribute.

It was with slightly higher hopes that Sora finished the rounds at Yen Sid's tower, but neither the great magician nor the three good fairies had reappeared after providing Sora with the last adventure's exposition, instructions, and new clothes.

"I guess everyone's taking the chance to get their own errands and adventures out of the way before my new one starts up," Sora mused as he scribbled out a note. "Man, my timing must be lousy."

When the tired young hero returned to Radiant Garden, he grabbed a bar of ice cream as a pick-me-up and ambled over to Merlin's house. Then he nearly dropped it in surprise when he opened the door to find the Greek messenger god waiting for him (the wizard, perhaps fortunately, was not at home).

"Finally!" Hermes exclaimed, swooping up to the boy.

"Whoa!"

"Ahem! To Sora of Destiny Islands, from Philoctetes of Olympus Coliseum," Hermes announced ceremonially, presenting a scroll. "Though you know," he added more informally, sounding a little annoyed, "you shouldn't go world-hopping so much. I had the dickens of a time trying to find you, even with my divine powers!"

"Sorry." Sora eagerly unrolled the parchment and began to read it as Hermes disappeared.

In the message, Phil agreed to help, but only in one month's time, since that was when the current tournament would be over and at the moment he had his hands full with that. Unfortunately he had not been able to contact Auron, since the deceased warrior had not been seen since the last time the Keybearer had visited that world.

Sora was aghast at the thought of waiting a whole month, so he hoped fervently that someone, ANYONE, would respond sooner.

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The next morning, Sora received an e-mail from Daisy Duck. Apparently the king was off on a mission with Donald and Goofy, and all three of them would be unreachable for an indefinite period of time. The queen had gone on a tour to oversee the realm in her husband's absence, and would be busy for at least the next week.

There was also a message from Dr. Finkelstein's address, which actually turned out to be from Jack Skellington (the mad scientist was the only one on that world with anything resembling a computer). This e-mail was only slightly more encouraging:

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HELLO, SORA!

I AM SO HAPPY TO HEAR FROM YOU!

HALLOWEEN THIS YEAR WAS ABSOLUTELY MARVELOUS, YOU SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE! YOU WOULD HAVE LOVED IT! >:)

I GOT YOUR MESSAGE, AND I AM SO EXCITED TO HELP YOU OUT, SORA!

I'VE PLANNED A SPECIAL RECOMMENDATION FOR YOU, AND I CAN'T WAIT TO GET TO WORK ON IT! I ANTICIPATE BEING ABLE TO PUT THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON IT BEFORE THE END OF THE WEEK, SO DON'T WORRY! I AM WORKING BOTH NIGHT AND DAY TO GET THIS READY FOR YOU! >:). I WILL LET YOU KNOW AS SOON AS IT'S DONE! >:)

BEST WISHES! HAPPY LATE HALLOWEEN, AND MERRY EARLY CHRISTMAS!!!

SIGNED,

!!!!!!JACK, THE PUMPKIN KING!!!!!!
"Eek...somehow, I have a bad feeling about this," Sora laughed ruefully. "Good old Jack; good to hear from him, though."

He logged off and went to take a walk, then checked his e-mail again. Of course nothing had come in after so short a time, so he went to beat up some Heartless. When that did little to relieve frustration, he headed for Twilight Town to sign up for odd jobs, which unfortunately made the frustration worse instead of better.

"Look, kid, I'm not ripping you off," the latest employer said as he handed over Sora's pay.

"Huh? Oh, no, I wasn't mad at you," Sora assured him. "It's just - twenty posters in under thirty seconds! Seriously, it's impossible, even when you can fly! The ONE time I did it had to have been a fluke, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE I TELL YOU!"

"Whoa! I never said you had to do it in less than thirty seconds!"

"Not you, the cricket!"

The man gave him a very strange look, so Sora smiled at him and decided it was time to leave.

He went to Destiny Islands to see if spending time with Kairi would cheer him up, but he had forgotten that the school year had already started up again. Faced with a choice between getting chewed out for playing hooky for over a year (again, since he had already gotten a lecture when picking up his transcripts), or returning once more to Radiant Garden to check his e-mail, Sora picked the latter.

Nothing, except a chatty message from Olette. Which was fine, but it was not exactly what he needed at the moment.

"Why is this so hard?!" he exclaimed. "I have, like, a billion friends, but I can only get one recommendation letter?!" He logged out of his account with more violence than was strictly necessary in his grip on the mouse.

"Ouch!"
Sora blinked and peered at Cid's computer screen, which was wavering. "Huh?"

The display smoothed out, then dissolved into a blue background with a familiar face looking out of it. "Is something wrong, Sora?"

"Tron!" the boy cried happily. "Hi. Yeah...I mean, it's not a big deal, it's just that I'm having more trouble than I thought I would trying to get people to write recommendations for me."

"Ah - you need recommendations in order to apply for a job?" Tron sounded enthusiastic. "Do you think I could possibly give it a try? I've read thousands of them, and I've always wanted to write one myself."

"Really? You'd do that?" Sora cried gratefully.

"Of course! It would help you, and friends help each other, right?"

"You're the best, Tron!!!"

"The best, eh?" the computer program mused with a chuckle. "I'll get to work on it right away!"

"Great!" Sora said, feeling lighter than he had in days. He leaned back in his chair and laced his hands behind his head, smiling.

"All right, I've written it! What do you think?"

Sora blinked and sat up again. "Huh? You wrote it already?"

"Yes! I apologize for taking so long, but I wanted to spend a few nano-seconds going over it again, just to make sure---"

"Tron, you're AMAZING!" Sora eagerly scanned the text of the letter that Tron put up on the
screen for him. Then he ran yelling for Merlin, and dragged the wizard back to the house so that he could read the letter, too. "Isn't Tron AMAZING?"

"This certainly is impressive," the wizard admitted, tugging thoughtfully at his beard. "It...it rather makes it sound like you would be the greatest potential synthesis master in history, Sora."

"I know, right? Tron, I totally owe you!" Sora said happily. "Two down, two more to go!"

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The last two letters came in the form of expensive-looking, sealed scrolls from the Land of Dragons a couple of days later. However, when Sora took his basket full of paperwork to the Synthesis Guild headquarters and proudly presented it, his hopes were dashed.

"What is this, kupo?"

Sora blinked. "What's what?"

"This," the Moogle insisted, holding out the elegant scrolls. They were both covered with lines of beautiful Chinese script.

"Uh...they're letters of recommendation from the Emperor of China and his best army captain," Sora said in confusion. "They're kind of pretty, don't you think?"

"Very nice calligraphy," the Moogle agreed, rolling up the scrolls again and thanking its stars for the new excuse it had found to not hire Sora. "However, the letters are in Chinese, kupo. We - er, that is, those of us stationed here at headquarters - are not fluent in that language. Do you have any replacement letters to fill the quota?"

Sora stared at the Moogle blankly. "You mean...I have to get two more letters?!

"That is correct, kupo," the Moogle said in a relieved rush. "It looks like...well, we can't find any fault with the rest of your application paperwork...but we do need two more legitimate letters of recommendation, kupo."
Sora swallowed. He had received a short note from Beast, which had promised to send a recommendation soon, but the Chinese ones had come in first. "Um...can you maybe give me a little more time?"

"No problem, kupo!"

"Okay. See you guys later." Sora trudged away, scuffing his shoes along the pavement.

His upbeat attitude was slipping, and Sora was feeling more depressed than he had since the last time Kairi had been kidnapped. Donald and Goofy were not here now to remind him to keep smiling no matter what. The bright light and hardworking atmosphere of Radiant Garden did not suit his mood, so on an impulse, he boarded a Gummi Ship and set sail for the World That Never Was.

The empty buildings and deserted streets, the hauntingly beautiful theme music, and the perpetual night sky lit by the remains of Kingdom Hearts were all strangely soothing. Sora smiled a little as he hopped on a skateboard and breezed past hordes of minor Heartless, heading for the castle. As he passed the holo-Moogle stationed at the edge of the glimmering bridge, Sora paused and stared for a long moment.

"May I help you, kupo?" the Moogle asked politely.

"...No," Sora said softly. "Not right now, thank you." He headed up into the castle.

Fighting Nobodies as he ascended was certainly more difficult than it had been when he had had friends at his side, but this was not the first time Sora had fought alone. He kept doggedly on until he had reached the Proof of Existence, its air inexplicably chilled with sadness and loss.

Sora looked around at the twelve grave-like portals. Apparently the Dusks had been busy since the Keybearer's last visit, for the place had been cleaned up and repaired somewhat, allowing Sora to do more exploring.

Luxord and Saïx seemed to have covered their rooms with illusion for the battles where they had met their ends, because Sora accidentally broke through and discovered that the chambers were actually not empty at all. Luxord's looked a little like the storage room of a casino, with card decks and piles of dice and dozens of clocks scattered among various gambling machines. Saïx had
apparently been fond of chew toys.

For a while Sora happily distracted himself by going from room to room to investigate. He picked through Axel's video games, and then through the drawers of a room that seemed to have belonged to a woman. Some of the undergarments were rather mind-boggling, not that he realized they were undergarments at first.

Demyx's room was filled mostly with scattered sheet music and a tank full of decaying fish corpses (apparently the Dusks were not intelligent enough to realize that Demyx's orphaned pets would require feeding). There was another room that consisted of little more than a bed, a tidy library, and a desk with an inactive laptop on it, where nothing held Sora's interest except the bookcase full of manga.

One room was crowded with computers and laboratory equipment, the whole place giving Sora a bad feeling. He grimaced and tried another room, which turned out to be full of dead flowers. The odor of rotten roses hit his nose and gave Sora an even worse feeling, so he hurriedly went back out again.

Eventually he turned to the only portal that had not gone red. Sora laid his hand on the cold metal of the rebuilt gateway and paused a moment, looking at the weapons engraved on the threshold. Two Keyblades. *The Key of Destiny.* Feeling sad, he stepped through.

The room was completely devoid of personality, except for an old ice cream stick lying on the nightstand. Sora's heart sank as he looked around, and the emptiness made him suddenly tired. He lay down on the cold white bed and gazed at the gutted moon of Kingdom Hearts for a long time. Eventually he spoke, though mostly just to break the silence. "This is a disaster," he groaned. "I'm never gonna--"

He suddenly shot straight to his feet, a huge smile growing on his face. An absolutely *brilliant* idea had just occurred to him, one he could not believe he had not thought of before, considering *where he was standing right this moment.* "Hey...hey, Roxas!"

There was a long pause, and Sora worried that his Nobody could not hear him. Then, from within the depths of his own mind, came a very wary, "What?"

"Roxas! Yay, you can hear me!"
"I can hear you all the frickin' time. It's exhausting."

"Oh. Sorry. Anyway! Hey, Roxas, can you write me a letter of recommendation?"

There was a sense of incredulity. "You want me to write a letter of recommendation for you?"

"Yeah! It's perfect, I'm sure you know me better than anyone else does!"

"That's because I AM you, you dolt!"

Sora frowned. "So what's the problem?"

"...Sora, I'm not gonna write you a letter of recommendation."

"But why--? Oh! I see, you're worried because you're part of me now and can't really write anything yourself. Don't worry, Roxas! You can just tell me what you want to say, and I'll write it down for you."

The only reason Roxas did not argue further was because he did know Sora better than anyone else, and he knew that it would save a lot of time and headache to just give in to his "other" from the start. "Fine. But I'm warning you, I'm not going to sugarcoat anything."

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Hi,

My name is Roxas, and I'm a former member of Organization XIII, as you can probably tell from the X in my name. As you can also probably tell from my name, if you take out the X and re-arrange the other letters, you get the name of my Other. That's right, I'm Sora's Nobody, which means that I know him better than anyone else does, and I know that he's really good at saving the worlds, making friends, helping people, and being a dork. Not in a bad way, though. His dorkyness is the kind that seems to make some people like him a lot. I don't really care, because I have more fans than he does, and anyway, I've got Naminé, who I, unlike a certain thickheaded Somebody, am not afraid to get reasonably sentimental with.
Anyway, Sora probably wrote in his résumé that he defeated half of Organization XIII (I'm it's last surviving member, and I don't really count because for one thing I'm an ex-member, and for another thing I reunited with Sora), so obviously he's good at fighting. (Seriously though, don't ask me how. His arms are really spindly. *More than mine.*) He's also really, really good at making friends. This guy will make friends with every single person he lays eyes on, as long as they don't try to kill him or hurt his friends or something. Just ask pretty much anyone in any world. If you hire him, Sora will very soon be your friend, and the friend of everyone else he works with. Sora's also good at helping people. In fact, that's how he gets into trouble a lot. Take me, for instance. I wouldn't exist if Sora hadn't stabbed himself with a Keyblade to save Kairi and turned into a Heartless, so I guess I should be grateful that Sora is kind of dumb. Actually I'm not supposed to exist anyway because I'm a Nobody, but you know what I mean. Sora may not be very smart, but if you need help, he will do it, no questions asked. Including the question, "What would you like me to help you with?", which I really think he should start asking *before* he agrees to whatever it is people want him to do for them. I'm pretty sure he forgets a lot that I am part of him, and so I get dragged into whatever he decides to do.

Anyway, Sora is really good at hitting bad guys with a Keyblade, and he's really really friendly. You should probably hire him because if you don't, he won't stop bugging you about it.

Sinsirley,

Roxas, The Key of Destiny

O.O.O

"Hey, I'm not a dork," Sora said indignantly.

"Excuse me, but do you, or do you not, run around the woods playing games with stuffed animals, at age fifteen?"

"Well, yeah, but--"

"Or laugh at Goofy's jokes?"

"Of course I do, they're funny!"
"Or sing cheesy songs with mermaids?"

"You also said my arms are spindly! And that I'm not very smart!"

"If I had just 10 munny for each time you and your doofy friends stand around, adopting poses of deep concentration before you finally realize the painfully obvious...."

"What are you talking about?!"

"I told you at the beginning. No sugarcoating."

Sora shook his head and decided to drop the issue. "Oh well, at least I've got one more recommendation!" He looked happily at the letter he had just written with his hand but not with his own brain. "Thanks so much, Roxas! You're the best Nobody ever! Except when you say I'm dumb."

"Thanks," was the dry response. Then, "...You need one more of these things, right?"

Sora sighed. "Yeah. I guess I'll just have to wait for Beast to--"

"Get out another piece of paper."

"Huh?"

"Just do it. Gives me a nice chance to talk to him again, anyway."

To Whom It May Concern:

I am Axel, Number VIII of Organization XIII. This letter shouldn't really exist, since for one thing
I'm a Nobody and therefore I don't exist, and also I'm currently stranded in the Realm of Darkness waiting to get rescued in Kingdom Hearts III. However, since Roxas is such a good friend of mine, I decided to do him a favor and write him a letter of recommendation even though I'm not really in a fit state to do so.

Roxas is a great guy. He makes Nobodies like me think we have hearts again. When Roxas is around, you feel like life has meaning again. He's also really dependable. Like, when it's his turn to buy the ice cream for everyone, he always remembers and he never cops out like I do. He's also really determined to do the "right thing", like when he grew a conscience and left the Organization, or when he killed his other best friend in order to save the world or something.

Also, you can ask Naminé, I'm sure she has lots of nice things to say about Roxas too.

So my point is, Roxas is great, which means that somewhere deep inside, his Other (Sora) is probably worth hiring.

Regards,

Axel

Number VIII, Flurry of Dancing Flames

O.O.O

Sora stared at what he had just written. "You killed your own friend?!"

"...I really don't want to talk about it."

"But how could you do something like that?!"

"I SAID I REALLY DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT."

"Um, okay." Sora frowned. "And what does Axel mean by getting rescued? You mean he's not really dead?"
There was the faint impression of a smile. "You're me, Sora. That means you'll figure it out eventually. We'll be waiting."

The Moogles looked up in horror as Sora came bursting through the doors of the shop, waving two pieces of silvery paper with glowing blue print. "I got them! I got the last two letters of recommendation!" He threw them down on the counter in front of the head Moogle and waited breathlessly.

The Moogles all looked at each other, wanting to cry.

"These aren't really the best letters," one of them pointed out helpfully, after scanning the sheets of paper. "Quite unprofessional."

"Oh - guess I should've had Merlin edit them first," Sora realized. "I'll be right back!" He reached for the Nobodies' letters, but the head Moogle stopped him.

"Wait, kupo." It sighed heavily. "Listen, Sora. It deeply pains me to have to say this, kupo, but we can't...um...we're not...."

Sora's eyes were very wide and very, very adorable.

"We, uh...."

"It's no use, Boss," another Moogle said in a small voice. "We have to hire him. We have no defense against the Puppy Eyes."

"Really?" Sora exclaimed. "You'll let me be an apprentice?! W00T!"

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the doors swept open again, admitting three well-known figures.
"Your Majesty! Donald! Goofy!" Sora cried joyously. "Look, I got a job!"

"Sorry, Sora," Mickey said seriously. "We've got important work to do."

"Huh?"

"A-hyuk! Hi there, Sora!" Goofy called.

"We're gonna go on another adventure!" Donald added excitedly. "You ready to fight some more Heartless and Nobodies, Sora?"

Sora stared at them. "Uh...well, see, I just...."

"Kupo! Good luck on your journey!" the Moogles were all cheering. "Be sure to visit us any time you need items synthesized!"

"Um, Your Majesty, is there any chance I could stay just a little longer and start my apprenticeship before going on another adventure?"

"There's no time, Sora! The worlds need you! Everyone's counting on you - you're not gonna let 'em down, are you?"

Sora clenched his hands a little and bowed his head. Then, suddenly straightening, he smiled and summoned his Keyblade so that he could pose with it. "Of course not," he said confidently. "Lead on, Your Majesty! Let's go save the worlds again!"

"Together!" Donald proclaimed.

"A-hyuk!"

Sora smiled and held out his hand. "All for one and one for all. Right?"
Three more hands were laid over his. "RIGHT!"

So Sora set out on a new adventure, and he only looked back once.

Author's Notes: I got the idea for this during a frustrating job search, where I relieved stress by playing video games. The idea of Sora trying to write a résumé and other Kingdom Hearts characters writing letters of recommendation for him struck me as hilarious. XD I constructed the rest of the story in order to not offend FanfictionDotNet's INCREDIBLY DELICATE sensibilities, but in this case, I think it actually turned out much better that way, rather than just the résumé and recommendations with no context.

Although my own job search didn't go exactly the way Sora's did, a lot of it was similar, lol. (I did, by the way, eventually get hired a few days ago, long after I wrote the first draft of this story.)

Almost everything in this fic works with canon, but there are a few small discrepancies I couldn't resolve. Hopefully they aren't too big a deal.

Heh, for Sora's first attempt at a cover letter, most of it is what Microsoft Word actually offered me when I curiously put the initial draft through spell-check. :p

The recommendation letters by Roxas and Axel, btw, have some intentional errors in them to keep their writing style in-character.

Poster Duty - it's one of the two requirements I was unable to fulfill when trying to complete Jiminy's Journal. (The other was meeting the goal for the Titan Paradox Cup.) However, when I was looking it up to make sure I got the information right for this fic, I found a YouTube video that shows someone acing the stupid thing - five times. -- Guess I'll memorize one of those routes and try it again, even though I was convinced it's an impossible task....
Summary: After being kidnapped by Axel, Kairi has a brief conversation with him before she is taken away by Sаіx.

"I said let me go, you clown-faced jerk!" The transition was disorienting, being pulled from the sleepy warm brown tones of Twilight Town into the darkness of the corridor, then suddenly emerging into this place of stark white. Kairi once again yanked ineffectually at the black-gloved fingers that were gripping her arm.

Her captor rolled his eyes and finally let her go. She stumbled forward, then straightened and looked around. They were in a room that was almost completely white, including all the furniture, though the full-length window on one side looked out onto a nighttime view with a heart-shaped moon in the sky. The room's only visible exit seemed to be a sort of portal that was closed off with a shimmering blue barrier.

Kairi stared at that portal, gritting her teeth. She eyed her captor, Axel, who merely smiled and waved one hand in a be-my-guest manner. That did not bode well, but she had to at least try. Curling her hands into determined fists, Kairi charged at the thing that she hoped was a door, but when she was a few steps away from it, a couple of freaky creatures swirled into existence.

They were like lanky, purpleish, sharp-footed caricatures of people, with long appendages sprouting from their shoulders that resembled dagger-feathered wings. The creatures drifted menacingly before her, their razor-edged wings waving slowly about. Trembling, Kairi sucked in a breath and took a brave step forward, but then the things suddenly dove into the ground. They advanced, their wings slashing at her with deadly swiftness. Kairi gasped and leaped back just in time, then screamed in earnest when she collided with someone.

Axel wrapped a steadying arm around her shoulders and then held out his other hand before him. The creatures stopped, rising back out of the ground and drifting in a respectful manner. "They won't let you leave this room, but they won't hurt you otherwise."
"Call them off!" She had meant to say more, but the sound of the tears in her voice stopped her. She did not want to show weakness in front of this man.

"Look, just make yourself comfortable. Knowing him, he'll be so clueless and easily distracted that it might be a while before he comes for you." Axel tossed her casually toward the bed, so that she stumbled and practically fell full-length across it. In a panic, she scrambled to get back to her feet, but by that time he had merely plopped into a chair across the room and was digging through a stack of video game cartridges. He inserted one into a handheld console and began tapping buttons. The air was suddenly filled with tinny, incongruously chipper music.

Kairi stared at him for a while. It was like he had lost interest in her - all his attention was for the game. Finally, she lowered herself back down to sit on the bed, then eventually pulled her feet up so she could hug her knees. "You know," she muttered in a low voice, half to herself, "I guess I always liked the idea of being rescued by a knight in shining armor...I just never really thought about how unpleasant it would be to need to be rescued."

Axel made a quiet scoffing sound, his eyes still on the video game. "Wish I had a knight in shining armor."

Kairi glared. "What would you need to be rescued from, you heartless thug?"

At that, he looked up and grinned at her, tapping his chest. "Heartless. You hit the nail on the head."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

Axel sighed and snapped the console shut. "Do you have any idea what it's like, being completely empty of emotions? You get out of bed, you only slept for two or three hours the night before and your eyes are sore, and you think, 'Oh, I'm supposed to be lethargic and cranky,' so you drag yourself around and snap at everyone just because that's the thing to do. You get orders to end someone's existence, and you think, 'Man, that's a terrible crime, I ought to feel so guilty,' but you feel absolutely NOTHING. You go to other worlds and watch people laughing, crying, screaming, just consumed with emotion and acting like idiots, and all the while you're thinking, 'Man, I wanna be just like them.'"

"Then some zombie-eyed little punk comes along and bounces around, yapping out endless questions, spouting off every little thing that comes into his head, scarfing down truck loads of ice cream so that you remember what it was like to have a favorite flavor again...and then he goes off, he didn't care about you enough to stay, he gets his stupid butt captured and you go through all that
mess to rescue him and then you *finally* find him and he...and he doesn't even remember you...." Axel suddenly blinked and looked back at her, breaking out of his increasingly impassioned monologue.

Kairi personally thought that someone who truly had no emotions could not have spoken like that, but after all, he did say he was good at pretending. "He was important to you," she said instead. She had not meant for her voice to sound so soft, so filled with compassion, but then realized to her disgust that the play-acting jerk had succeeded in making her feel a little sorry for him. "You even told me before. *You and I both miss someone we care about.*" She paused, then decided to continue despite his warning glare. "Who is it for you?"

He looked away. For a while she thought he was not going to answer, but then he finally said, "You know...Saïx used to be my best friend."

"Who's Saïx?"

"Heh. One of my black-coated cohorts."

"There's more of you?" she muttered sourly.

"There are thirteen of us - well, there *were*. Our numbers have been...dwindling lately." He had an odd little smile as he said it, as if he had something to do with the crumbling ranks of his own allies.

Kairi shivered a little. "Well. If you and Saïx were friends, why would he forget you?"

She thought he might get emotional, perhaps angry, but he simply scoffed. "It's not Saïx who left the Organization, it's...." He paused. "Anyway, Saïx is the one who changed, not me. Once upon a time he might have had my loyalty, but now...."

She eyed him, gauging how far she could toe the line. "So how many friends do you have left, Axel?"

He only grinned at her. "You're a Princess of Heart, aren't you? Be nice if you could pull that restoration trick on me like you did for Sora."
A sudden commotion at the door startled them both. They looked over just in time to see the two Assassins burst into clouds of bubbles, which allowed a Claymore-bearing figure to enter the room.

Saïx dismissed his weapon as he gazed calmly at Axel. "Another stray puppy, I see."

"You're not supposed to be in here," Axel muttered sulkily.

Saïx gave a tight little smile. "Just as you are not supposed to be pulling stunts like this, Axel." He folded his arms and looked calculatingly at Kairi. "Still, your foolish games have provided an opportunity to further my own." He reached out to take Kairi's arm.

She backed away, and to her surprise, Axel stepped in front of her protectively. "She's mine. I need her."

"As do I. Hand her over, Axel. Or would you rather I inform the Superior of the full extent of your questionable activities? Yet you've been so useful to us in the past, surely he wouldn't brand you a traitor to be eliminated, would he?"

"Leave us alone," Kairi said angrily. Then her eyes widened and she looked up at Axel, who had not responded. "Axel?"

The flame-haired Nobody did nothing as Saïx moved past him and reached for Kairi again.

"Axel!" she cried desperately. Once again she tried to move away, but this time Saïx caught hold of her. "Let me go!" Axel just kept standing there, not meeting her eyes as she was dragged out of the room. "No! No! Axel, please help me! Please!" She struggled fiercely, managing to rock Saïx back a step, but then he pulled her on again. "I hate you people! Let me GO!"

Axel watched until they had stepped across the threshold and vanished from sight. Then his limp hands curled into fists. "You want a traitor, Saïx? You've got one, old friend." He flung out his arm to summon a corridor of darkness, and walked resolutely into it so he could find Sora.
Author's Notes: Got the idea for this and also wrote the rough draft when I was running late for work. I wanted to sort of fill in the missing scene between the time Axel kidnaps Kairi in Twilight Town and the time Saïx gets hold of her.

While replaying Kingdom Hearts II after becoming more familiar with the KH universe, I felt particularly drawn to something Axel says on Destiny Islands: "We've got something in common, Kairi. You and I both miss someone we care about." I kind of had that in mind when it occurred to me to write this.
Now I Have One Too {Repliku & Vanitas}

Now I Have One Too

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

**Summary:**  "It's always about your friends, isn't it."  "At least I have some!"  With Ven's cruel words ringing in his ears, Vanitas sulks in the Realm of Darkness until he meets Riku's replica. (No slash.)

0.0.0

'So death isn't the end, after all.'  Riku's replica looked around the dark path where he had found himself after being destroyed by the boy he'd been copied from.  'Looks like my heart will be wandering for a long time.'

Sighing, he picked a direction at random and began to trudge along.  The path stretched on until he lost sight of it in the darkness.  For all he knew, it would lead to nowhere forever.

0.0.0.0.0

Vanitas sat hugging his knees as he glared out at the dark ocean.  "The waves are really pretty," he said defiantly.  "I could watch them forever.  See?  I'm not bored at all!"  He was, however, talking to himself again.  "And I'm not crazy, either!"  Something about this statement struck him as wrong, so he put his chin back on his knees and glared again.  "I don't need friends...I'm fine on my own...."

Presently, a soft crunching sound caught his attention.  Vanitas looked up and found, to his astonishment, a person.  An actual, honest-to-God living being, a boy in a body suit identical to his own except for the coloring, making his way toward Vanitas across the beach.

Immediately, Vanitas jumped to his feet, hurled himself at the other boy, and tackled him to the ground in delight.  "You're breathing!"

"Um, yeah."
"You can talk!"

"I was programmed with that ability, yes," the replica said cautiously.

"Fight me!"

"...Well, since there's nothing else to do here...."

It was of some interest to each of them that they both wielded Keyblades. "What's yours called?" Vanitas asked.

"Soul Eater."

"Aw, that's a cooler name than Void Gear!" Vanitas whined. "Mine's bigger, though. And I used to have a really awesome χ-blade, but that poop Ventus broke it...."

"Are we gonna fight or talk?"

"We're gonna fight! I'm gonna kill you!"

The boys rushed at each other, yelling. They hacked away, occasionally stumbling in the sand, observing each other's moves with interest. Vanitas soon learned to jump back whenever he knocked his opponent down, since the replica packed a powerful punch with his counter move. The replica began Dodge Rolling away every time he scored significant damage, since Vanitas had an annoying habit of materializing behind him to retaliate. They were both very swift, sometimes flying into berserk rush attacks.

It was the most fun either of them had had in a long time, imprisoned here in the darkness, but eventually the replica's enjoyment began to sour. He was steadily losing HP and had no way to heal; Vanitas's attacks were causing more and more damage, and began getting harder to avoid. The replica got desperate. He flew into another rush attack, surging across the field - and suddenly hit an invisible barrier that felt like a brick wall. It stunned him for a few precious seconds, giving Vanitas the opportunity to smash Void Gear into him and send him flying.
The replica lay KO'd for a while, then slowly recovered. He blinked out at the dark water. Vanitas was kneeling beside him, shaking his shoulder in concern. "Hey, you. Wake up, don't go away, I didn't mean to break you. Don't go away...please don't go away...."

The replica slowly sat up.

"Yay, you're moving again!"

The replica stared disconsolately at nothing. "How could I lose?"

"Because I'm awesome," Vanitas said importantly.

"Grah!" Disgusted with himself, the replica got to his feet and instinctively did what he was in the habit of doing after every fight: he ran away.

"Wait! Come BACK!" Vanitas hurtled after him, catching up and tackling him again. "I said, don't go away!"

"I'm a worthless failure," the replica hissed. "Not only am I nobody, but I'm a loser. Why do people keep beating me if I'm supposed to be so strong?!"

"You know, I have the same problem," Vanitas realized. He sat up, crossing his legs and propping his chin on his hand with a thoughtful frown. "I'm the strongest ever, I control countless beings of darkness...but people keep beating me, for some reason."

"Who are you, anyway?" the replica asked resentfully.

"My name's Vanitas." When the replica did not answer, Vanitas poked him. "Who are you?"

The replica rubbed his arm, glaring. "I'm no one. Just a copy of a guy who was better than me after all."
"A copy?" Vanitas said interestedly. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a fake. A replica. Vexen created me in his lab to replace Riku, but that was a joke. I couldn't replace Riku...he was the stronger one all along."

"You know, Mater Xehanort told me the same thing about Ventus," the other boy mused. "I was supposed to be better than that weakling...but he kicked my butt!"

The replica peered at him. "Are you a replica, too?"

"No," Vanitas scoffed. "I'm a being of pure darkness, born from the darkness in Ventus's heart. I don't have a spark of light in me anywhere!"

"I wonder why you look so much like Sora," the replica said.

"Who's Sora?"

"This annoying kid I fought back in Castle Oblivion."

Vanitas uncurled comfortably, leaning back on his elbows. "So, Riku. What do you want to do now?"

"I'm not Riku," the replica snarled. "I'm no one. Just a replica."

"I have to call you something."

"...Whatever. Just not Riku."

"Fine, I'll call you Repliku."

The replica rolled his eyes.
"Man, are you as bored as I am?"

"There's been nothing to do ever since Riku destroyed me."

"That's because nothing ever happens here. Not 'til you came along, anyway."

"How long have you been here?" REPLIKU asked.

"No clue. Time is kind of wonky here. You hungry?"

"Not really."

"Well, get used to it, 'cause you'll never get hungry here. Ever."

"Isn't that a good thing? It doesn't look like there's anything to eat here."

"There's not."

"Not even fish?"

Both boys looked at the ocean. Then Vanitas leaped to his feet. "REPLIKU, let's go look for fish!"

They both took off running, inexplicably laughing. They splashed into the shallows, then waded deeper, their jagged skirts swirling around them. Vanitas was the first to dive beneath the water. He summoned a Red Hot Chili, which promptly drowned. So he summoned a whole bunch of them, constantly calling on more to replace the ones that were snuffed out.

The boys hovered in the illuminated waters, overcome for a moment with awe.
"No fish," Vanitas tried to say. Water instantly poured into his mouth and down his throat; he came up sputtering. Just when he had gotten his breath back, Repliku, who had surfaced nearby, suddenly shot him a mischievous smile and lobbed a wall of water straight into his face.

"*gack*  *cough*  I'll kill you!"

For a while, they were happily occupied in trying to drown each other. Eventually, they called it a draw and struggled their way back to shore, having drifted quite far during their tussle.

Repliku observed that he never really got tired, even though it was a long and difficult swim. It was as if his body had become frozen at a certain point of health, and he would never need to maintain it as long as he was here. "Maybe exile in this place isn't so bad after all...."

Once they got back to the beach, Repliku, whose fake memories were all about growing up on an island, fascinated Vanitas with stories about his childhood with Sora and Naminé. This dark shore had no seashells to collect or seagulls to tease, but it did have lots and lots of sand.

"Look, this is how you build them." Repliku started scooping sand into a pile. Just when he was starting to mold the shape, Vanitas stomped on it. "No, no, idiot, you wait 'til we've - we've, not just me - built this huge fancy castle, and then we - WE, not just you - get to squash it flat."

"Ohhh! I get it." Vanitas joined in the project with enthusiasm, and Repliku was surprised at how enjoyable it was, building a sand castle with Vanitas just like he had used to do with Sora, at least in his memories. This was even better, because it was real this time.

Eventually, the boys had produced a gorgeous turreted structure, with scalloped edges and tiny windows and a deep moat. "Too bad we don't have anything shiny to decorate it with."

"Hang on." Vanitas summoned some random Unversed and bashed them with his Keyblade. They exploded into soft plump HP balls, sparkling D-Link crystals, glinting munny orbs, and in one case a jeweled red prize. "Am I good, or what?"

"Perfect!"

Together, Vanitas and Repliku adorned their sand castle with the sparkly goodies. They stood back for a minute to admire their handiwork. Then they shared identical evil grins, summoned
their Keyblades, and charged. "Yaaaahh!" The castle was smashed, stomped, and bludgeoned to death with great glee by its creators.

"Let's do it again!"

"Absolutely!"

After the fall of the second sand castle, the boys went climbing, scampering over the lumpy rock formations out past the water's edge. Repliku found a little indentation shaped like a perfect heart. Vanitas smashed one side of it. "Now it's a broken heart, ha ha!"

"Someone broke my heart once or twice," Repliku remarked. "It really hurt."

"I was born from a broken heart," Vanitas said.

"Did it hurt?"

"I don't really know what you mean." They were lying side by side beneath a rock arch now, gazing up at the dark sky.

"Didn't it feel awful? Like someone had betrayed you, and you were full of pain and anger and sadness, and it felt so bad you wanted to die?"

"That's what I feel like all the time." Vanitas looked over at him. "Is there a different way to feel?"

Repliku sat up slowly. "I don't think I've ever really been happy," he mused. "I was artificially created and used as a tool, a slave, manipulated and discarded. But, in my memories...even though they're fake...I know what it's like to be happy."

"Tell me."

Under the empty sky, to the sound of the gentle waves, Repliku talked about his memories. How it
felt to have friends to play with, a family who loved him, a girl he thought the world of and wanted to protect.

"I wish I knew what that was like," Vanitas said softly. "But...I'm made of pure darkness. I don't know if I can be anything else." He looked at Repliku. "Ventus...at the end, when I told him he was obsessed with his stupid friends, he said, 'At least I have some.' He told me that his friends are his power. That he was strong because of them."

Repliku sighed. "I think I know what he means. Sora...he's an idiot, but he never stopped squawking about Riku and Kairi and Naminé, was always hanging out with those Disney Castle doofuses. And he won. He didn't just beat me, he defeated Marluxia, and Larxene, too. He was so strong. He seemed weak, but in the end he turned out to be so strong. Maybe that Ventus of yours was on to something."

Vanitas was still for a long time. Finally he said in a small voice, "Ven was right. I don't have any friends."

Repliku looked at him.

"I could never make friends, anyway. I'm pure darkness. Anyone who gets friendly with darkness is really stupid, 'cause it'll eat them up."

"I'm not like Sora and Ventus, you know," Repliku said.

Vanitas looked at him.

"I don't get my power from my friends. I get my power from darkness." He smiled at Vanitas. "I willingly embraced the darkness so that I could be stronger than Riku. I guess that makes me pretty stupid...but it also seems that hanging out with you would be right up my alley."

Vanitas smiled back. "So I'll give you my darkness, and you'll give me your friendship, and together we'll be strong enough to bust out of here and take over the worlds, right?"

They both laughed. "It's a promise!"
Author's Notes: Vanitas and Repliku probably aren't actually in the Realm of Darkness in canon, but the idea was too fun to be nitpicky.

I'm also not too pleased with the way the thematic material played out, but it does kind of reflect the stupid philosophy of *Chain of Memories* (Reverse/Rebirth).
A Gift for the Sleeper

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: It's kind of hard to celebrate Christmas in the Dive to the Heart. Vanitas takes a shot at it anyway. (No slash; kind of a downer.)

0.0.0

It was not fun, living in a sleeping body.

Vanitas himself had soon regained consciousness, sensing once again that his shattered half-heart had been touched by that child, Sora. Yet he was not master of this body. The body he had been born into was destroyed, and his original one only answered to Ventus, or to the two of them together.

It frightened him too much, whenever he tried to slip into the blank brain and doll-like limbs. They did not respond to him; he was completely unable to move. The eyelids would not open, all he could see was blackness. The Chamber of Waking was silent as a tomb. His failed attempts to take control of the comatose body were too disturbing, so Vanitas had not tried in years. Instead, he hid on the Soul World pillar deep within his and Ven's fractured heart, where he had full use of his imaginary body, where the stained-glass colors glowed comfortably in the darkness, where he could hear the sound of his own voice and the tapping of his footsteps.

He had pets. The three Floods were formed of pure irritation, and were therefore not very friendly or prone to hold still. However, if he hit them hard enough, they would get sluggish and he could hold them in his arms when he felt too lonely. He preferred that to letting the Unversed of loneliness take shape...when they were nearby, they multiplied his feelings and made him feel worse. Better to keep them inside, where their presence did not hurt quite so much.

Currently, Void, Nothing, and Empty were dancing in agitation at the very farthest side of the pillar from him. They always did this when Vanitas summoned and killed their brothers and cousins. He supposed it was not unreasonable.

"Finally. I swear, you guys are so useless." A lie. Without his Unversed, he would not be able to survive here with his sanity intact, if he even was sane anymore.
Vanitas reached down to pick up the only traces left of the Thornbites he had just destroyed: scattered HP and munny balls, and a red prize. The HP balls he ate absently, since they restored his health whenever his body began to starve. Then he hauled the Floods over for company and began to work.

The red prize went in the middle. The spikier munny orbs needed to be arranged around it a certain way. It took several attempts, but eventually he managed to fasten the construction together with strands of his own hair. The finished product looked rather like a jeweled spider, but was still recognizable enough.

Vanitas looked at his Floods. "I bet you stupid pests can't guess what today is." He pointed. The pillar had several rows of notches that had been cut all the way around its circumference. "I've been keeping pretty good count - I can't be off by more than a few weeks. In any case, we're celebrating now."

The Floods hopped and skittered about restlessly.

"Do you guys remember that one town we went to, with all the snow and the fat guy in the red coat? That's where I heard this song. Here's how it goes." He began to sing, his voice echoing eerily in the empty space. "You better watch out, you better not cry. You better not pout, and I'm telling you why...."

When he had finished all the lyrics he remembered, he smiled. The Floods danced away in alarm. "Okay. Time for presents." He bared his arms and held them out. The Floods shied away even more. Impatiently, he seized Void and dragged the creature close, shoving his arm against its mouth. It bit him, then began wriggling frantically, terrified of the usual retribution.

"Come on, idiot, I'm not gonna hurt you. Today is special. This is my gift to you."

Void bucked and writhed, then finally bit him again in desperation. He did not move. Cautiously, Nothing and Empty crept close again. Soon, all three Floods were sinking their small, razor-like teeth into their master's flesh, ripping at him with a vicious glee.

He endured it as long as he could. Finally, when the blood was running freely down his arms and the Floods were starting to nip painfully at his shoulders and neck, he shook them off. "Okay, that's enough. Hope you enjoyed it, because if you try that again before next year, I'll squash your eyes."
He got to his feet. Chewing on some spare HP balls he had saved, he walked over to the part of the stained glass image where Ven's free hand rested against his leg.

Vanitas laid down the star-shaped charm he had made, trying to position it so that it looked as if Ventus was about to grasp the thing. Then he moved to a different part of the pillar, lying down and curling up so that it was almost like he was looking into the stained glass image's sleeping face. "Merry Christmas, Ven," he whispered. "I miss you."

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Author's Notes: This ficlet kind of brought together two ideas. One is my theory on Vanitas's fate. After thinking about it, I've decided that he's probably sleeping in Ven's body (though for the purposes of this fic, I made him conscious). The other was that I just felt like writing a Christmas-themed story about Vanitas. I'm a total Vani fangirl...I can't help trying to woobiefy him. *sweatdrop* I think it worked a lot better here than in Now I Have One Too, which I intend to revise so that he's not so OOC.
Christmas at the Castle: Chapter 1 - ...Twelve blazing light-swords...

Christmas at the Castle
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

This fic is dedicated to Infamousplot, who inspired it. :)

Summary: After Demyx manages to pull off a majority vote for a Christmas party, Axel’s left to explain the concept to the kids. Now Roxas & Xion are faced with Christmas shopping for eleven jerks. (No pairings...mostly.)

On the twelfth day of Christmas, my best friend gave to me...

Chapter 1 - ...Twelve blazing light-swords...

"Is there any last business before we conclude?" Xemnas asked, surveying the meeting room imperiously.

The Melodious Nocturne raised his hand. "Oooh, ooh, I have something!"

"What is it, Number IX?"

Demyx enthusiastically slapped his hands down on the armrests of his seat. "I propose we celebrate Christmas this year!"

There was a rustle of surprise from the rest of the Organization.

Xemnas frowned. "Christmas?"

"What is the point of celebrating Christmas?" Xaldin rumbled. "Even if we had any interest in the first place, such drivel has ceased to have any importance to us now that we have shed our hearts."
"For you, maybe," Demyx pouted. "But - we've got kids now, you know!"

Everyone looked at little Number XIII, who squirmed uncomfortably under the sudden scrutiny.

"We've never celebrated Christmas," Zexion pointed out. "Even before we became an Organization." He glanced at Vexen for a moment, then away.

"Saïx and I never got an Organization Christmas, either." That was from Number VIII, who was lounging in his chair with an amused grin. Saïx looked as if he would sic a giant banana on anyone who dared suggest he might want a Christmas.

"Aw, that's only cuz you all joined before I did," Demyx said. "Man!" This was to the room at large. "How heartless are you people, depriving these poor kids of a fulfilling childhood?"

"If that was a joke, Number IX," Zexion said coldly, "it wasn't funny."

"Seriously, dude," Xigbar smirked. "Must be running out of good Nobody puns if 'Heartless' is the best you can come up with."

Demyx waved his hand dismissively. "Aw, I'll think of a better one later. The point is! Now that we have kids and I'm here, we have to have Christmas! Roxas, you want Christmas, don't you?"

"What's Christmas?" Number XIII asked cautiously.

There were a few groans and facepalms around the room.

Axel leaned over the side of his chair. "Buddy. You remember Halloween Town?"

"Yeah."

"Christmas is like that. Only shinier, and without the skeletons and exploding pumpkins."
"Oh."

Saïx stared at Axel, shaking his head a little in a show of disbelieving disgust.

Unexpectedly, the Savage Nymph now spoke up. "Well, I'm in favor of the motion." She was grinning at Marluxia for some reason.

"What?!" Demyx burst out in horror. "Never mind, I don't wanna do it anymore!"

"I second the motion," Marluxia said, smirking back at Larxene.

"Thirded," Axel said at once. "Roxas is in, too."

"I am?"

"Yes, you are."

"...Okay."

Zexion buried his face in one hand, his voice a mumble. "I have no objections to the venture if it has a majority vote."

Saïx closed his eyes, as if in a polite version of rolling them. "I have no preference either way."

Xigbar stretched his arms over his head lazily. "Ah, what the heck, I'm in."

Xemnas looked around the room. "What say the rest of you? Number III?"

"Useless drivel," Xaldin said firmly.
"Number IV?"

Vexen sniffed. "I have better things to do with my time than cater to the childish whims of our lower members."

There was an affronted rustle, but none of the grumbling was audible.

"Number V?"

"No preference."

"Number X?"

Luxord shrugged. "Why not? It could be interesting."

"Very well, then. We shall celebrate Christmas. When do you propose to hold the event, Number IX?"

There was a long pause.

"...Superior," Xigbar finally drawled in an amused tone, "Christmas is December 25th."

"That is nearly one month from now," Xemnas mused. "Number IX."

"Yeah?"

"As instigator of this plot, you shall be its organizer."

"What?!"
"You will make regular status reports to Number VII."

"Awww!"

"You all are dismissed." With that, Xemnas opened a corridor of darkness and vanished from his seat.

Larxene laughed. "Well, isn't this gonna be fun! Good luck with your new project, honey." She blew Demyx a sarcastic kiss and disappeared as well.

"Gah, I hate her!" Demyx looked around imploringly. "Come on, guys, someone help me out, here!"

"Dig yourself out of your own mess for once, Number IX." Xaldin vanished pitilessly, along with several of the others.

Demyx's eyes fell on the Key of Destiny. "Hey, Roxas! Little buddy!"

Axel abruptly stood up on his seat. "Don't even think about it, Dem. Roxas, the Proof."

Roxas nodded. He opened a corridor of darkness to the Proof of Existence and was already knocking on Vexen's door by the time he heard Axel materializing behind him.

It was not one of Vexen's Nobody servants, but rather, a small black-haired girl who almost immediately came out to meet them.

"Roxas, Axel! Vexen came back, so that means the meeting's over, right?"

Roxas nodded. "Yeah." He turned to Axel. "Hey, Axel...I had some--"

"Questions, I know." The older Nobody rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. "Xion, I guess it's
safe to assume that you have no idea what Christmas is, either, right?"

"Christmas?" Xion said in confusion. "Is that the Heartless we're fighting on our next mission?"

"God bless your clueless little non-existent heart, no. Come on, we're going on a field trip." He turned and opened a corridor to Halloween Town, amused when the younger Nobodies came trotting after him like puppies.

"We decided at the meeting that we're gonna celebrate Christmas," he heard Roxas explaining behind him. "Axel said it's like Halloween, but this time those kids won't blow up pumpkins in our faces."

"Oh, good," Xion said fervently. "I don't like when they do that."

"Me, neither. It hurts."

"You might want to duck, then," Axel advised.

"Huh?"

They stepped out into a dark, dreary courtyard. Just as they were looking around to orient themselves, an orange ball came flying out of nowhere.

"Ahh!" The two young Nobodies instinctively ducked behind their mentor. Axel batted the pumpkin bomb away and smiled in satisfaction when the rebounding prank blew up in the faces of its creators.

"Ahhhh!" Coughing and gasping, Lock, Shock, and Barrel frantically discarded their masks so they could rub soot out of their eyes. Then they leaped back, screeching, when they caught sight of the flame-wreathed figure towering over them.

The fiery spectre of doom smiled. "The next time you trick-or-treating punks play a prank on my friends, I'll roast you alive - that is, after I've shoved these chakrams so far up your little butts that you'll have more stitches than Sally."
"Oogiiiieeee! Save us!"

"We won't do it again, we promise!"

"Meanie!" The tiny hooligans ran away, still gibbering.

Axel laughed and extinguished his flames. "Heh, brats." Then he turned and tilted his head a little. "What's up with you guys?"

Roxas and Xion were huddled together, staring at him with huge eyes. As one, they looked at each other and then flung themselves at him.

"Axel, you were scary!"

"Like some big...fire...monster...thing."

Axel rolled his eyes. "Fine, I won't do it again in front of you." After a minute, he shook his arms, trying in vain to dislodge them. "Come on, guys! It wasn't that scary, you're just jumpy cuz you're in Halloween Town!"

Eventually, he managed to coax them down a road lined with tombstones, out to a forest that was just as dark and eerie as the rest of that world. That is, all except for one part of it, a clump of trees emblazoned with bright, colorful doors.

"I didn't know this place was here," Roxas murmured. He peered at the clover-shaped door, frowning thoughtfully.

"Is this what you wanted to show us, Axel?" Xion asked.

"No. The tree with the tree on it is the one we want."
 Roxas and Xion looked at him strangely.

"The *Christmas* tree! The one with the ornaments-- Oh, forget it." Axel marched past them to the Christmas door and opened it. They came over and peered into the black depths. "Hoods up. It's gonna be cold; don't want you getting snow up your ears or something when you land."

"Land?"

Axel placed one palm on Roxas's back and the other palm on Xion's, and shoved.

"Aaaahhh!"

They eventually landed in a pile of snow, which they were pretty slow to get out of since they were so riveted by the sight before them. They were on a white hill overlooking a colorful village, so much cheerier-looking than Halloween Town that it seemed to dazzle their eyes. Tiny multi-colored lights gleamed everywhere, reflecting softly off the snow.

"Heads up!" Axel came crashing into them, but they were too enchanted to care much.

"Axel! Oh, it's so beautiful!"

"Axel, what is this place?"

"Christmas Town," the red-haired Nobody grunted, shaking snow out of his spiky locks. "Come on."

Axel had to admit, it was fun just watching the two kids' first exposure to Christmas magic. He found himself smiling way more than he had a right to as Xion danced in the snow; as Roxas ran to look in the windows, the Christmas lights glowing on his awestruck face; as Xion squealed at her first sight of an elf and threw herself on her knees to hug it; as Roxas cautiously licked a candy cane that another elf handed him and opened his eyes wide at the taste.

"All right, enough already, let's get moving," Axel said gruffly.
"Axel, taste this!" Roxas poked the peppermint stick in his face. "It's like...like...eating a flower-cloud!"

"Roxas...."

"Oh." Roxas peeled off the rest of the wrapping and offered up the candy cane again, this time turned the other way.

"Look, forget the candy cane, there'll be a ton of them on the 25th. We need to start the tour before Saïx realizes we're not on a mission and comes bugging us with assignments."

"There'll be more candy canes on Christmas?" Roxas said eagerly.

"Yeah, like hanging on the tree or in the stockings or something."

"Stockings? Why would anyone put candy in stockings?" Xion asked.

"Yeah, and you keep talking about trees. There aren't any trees at the castle, are there?"

Axel sighed. This was going to be a long afternoon.

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The elf at the clothing store gasped in surprise when the three customers entered her shop: a man in his mid-20s, and two teenagers who huddled close to him but looked around with bright, inquisitive eyes. What startled her was the horribly inappropriate way they were all dressed, shrouded from neck to toe in black, as if they were some of those ghastly Halloween Town citizens.

"Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed. "Christmas is a mere twenty-five days away, surely you don't mean to dampen the festivities with those outfits!"
The children looked down self-consciously, but the man only gave her a haughty sneer. "Why d'you think we're here, Granny? We're aiming for some appropriate attire." The way he enunciated his syllables was condescending, but he was, after all, a paying customer, and was apparently making an effort to rectify his sad state.

"Well, you've come to the right place," she said briskly as she moved around the counter. She smiled at the children, who smiled shyly back. Really, once she had them dolled up to satisfaction, they would be quite precious. "Madame Holly will have you spruced up in a jiffy!"

From long experience, she knew to send off the girl with a large pile of outfits to try on and then keep a close eye on the males, who usually tired much more easily. She focused on the boy first. "Now, then, what's your color?" She took hold of his chin and frowned thoughtfully into his face, charmed by his beautiful sapphire eyes.

"He'd look good in tan," the boy's brother suggested decisively.

"Tan? Nonsense! It's simply a matter of deciding whether he'll look best in green or red."

"Are you kidding?" the man exclaimed.

"Perhaps white."

"Axel," the boy said hesitantly, "I don't mind wearing green or red."

"That's not the point, Roxas!"

Madame Holly tried several variations of traditional elf suits, custom fit Santa styles, and a few costumes such as a snowman and a reindeer, but eventually, she was forced to admit that little Roxas looked best in a uniform...which included tan pants. Since she thought the brothers would be adorable in matching outfits, she found a larger set of the pants and the red buttoned coat for Axel as well.

"We look like freaking tin soldiers!"
"That's the point," she snapped. "If you want something ridiculous, go next door to Halloween Town."

"Define ridiculous," Axel growled, but did not protest too much. He seemed to be worn out from the mountains of clothes he had been made to try on. Roxas looked a bit tired himself.

Xion, on the other hand, seemed to blossom as she came out every couple of minutes to model for them. Roxas praised her each time, since she looked cute in everything; Madame Holly had much the same reaction, but with a more discerning eye. Axel soon resorted to flashing weary thumbs-ups and thumbs-downs. "Oh, for crying out loud...go with that one," he finally burst out. "Look, Roxas doesn't know what hit him, you're gorgeous. Just buy a dress already."

"Well, if you say so," Xion said happily. She tugged at the edge of her skirt in self-conscious pleasure as Roxas told her that she was pretty again.

"Oh, dear," Madame Holly fussed, "it's lovely, but I'm sure a more festive color would be better...." She was cut off by the sound of Axel firmly slamming a pile of munny on the counter.

The trio finally walked back out into the snow, Axel and Roxas in their tin soldier uniforms, Xion in her short purple Santa dress. She adjusted the hat and shivered a little, despite the fact that she also wore boots and leggings. "It's even colder out here than in Vexen's room. Axel, can we please go somewhere else warm?"

Axel rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Guess it's time for Christmas Lesson Number Eight: Hot chocolate."

As he had known they would, they began to chorus in unison, "What's hot--?"

"I'll show you when we get there!" He led the way to a restaurant, where he ordered the works - hot chocolate, apple pie, fruitcake, eggnog, everything. "Now, here's what we're gonna do. We'll spread the food out, you get a little taste of each, I'll tell you what's Christmasey about it, and afterward, you can stuff yourselves as much as you want. Deal?"

"Okay," Xion agreed.

"Axel, how much is all this gonna cost?" Roxas asked worriedly.
Axel practically beamed with pride. His little buddy was getting smarter. "Ah, it'll be fine. Go out and bash some Heartless if you're worried. The evil jack-in-the-boxes leave some good munny drops, just make sure the ones with rifles don't shoot you in the face."

Xion sagged. "I guess this really is still Halloween world, even in the Christmas part of it."

Axel sighed and reached over to fluff her hair. "Hey, could be worse. We could have Jack Skellington planning our Christmas party instead of Demyx."

Roxas ended up voting on the gingerbread cookies as his favorite, and Xion picked the candy canes. Thinking it would amuse him, Axel let them both get tipsy on eggnog, until their waitress finally made a disapproving remark and took the pitcher away.

"Look, Xi-Xi!" Roxas gasped breathlessly, pointing at Axel's hair. "Axel! His head! Looks like it's on fire!"

"He's the Furry-- Foofy...Fluvy?" Xion slurred.

"Flurby," Roxas corrected. "Of Dangling Flames."

"Juuuust like the flaming pudding!" Xion shrieked, and the two of them dissolved into hysterical laughter.

Axel surveyed them distastefully. "I changed my mind, this is not amusing, we're going home."

"AHAAAA!"

"Flaming Pudding Head!"

"HAHAHAHA!"
"Furly of--"

"HAA, DON'T!"

"Caramelldansen--!

"Noooo, I'm gonna pee!"

"Flame-boiled--!"

"Don't, don't, really, I--! ...Axel, I wet my pants."

Axel slammed his hand down on the table. "Forget it, you two find your own way home!"

"Noooo!"

"Axel, don't leeaave meeel!"

"You and your wet pants get away from me!" Axel slung his coat around his shoulders and threw himself into a corridor of darkness, but not before both kids flung themselves after him and Roxas hit the floor face first, knocking himself out. Axel was forced to carry him, with Xion clinging to his arm, practically in tears the whole way.

"Last time I ever, ever let you two touch eggnog again...or anything with alcohol in it, for that matter...."

o.o.o.o.o

Saïx happened to be in the Proof of Existence when Numbers VIII, XIII, and XIV materialized nearby, all of them with disheveled coats that only partially concealed the irregular costumes beneath. The Luna Diviner watched as Axel herded both of the children into Number XIII's room. There was some yelling and crashing, and then Axel came out again, collapsing back against the portal's frame with a loud groan.
"Trouble with the subordinates?" Saïx said dryly.

Axel glared. "Aside from having to baby-sit a couple of dorks with bladder control issues and zero tolerance for alcohol, I'm peachy. Why do you ask?"

Saïx frowned. "They're underage. And were supposed to be collecting hearts, anyway."

"...Time was you'd smirk and make some insulting joke. You've gotten so boring, man."

"Are you trying to goad me? An exercise in futility. You should know that."

Axel rolled his eyes and wandered over to lean more comfortably against the wall. "Must've lost your sense of humor along with your heart, buddy."

Saïx merely raised his clipboard and began taking notes again, murmuring orders to a few waiting Dusks nearby.

"Oi, Sai. You remember our last Christmas in Radiant Garden?"

Saïx paused. "You mean the one where you set your stepfather's pants on fire?"

Axel grinned. "That's the one. Man, that was ages ago. You think Christmas'll really be any fun, now that we're not kids anymore?"

"I'm sure that the absence of a heart has a negative effect on the experience, if nothing else."

Axel looked away, thinking resentfully, 'See, this is why I stopped hanging out with you. You're so dang depressing now, Isa.'

There was a long, quiet moment, as Saïx kept working and Axel considered leaving. Then Saïx said quietly, "For what it's worth, I still find the recollection of those flaming pants to be faintly
amusing. Odd, isn't it? I should have no emotional investment in the memory at all."

Axel smiled. "Yeah, well, you can't go wrong with a pair of combusting pinstriped trousers."

"I can think of many, many ways such a thing could go wrong."

"Which was why it was always me setting things on fire instead of you."

"True."

To be continued....

Author's Notes: Slightly AU, because I wanted to include the entire Organization.

Technically, I suppose that eggnog *could* make someone drunk if they consumed enough of it and had a low enough tolerance for alcohol, but the effects are probably exaggerated here for humor purposes. *sweatdrop*

Infamousplot's fic *A Different Sort of Love* had a line in it that gave me the idea to write a story where Roxas & Xion go Christmas shopping for the rest of the Organization. XD It was originally just supposed to be a one-shot, but then I found myself adding in all this stuff about daily life in the Castle That Never Was, and the trio traveling to worlds that weren't in Days, so it got a LOT longer than planned. Eventually, I decided to do a "Twelve Days of Christmas" chapter theme, so I split up the material accordingly.

...Funny how the first one to actually say "flaming pants" was Saïx, not Axel. XD XD XD Ah, nostalgia...that scene right there at the end was my first attempt at AkuSai friendship, which eventually became my OTP. X3

This fanfic, being my first Kingdom Hearts non-crossover canon-based multi-chapter, became the foundation for much of my KH headcanon. Many of my later KH fics reference it in some way. ^^
Roxas cracked open bleary eyes and groaned. According to his bedside clock, it was what passed for morning in the World That Never Was, but he could have easily slept for several more hours. He rolled over and was startled to bump into someone - Xion was still there, cuddling up to him in her sleep. "Um, Xion?" He shook her shoulder gently.

She looked just as bad as he felt once she managed to pry her eyes open. "Mm...Roxas?"

"You fell asleep in my bed again."

"Oh. I'm sorry...." She stretched, yawning. "Ugh, I feel icky. I wish I hadn't fallen asleep in my coat."

"Me, too."

She picked up her Santa dress from the floor and left for Vexen's room, as Roxas went to his closet to dig out a change of clothes. Almost everything he owned looked exactly the same, with one exception. For a moment, his hand lingered on the outfit he had been born in, the tan pants and white sweater relegated to the very back of his closet. Then he sighed and reached instead for a clean set of black pants, tank top, and coat. He was not sure how Saïx would react if he ever tried to wear something different, but he really did not want to find out.

Only Zexion and Luxord were in the dining room when he came in with his bowl of cereal. Luxord was playing an elaborate game of solitaire as he munched on a bagel; Zexion was holding a mug of coffee as he glared at his laptop screen and navigated with one hand.

The Gambler of Fate looked up and smiled. "Good morning, Thirteen. Up for a game?"

"Um...not really," Roxas said. "I'm not all awake yet."
Luxord shrugged and laid down another card.

Roxas took a seat and ate a spoonful of his breakfast, looking back and forth between the two adults and wishing that Xion or Axel were here. Finally he ventured, "What are you working on, Zexion?"

He was startled when the Cloaked Schemer slammed his laptop closed and gulped down half the contents of his mug. Zexion made a gagging sound and hastily put the mug back down again. "It's disgusting when it goes lukewarm."

"All right there, Number VI?" Luxord inquired mildly.

"Yes." Zexion shook his head, still irritated. "To answer your question, Number XIII, I am researching catering services."

"Oh...I see."

"You have no idea what I'm talking about," Zexion observed.

Roxas ducked his head and ate another bite of cereal.

"Food," Luxord supplied. "Our dear Melodious Lazybum duped Six here into organizing the party food."

Zexion blinked. "He did, didn't he!" The young man surged to his feet, summoned his weapon, and slammed it down on the table. Roxas winced.

"Kick his bum later," Luxord advised. "Don't let that fool ruin your breakfast."

Grumbling under his breath, Zexion slowly sat down again. There was an awkward pause. Then Roxas pulled a granola bar out of his pocket and hesitantly slid it across the table toward Zexion. He was a little surprised when the young man accepted it with a curt "Thank you." Most of the other members would have been too proud to do so.
"Um, if you need food for the party, maybe you could try asking the elves in Christmas Town," Roxas suggested.

Zexion and Luxord both looked at him.

"Axel took us there yesterday. There was a place that had all sorts of Christmas food-- Don't get eggnog, though," Roxas added shamefacedly. "Eggnog is bad."

"I see," Zexion murmured, frowning thoughtfully.

Just then, Xion came in with a plate of jellied toast, looking downcast. Roxas eagerly patted the table next to him, though there was no need, of course she came and sat beside him. "What's wrong?" he asked in concern.

"I got in trouble," she mumbled. "Vexen was up late again in the laboratory last night, and he needed an assistant. I forgot to tell him I was sleeping with you."

Zexion's eyebrows climbed, and Luxord chortled. Roxas looked at them in confusion.

Before he could ask them what was going on, a corridor of darkness appeared nearby, and Axel's head poked through it. "Oi, it's late, Sаix is getting mad. You two better get your little butts up to the Grey Area before he sics you on another Leechgrave or something."

Roxas hastily scooped up his bowl of now-soggy cereal and hurried with it back to the kitchen, as Xion rushed beside him, jamming toast into her mouth. Even Zexion was right on their heels. They flung bowl, plate, and mug at the Demyx water-clone who was washing dishes and then high-tailed it to the Grey Area (Luxord, who had not bothered with a plate, beat them to it).

No luck. Sаix's expression was formidable as he paired up Roxas and Xion on a mandatory mission to defeat the Leechgrave's vengeful twin brother in Halloween Town.

"Do you have a problem with the mission?" he asked severely as the two youngest Nobodies stared glumly at their shoes.
"No," Roxas mumbled.

"Thank you for allowing us to work together," Xion said sadly.

"Hmph."

The Keybearers turned away and trudged into a dark corridor.

They survived, mostly because Roxas had Xion stay to the side and focus on healing him and restoring his Limit threshold and attack spells, while he concentrated his efforts on defeating the monster. It was still a long, grueling battle, but the Leechgrave fell at last.

"Roxas!" Xion ran to her friend, who was coughing and gagging from the monster's last poisonous attack. "Here, drink this, quick...." She managed to get her last Hi-Potion down his throat. Then she hugged him as he recovered, and it was a sign of how badly he had been hurt that he let her hold him for a good minute before he finally opened his eyes and pulled away.

"Better?" she asked at once, averting an awkward moment.

He nodded. "Yeah."

They walked together back to the central courtyard, where they both paused and looked at each other.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Roxas asked.

"I'm guessing it doesn't have much to do with RTCing," she said with a grin.

He grinned back. "Race you to the Tree tree!"

They pelted off for the forest, laughing. Roxas touched it first, and Xion came panting up behind
him. "Do you think we should go back and get Axel?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah."

"We should probably get our Christmas Town clothes, too, so we don't make the locals nervous."

Roxas laughed. "And this time we won't pee in them...."

"Definitely not," Xion agreed fervently. It had been rather difficult trying to get the clothes cleaned without any of the older Organization members noticing.

They ended up RTCing after all, but instead of reporting to Saïx, they snuck to their rooms to retrieve the Christmas clothes, then opened a portal to Twilight Town, where they found Axel looking very lonely and cute all by himself on the clock tower.

"Axel!"

"Hmph. 'Bout time you guys showed up," he pouted, brandishing his ice cream stick. "Almost finished without you. Yours are melting, by the way."

"We'll eat on the way there," Roxas said impatiently. He pushed Axel's tin soldier costume at him. "Hurry up and put these on, unless you want to wait and change out in the snow over there."

"Eh? We're going to Christmas Town again?"

"Yeah, you have to show us the rest of it, Axel! The place where they were making the toys, and the guy who was selling trees, and all those songs everyone was singing--"

"Okay, okay!" Axel fixed Xion with a stern look. "You go off around the corner, missy, unless you're just dying to know what color my shorts are."

Giggling, Xion retreated out of sight, as Axel changed clothes and tuned out Roxas's continued chatter. "And I wanna try lying in the snow flapping my arms like those kids were doing, and I
Roxas and Xion were so excited to be back in Christmas Town that they actually dithered in the town square, making uncertain jerks in one direction or another, torn about where to go next. Axel smiled in amusement and mentally counted down, with the accuracy of long experience, to the moment when they finally turned to him and asked with shining eyes, "What should we do, Axel?"

"Tell you what. One snow angel each, then I'll see if we can wrangle a toy workshop tour, and then I'm just gonna chill and let you two run loose for a while."

"What's a snow angel?"

He was forced to demonstrate. Then, as they eagerly followed suit, he simply lay there and stared up at the sky, lost in memories. The last time he had done this was ten years ago, in Radiant Garden, with Isa laughing at his side.

Times had changed since then. Radiant Garden was a crumbling wreck of a world, and Isa was gone, replaced by a heartless, stone-faced being who had not laughed in so long that he had probably forgotten how.

"Gah!" Axel flailed upright, glaring at the kids. "Who flicked snow in my face?"

They were both grinning at him mischievously. "Nooobody?" Roxas hedged.

Xion suddenly gave a shriek of laughter. "Nobody, Roxas, get it?" They both cracked up at the lame, lame, lame pun.

Axel rose to his knees, growling playfully. "Well, if Mr. Nobody would like to come over and get what's coming to him...." Both kids scrambled up and dashed away, laughing like maniacs, as if they thought he was going to chase after them. Axel sighed and got to his feet, shaking his head with a smile as he brushed snow off his clothes. Then he headed at a leisurely pace for the workshop.
The kids were enchanted. From the first amazed "Whooooaaa!" as they entered, they were in total Squee Mode. Axel could not help laughing sometimes at their reactions as the guide elf explained things, such as that the building materials were edible ("Oi, Roxas, don't bite that!" "But he said it was--" "Just because you can eat it doesn't mean you're supposed to!").

The workshop itself was pure magic for a child, or for young teens who had never had a childhood. Once Axel had managed to get the concept of 'toys' through their cute thick skulls ("They're, you know, things you play with." "Play?" "Yeah, like have fun." "So they're made of ice cream?" "No!"), they scampered from conveyor belt to conveyor belt, watching in awe as jack-in-the-boxes and dolls and miniature cars and stuffed animals took shape.

"It's so cuuuute!" Xion squealed, snatching up a stuffed dog and hugging it. "Isn't it cute, Roxas?!

"Yeah, kind of," the boy agreed amiably.

"Isn't it cute, Axel?" she insisted, holding up the toy to his face.

"Yeah. Real cute. And they won't let you take it, this isn't a store."

"But it's so cute!"

The elf now spoke up. "These toys here are for the kiddos on the Nice List, but you can take your pick from the defect pile, if you really want to."

"Mighty generous of you," Axel said dryly.

"Really?!" Xion squealed, delighted.

The elf led them to the pile of rejected toys, all of them imperfect in some way: dolls with lopsided facial features, cars with missing wheels, and the like.

"I can...have one? To keep?" Xion asked shyly.
"Sure, take your pick."

"Ooh! Roxas, which one are you going to pick?"

"Hm...I dunno. You pick one for me, Xion."

"Okay! Which one do you want, Axel?"

"Eh? Oi, Xion, toys are for kids. I'm not a kid."

They both stared at him with the exact same look they had given him when he had said they might not be together forever.

"Oi, oi, oi...oh, whatever, just grab one, I don't care."

Xion lovingly chose a one-legged tin soldier for Roxas and a stuffed dog with a missing eye for herself. She handed Axel a toy car that was decorated with flame designs except for the bare gray hood, on which a crescent-shaped splotch of yellow paint had fallen.

Axel stared at it. "Dang it. It's perfect," he mumbled. 'Isa is not my friend anymore,' he thought resentfully at the coincidence. His chest was empty. There wasn't supposed to be anything in it to hurt. So why...?

"Thanks, Xion," Roxas said with a smile.

"Yay! I knew you'd like them."

They then trudged all over town, trying to find the restaurant they had been at before, and by the time they found it, they were half-frozen. They bought mugs of hot chocolate and then went to settle in the lounge area by the fireplace. Axel plopped down on a sofa close to the fire and leaned his head back with a contented sigh. He heard rustling noises from the kids. Then he abruptly raised his head again. "Oi, what do you think you're doing?"
They had both pulled off their shoes and climbed onto the couch on either side of him with their hot chocolate. Xion had stuck her icy toes under his left knee, and Roxas had followed suit on the right.

"Get your stinky ice cube feet away from me!"

"But Axel...it's c-cold," Xion said pathetically. Roxas hung his head in that horrible way he had of making Axel feel like he was kicking a puppy.

"Urgh...you guys are brats." He pulled his feet farther under the couch so that theirs were held more securely under his knees, and tried to summon extra warmth from his powers.

"Axel?" Roxas asked. "Who were all those toys for?"

"Well, they're for kids. Santa's elves make toys all year, and then on Christmas Eve, Santa Claus flies his sleigh all around the world and delivers toys to all the good boys and girls."

"Which world?" Xion asked urgently.

"This one. And some others, like Destiny Islands." 'And Radiant Garden.'

"What about the World That Never Was?"

Axel grinned. "I'm gonna dash your hopes right now, Santa wants nothing to do with a world inhabited by heartless monsters."

"But, you know, you'll still get presents, anyway." 'Because the Flurry of Dancing Flames is no match for your big blue puppy eyes, and will apparently be doing a bit of Christmas shopping in the next few weeks.'

"We will?"

"Yeah. We're having Christmas at the castle this year, after all."
"So Santa will come to our party?"

"No! I mean...look, you don’t need Santa Claus to have presents. In fact, you’re supposed to get presents for other people. Santa’s more of a kids’ thing."

"So...are we going to have to get presents for the rest of the Organization?"

Axel paused. It should have been obvious, but for some reason, it had not occurred to him until now. "Yeah...yeah, I guess so. Dang." He let his head flop back again. "This is going to be so fun," he told the ceiling sarcastically.

"Really? Will you help us, Axel?"

"Like I wouldn’t. Heh, though it would be funny seeing what you guys’d come up with on your own."

Eventually he shooed them away, after promising to help them start their Christmas shopping the next day after work. Then he took a nap as they spent the rest of the afternoon learning Christmas carols, building a Shadow Heartless out of snow, and using their powers to experiment with the blinking patterns on the strings of Christmas lights. Finally, they went back and cuddled with Axel to get warm again, until he woke up and pitched a fit. "You want to warm up, go dance with a Scarlet Tango or something, leave me alone!"

When they got back, the Grey Area was more crowded than usual. One of the tables was covered with paper, small cans of paint, brushes, cups of murky water, and open boxes of white glass balls. Several of the other members were gathered around it, talking. Larxene merely sat with her arms folded in defiance, and Xigbar was animatedly waving a ball around while he spoke, as if he had forgotten he was holding it. Luxord and Marluxia, while participating in the conversation, were also carefully painting the balls they held: Marluxia with flowers (he was a surprisingly good artist), and Luxord with patterns of diamonds, hearts, spades, and clubs.

By the table at the other end of the room, which was covered with stacks of books and papers and a laptop, Zexion appeared to be yelling at three Dancer Nobodies. Demyx, who had been whining in his servants’ defense, happily pranced over to the three newcomers as soon as they entered. "Axel, Roxy, Xi! Arts and crafts time!" He thrust a box of glass balls at them. "Paint ornaments or Zexy will kill you."
"What are you saying about me?" Zexion called in irritation.

"Nothing, Zex!" Demyx answered brightly.

Axel shook his head. "Demyx, think up some better nicknames for Zexion, those just sound wrong...."

"Ahem." They all turned at the sound of a throat being cleared severely behind them, except Demyx, who yelped and fled back to where he had been working with the Cloaked Schemer.

Saïx stood glowering in his usual place at the head of the room, apparently unaware of the glass ball someone had hooked over the hem of his hood. "Mission reports first." He held out a stack of forms meaningfully.

"Geez, we just walked in two seconds ago." Axel swept three sheets off the top of the stack and handed a couple of them back to Roxas and Xion, returning Saïx's glare with a grin. Then he moved close to the blue-haired Nobody, reaching an arm around as if to hug him.

Roxas and Xion were very interested to see a flustered expression pass over the usually intimidating Saïx's face, before Axel pulled back again, offering up the ball that had been hooked onto his old friend's coat.

The Luna Diviner growled, swiping the ball out of Axel's hand. "Number IX!" he bellowed.

"I didn't do it!" was the immediate response.

Shaking his head in amusement, Axel led the kids over to the paint station. "Oi, Larxene, Xigbar. If you're not gonna work, make some room for the actual participants, eh?"

"Hmph." Larxene swept to her feet with a haughty look. "This Christmas stuff is ridiculous, anyway."

"Then why'd you vote for it?"
"None of your business. I'm out of here." She vanished into a corridor of darkness.

Xigbar grinned and patted the now empty seat beside him. "Come on over, Poppet, there's plenty of room." Xion hesitantly approached, but Axel got there first, sitting down aggressively enough to shove Xigbar to the side, right up against the armrest. Xion sat down on Axel's other side, smiling a little. "Hey, I wasn't gonna mess with her or anything," Xigbar complained.

Roxas took the seat next to Luxord, looking around and then uncertainly taking a ball from one of the boxes. "So...we draw things on them with those brushes?"

"These are ornaments," Axel explained. "They're for the Christmas tree."

A light bulb flickered. "You mean like the tree on the tree in Halloween Town?"

"Yeah."

"What's she talking about?" Xigbar wondered.

"But the Tree tree's balls are colorful," Roxas said. "These are just white."

"Hence the paints," Axel said with infinite patience.

"You are to fill the empty space with a design," Luxord put in.

"What kind of design?"

"Anything you like."

"Anything, huh?"
Xigbar smirked. "Why? You had something racy in mind?"

Axel elbowed him in the ribs, looking annoyed. "Leave 'em alone, they're still clueless about that kind of thing, and I'd like it to stay that way. I've got enough to deal with without throwing teenage hormones into the mix...."

"What are you talking about, Axel?" Xion asked in confusion. Roxas was glad she had said it before he did, since he did not want to sound as dumb as he felt.

"Nothing you need to worry about for a loooong time," Axel said firmly.

"You'll probably find out if you spend a night in Number XIII's bed," Marluxia mused, earning grins from Xigbar and Luxord, and a glare from Axel.

"But I have slept with Roxas," Xion said, puzzled. "I still don't know what you mean."

There was a long pause.

Axel dropped his face into his palm. "I don't know them. Never met them in my life. I am unaffiliated with them in any way."

The other three older Nobodies snickered.

"What?!" the younger ones cried, "How could you say that, Axel?!!"

Saïx chose that moment to storm over. "I expect three reports in my hand within the next ten minutes, otherwise you'll have my claymore to deal with."

After filling out their mission reports, Roxas and Xion ended up painting three ornaments each. On her first one, Xion attempted to depict her friends' faces, but her skills were so bad that she ended up smearing blue over the whole thing and painting seashells instead, which she did for the other two as well. Roxas painted an ice cream bar on both sides of his first ornament, then tried to draw a sunset on the second. It turned out looking a lot like Axel's ornaments, which were mostly random swirls of red, orange, and yellow.
Roxas picked up the third ball and tried painting a Heartless symbol on it, thinking of all the hearts he still needed to collect before Kingdom Hearts would be complete and he could finally be free to hang out with his two best friends forever. However, he could not get it to look right. "I'm really bad at painting," he noted sadly.

Everyone else looked at him. "No, it's really good, Roxas," Xion said encouragingly.

"Thanks."

The other four were staring. "That looks like the Mark of Mas--" Axel started to say, then broke off. He shared a long look with Xigbar, Luxord, and Marluxia.

"The mark of what?" Roxas asked.

Axel shook his head. "Never mind. Xion's right, Roxas, it looks great." He set his latest creation down and stretched both arms over his head. "Eh, I'm callin' it a day. What do you kids want to eat?"

"Grilled cheese sandwiches," Roxas voted.

"Pancakes!" Xion said eagerly. "Like the ones you made last time, with blueberry faces."

"What? Pancakes are for breakfast, not din--" Axel rolled his eyes. "Whatever. Come on, let's go."

Roxas had become pretty proficient at making his own grilled cheese sandwiches by now, but Xion had not quite mastered some aspects of pancake-making, such as cracking the eggs so that bits of shell didn't end up in the batter. "Try tapping it, then," Axel suggested. "All around, so that it's cracked in one line. Then slowly pull the two halves apart."

Xion tapped. Nothing happened.
"Tap it just a little bit harder."

Egg yolk and bits of crushed shell splattered over the counter and Xion's coat.

"Just keep trying, Xi, you'll get the hang of it." Axel plucked another egg from the carton and pushed it into Xion's palm, closing his hand over hers to control the force as she tapped it again. This time, the egg ended up with a fairly straight equator. Still with his hands over hers, Axel helped Xion carefully pry the egg open, letting its unbroken yolk drop into the mixture.

"See? You got it."

"Only because you were helping me," Xion said dolefully, starting to beat the contents of the mixing bowl.

"You can't get good at anything without practice."

"I hope I'm as good at cooking someday as you are."

"Man," Axel mumbled under his breath, "first I'm a nanny, now I'm a good cook...I need to assassinate someone in cold blood before my image is totally ruined...."

"What did you say? I couldn't hear you."

"Nothing."

They ate together at one end of the table (Axel had warmed up some leftover pizza for himself), talking quietly about random stuff. Several of the other Organization members were scattered along the table, caught up in their own conversations or absorbed in whatever they liked to work on while they ate.

Zexion stormed in, crossing the room in an obvious bad mood. He disappeared into the kitchen for a minute, where they heard him slamming open and closed the freezer door. Then he stomped back into the dining room, lugging the entire, three-quarters full, party-sized box of ice cream bars. This he slammed onto the table a couple of seats away from Roxas, before flinging himself
into a chair and ripping open a strawberry-flavored ice cream, which he devoured in about four seconds. He was already on the second one (kiwi) before someone finally dared to comment.

"Demyx again?"

"I don't know how he does it!" Zexion raged, hastily wiping his chin as bits of kiwi-flavored sweetness leaked out of his stuffed mouth. "I'm mumblemumblemumble but then mumble, and he mumblemumble gets away with mumble before I finamumble realize what happened!" He swallowed hugely, then stood up and rummaged savagely through the box, accidentally knocking a few bars out onto the table. "Where is the sea-salt?!"

Roxas cautiously picked up the blue package that had landed next to his elbow and held it out. Zexion seized it with a perfunctory "Thank you" and nearly bit into it before remembering to tear off the wrapping.

Just then, Demyx ambled in, trailed by a few Dancers wearing scarves and mittens. "Hey, awesome balls, guys! Who's excited for Christmas now, eh?"

Zexion flung an ice cream bar at his face and stomped out of the room.

"Ow!" Rubbing the red spot on his forehead, Demyx bent down to pick up the projectile. His face lit up. "Yay, chocolate!"

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Xion said good night to her friends and then went to the luxurious bathing suite she shared with Larxene, where she changed into her purple night shirt and black shorts. The suite was large enough to comfortably accommodate fifteen women, but she stayed in her 'designated area,' which was a mirror, sink, toilet, shower/bath, and changing stall allllll the way at the far end of the room. Roxas had told her that the men did not have 'designated areas,' they just took care of business wherever there was a free spot, but Xion was not about to challenge the Savage Nymph on the issue.

After she had brushed her teeth, she came back down toward the door, passing Larxene as she did so. The petite woman was standing in front of a mirror, combing her hair after having washed all the gel out of it. Sparkly letters spelled out the word 'twilight' across the back of her panties.
"Did you get those in Twilight Town?" Xion asked curiously.

Larxene turned around. The front of her undergarment had a guy's chalk-white, hungry-eyed face on it. Xion shuddered a little. "What are you talking about?"

"Your, um...clothes," Xion fumbled. "They say 'twilight' on them, so I just thought...." To her surprise, Larxene's face twisted into a snarl. She lunged forward with one of her knives at Xion's throat before the girl even realized she had said something wrong.

"If you tell anyone about what's on my underwear," Larxene hissed, "I will kill you."

"Y-Yes, ma'am," Xion squeaked. "I won't tell."

Larxene withdrew her weapon. "Get out of here."

Xion crept past and then darted for the door, wondering why in the world Larxene had reacted like that.

She continued on to the Chilly Academic's room, where, for all practical purposes, she lived. Xion had never understood why she had not been given a room of her own, or why she had to share with Vexen, of all people. She supposed she would be awarded with a room of her own once she reached a certain rank or something, but in the meantime, she had to put up with the cranky scientist.

Vexen was hunched over one of his lab tables as usual, and did not acknowledge Xion's presence.

"Good night, Vexen," she said politely.

"Don't touch the purple beakers," he snapped. "Don't touch anything, but especially not those."

"I won't." She went over to her bed, climbed in, and went to sleep.

To be continued....
**Author's Notes:** Nothing inappropriate is going on between Vexen and Xion, in case you were worried. I just figured, considering Xion's backstory and the fact that there's no fourteenth room in the Proof, it made sense for her to stay with Mr. Mad Scientist.

Okay, so apparently in both the games and the manga, people sleep in their Org coats, but come on, that's ridiculous! (Those coats have *chains* hanging all over them!) Especially since KH people apparently sleep in their SHOES, too! I maintain that it's simply laziness on the part of the game makers, who just didn't want to design sleepwear for anyone except KH2!Roxas, and that everyone is really wearing PJs and would be uncomfortable sleeping in their coats.

Xion being a dog nut is from the manga. In fact, her squeeing about *anything* is from the manga. There's a scene where she squees over and then adopts Pluto - and, to Axel's astonishment, Saïx *lets her keep him*, because it turns out that Pluto reminds Saïx of another dog he used to play with when he was younger. 8D
Roxas awakened unusually early the next morning. Knowing that he would not be able to go back to sleep, he got up and went out in search of breakfast.

He soon realized what had woken him up: Zexion, already dressed, was having a full-fledged boss battle with the whining, pajama-clad Demyx right there in the Proof of Existence. Other Organization members were stumbling bleary-eyed through their doorways, cursing at the commotion, and then disappearing again, presumably back to bed. None of them were Saïx or Xemnas, who would probably have put a stop to it; Xemnas's suite was big enough that he probably could not even hear the racket, and Saïx was such an early riser that he had likely already left his room. Only Xigbar and Roxas stayed to watch the outcome.

Zexion won. Seizing Demyx firmly by the ear, he dragged the protesting blond Nobody out of the Proof of Existence, his mouth set in a grim line.

"Interesting," Xigbar commented. "Catch ya later, tiger. I'm going back to bed."

"My name's not Tiger." Sighing, Roxas went to toast some Pop-Tarts, then wandered into the Grey Area. No one was there except Zexion and Demyx.

"And if I don't see an acceptable one here by the end of the day," the Cloaked Schemer was saying, "I'll give you hallucinations so bad, you'll still be gibbering like a fool by the time Christmas rolls around."

"All right, I got it," Demyx pouted. "Poopyhead. Can I go back to bed now?"

"NO. You can start your search now, or you can pass the time by making festive decorations until Saïx gets here. Your choice." Zexion turned and swept past Roxas on his way out. "Good morning, Number XIII."

"Good morning," Roxas said nervously. He watched until Zexion was out of sight. Then he turned
and looked at Demyx, who had sat down on a couch and was now strumming on his sitar. "What was all that about?"

"Aw, Zexy's grumpy cuz I haven't found a good Christmas tree yet."

"Are you guys working on the Christmas party together?" Roxas asked curiously.

Demyx grinned, eyes sparkling with mischief. "Not officially...but, heh, Mr. Manipulative Scheming Cloaky Dude is pretty easy to manipulate when it comes to Christmas. I think that deep down, he's really looking forward to it, what with his lame childhood and all."

"I'm kind of looking forward to it, too," Roxas admitted.

Demyx's eyes lit up. "You are? Awesome! This'll be the best Christmas ever. Hey, Roxas, my man, think you could do something for me?"

Roxas was immediately wary.

"I'm supposed to get stockings for everyone, but I've already got enough to worry about...could you pick some up for me? I'll make it worth your while."

"Um...okay," Roxas said uncertainly. He still was not quite sure what the stockings thing was all about, but no doubt Axel or the Christmas Town elves could explain it to him.

He fiddled with his panel arrangement and worked on a challenge mission until Saïx came in and sent him off to Beast's Castle. After work, Roxas dark coridored straight to Christmas Town, where he pulled his costume out of his backpack and put it on, shivering in the frosty air.

Xion arrived about a minute after he had finished, already dressed in her purple Santa dress. Together, they chatted about how their missions had gone until Axel finally showed up, staggering through a dark portal and gushing blood. "Axel!" Xion cast a Cure spell on him without a second's thought, and Roxas seized the first Hi-Potion he could get his hands on, dumping it directly on the worst of the wounds.
"Thanks," Axel panted, collapsing against the tree to catch his breath. "That Saïx, sending me after a 'giant Heartless' and neglecting to tell me it's a freaking Dark Follower...."

"Are you okay, Axel?" Xion asked anxiously.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. Just lend me a few panels, will you? I'm totally out. Wouldn't wanna get KO'd by a Shadow, I'd never hear the end of it...."

The kids fusssed over him and plied him with snacks and hot chocolate until he finally resorted to gift shopping simply to distract them from the subject. Leading them to one of the few stores that actually sold something besides toys and Christmas decorations, he began his newest lesson. 

"Now. The first thing you need to know about Christmas presents is that you give one to everybody you don't want to offend."

"The entire Organization," Xion said at once, and Roxas nodded fervently.

"Okay, so now you need to figure out what you're going to give them. Depending on how close you are, you can sometimes just get away with a generic, fairly cheap tin of cookies or holiday-themed bath set or something. Of course, if you do this for some people but not for others, and the recipients know each other, you may end up with some hurt feelings anyway. Heh, not that we actually have 'feelings' to hurt. And also, if you're in a large group setting, like the Organization, it would probably be acceptable to give everyone basically the same thing. Of course, if you're closer to certain members than others and you want to do a little extra for them, it'd be best to keep quiet about--"

It was at that point he noticed the kids' eyes starting to glaze over. "Um...." Axel scratched the back of his head and sighed. "You know what, forget the lecture. Roxas, what kind of gift would you pick out for, say, Xigbar?"

"Uh...." Roxas looked around hopelessly at the merchandise on the shelves. "A blender?"

Axel facepalmed. "Okay, here's the deal. People want to receive gifts that they like, so when you're gift shopping, you need to think about what the people you're shopping for like."

"So...I should buy Xigbar a gun?"
"Urk...well, you're still a minor, so that won't go over well in the stores.... Okay, here's an easier one. What does Marluxia like?"

"Flowers?"

"Yes! You got it! And Zexion?"

"...Books?"

"Excellent. Xion, how about Vexen?"

"He likes to do experiments and make a scary laugh."

"...Okay, so, what kinds of things are in his lab that he might like more of?"

"DNA?"

"Gah! 'Seriously, Vexen?' "How about something less creepy?" Axel tried.

"Well...he's always having to get new beakers and test tubes and cages and stuff. Like when the specimens get loose and break them."

'Flaming pants, I have to get her out of there.' "Xion, when we get back, I'm gonna convince Saïx to let you transfer to Rox--"

"But I have slept with him," memory whispered in his mind.

"...That is, to my room." 'Great, now they'll all think I'm a pedo. Thanks so much, Vexen. Someday, I will kill you.'

Xion's face lit up. "Really? Oh, that would be wonderful!"
"The Organization seriously needs more girls...anyway." He cleared his throat. "Christmas shopping. You should buy stuff for people that you know they'd like."

Roxas made his Thinking Face. "Hm...so I guess for you, I should buy--"

"Nah ah ah, Roxas! You don't tell people what you're going to get before you give it to them, it's supposed to be a surprise."

"Oh."

"And you don't have to spend munny, either. You can make gifts by hand, if you want to."

"Really? I kind of like that idea," Xion said thoughtfully.

With Axel's help, Roxas ended up purchasing a CD for Demyx, containing nine Christmas carols performed by an apparently famous sitar player. He also got a magical snow globe with real snow in it for Vexen, and a huge book of dessert recipes for Zexion. Just before they decided to quit for the day, he remembered to ask about stockings.

"They're like huge socks that you hang in front of the fireplace-- Well, we don't have a fireplace at the castle, but we can use a shelf or a ledge or something. Anyway, you hang them up, and the night before Christmas, Santa - or your parents (don't you dare ask me what parents are), or in our case, whoever gets put in charge of stocking stuffers - will fill the stockings with candy and/or small toys. Or coal, if you've been really naughty."

"What's coal?"

"Do you think the Christmas elves will tell us what parents are?"

"If you ask anyone, I will set you on fire."

At first, they merely browsed around for ordinary stockings, but just when Roxas was about to
throw a bunch of random ones into his shopping basket, Axel suddenly stopped him and said he had gotten an excellent idea. They went to a customer service counter, where Roxas and Xion watched in confusion as Axel put in an order for fourteen custom-made stockings. "Oi, Roxas. What do you want on your stocking?"

"Um...I dunno."

Axel shook his head. "What about you, Xion?"

"Hm...can I maybe have a picture of my Keyblade on mine?" she asked shyly.

"Sure."

It suddenly occurred to Roxas what he wanted his design to be. "Put an ice cream bar on mine."

"What color?" Axel teased.

Roxas was taken aback. "Well...."

"I know, I know. Sea-salt blue." Then Axel spent about ten minutes drawing pictures and explaining exactly what he wanted to the sales clerk, though somehow Roxas ended up paying the deposit.

"Okay, kiddos, I'd say it's time to RTC," Axel finally said, looking very satisfied.

When they got back to the castle, Axel and Xion immediately headed for the kitchen, talking about making quesadillas for dinner. Roxas hung back, watching Zexion, who was the only one in the Grey Area. The young man was sitting on a couch with one of his Nobody servants sleepily curled up next to him, absently gluing red berries onto round green garlands with an unhappy look on his face.

"Is Demyx not back yet?" Roxas finally asked.
Zexion glanced at him. "No, he's not."

"He's probably out playing. And hiding from you."

"Yes."

Roxas fidgeted. "You know," he finally said, "they sell Tree trees - I mean, Christmas trees - in Christmas Town. I can help you get one. I know my way around there pretty well by now," he added, a little proudly.

Zexion put the wreath down and gazed at him for so long that Roxas thought he was in trouble. At last, Zexion said softly, "I would appreciate that."

Roxas decided he would rather go now than have to sacrifice the next day's Christmas shopping, since he had already bought all the gifts he could find in Christmas Town. Zexion had no objection, so after Roxas had told his friends that he was going out again, the two of them opened a dark corridor to Christmas Town.

Roxas was still wearing his tin soldier costume, but the older Nobody stuck out like a sore thumb in his black coat. They hid behind a building. "It was rather awkward the last time I came here," Zexion murmured.

"It's because of your clothes. They don't like you looking scary or suspicious here."

"Yes."

"Wait here, I'll be back in a minute." Roxas soon returned with a big red Santa hat. "Here, put this on. They won't mind the coat if you're wearing this."

Zexion looked doubtfully at the fluffy hat, then slowly put it on his head as if it was explosive. Roxas surveyed him critically, then nodded. "You look good. Come on, let's go."

They went to the Christmas tree lot, where their choice seemed pretty obvious - the castle rooms tended to be large, and they would need something impressive. Roxas made a beeline for the very
biggest tree in the lot. The saleself warily warned him about the price before stating the price itself, but the two Nobodies were both hard workers - between them, they had enough munny. Zexion ordered the tree to be delivered to a place outside town, then let Roxas pull him over to the restaurant with the fireplace.

"Axel takes us here every time we come to Christmas Town." Roxas bought a couple of hot chocolates and carried them over to the couch by the fireplace. He handed one to Zexion, who held it with a slightly bemused look on his face before sitting down next to Roxas and sipping at it.

"It's good, right?"

"Yes. Better than that awful stuff Demyx brought back the other day."

After a minute, Zexion pulled out a book. Realizing he had to move fast if he did not want to lose the older Nobody's company, Roxas asked the first thing that came into his head. "What was Christmas like for you when you were a kid?"

"We didn't celebrate Christmas when I was a child," Zexion said shortly.

"But you come from the same world as Axel, don't you? He said that he and his best friend used to--"

"I didn't have anything to do with him back then," Zexion snapped. "I was a scientist. Some of the castle staff took me in when I lost my parents, and I was put under Vexen's charge. He had no interest in acknowledging holidays - I spent every day cleaning out specimen cages and trying to decipher his handwriting so I could type his notes."

"Oh." There was a pause. Zexion opened his book. "I wish I could remember how I did Christmas before I became a Nobody," Roxas added hurriedly.

Zexion gave him a curious look. "So you really do remember nothing from your past?"

"Yeah. It's all just a big blank...I don't even remember my first week as Number XIII."
"I see." Zexion gave him a stern look. "Though I trust you do remember my tutorial."

Roxas nodded his head. "Yeah. I always fill the mission gauge, and when I can't, I go back and redo the holo-mission when I'm stronger. You can ask Saïx."

Zexion nodded in satisfaction. "I believe you." He drank the last of his chocolate. "Well, shall we go? It's getting late, and we both have work tomorrow."

The tree was waiting for them outside of town. Now that there was no one to see, Zexion was able to summon a crew of Dusks to haul it back to the castle. They got it set up in the deserted dining room, after which Demyx strolled in, whistling. He flinched at the sight of Zexion, then straightened up and smiled bravely. "Zexy! Long time no see, man! Hey, I see you got a tree!"

"Which means that you didn't," Zexion growled.

"Heh heh, well, see, about that...."

Zexion advanced grimly, his lexicon snapping open with its pages rustling ominously.

"No, wait, Zex, listen, I was gonna-- No, wait! Roxas, help! Ahhh! Noooo!" He fled, screaming, with Zexion stalking after him.

Roxas shivered, then went to scrounge up something to eat. When he got to the Proof of Existence, he found Vexen yelling at Saïx ("How do you expect me to get anything done without a proper assistant?! The Dusks are more thickheaded than Number XIII!")], and Saïx responding with implacable coolness ("You are already under investigation for improper experimentation, Number IV. You would do well to hold your tongue"). A few of the other members were watching with interest, and some gave Roxas odd, sly looks when they saw him.

A little sulkily (I'm WAY smarter than Dusks...'), Roxas took another bite of his sandwich and headed for the eighth portal.

As soon as he stepped inside, an Assassin leaped out of the floor, nearly startling him into dropping his plate. Its wings wrapped around him and drew him close, the spines piercing through his coat and pricking his flesh uncomfortably.
"Oi! Get off him!" There was a sound of snapping fingers, and the Assassin's head burst into flames. It hurriedly released Roxas and dove back into the ground to douse the fire. Roxas looked up to find Axel and Xion lounging on floor cushions with video game controllers, their race paused on the TV screen.

"Sorry, man."

"It's okay." Roxas was used to it by now. He was pretty sure that Axel's Assassins liked him, but just had not yet figured out how to properly express their affection. His Samurai were the same, always trying to catch Axel or Xion in duels so that they could tackle-glomp them if they won.

"Roxas!" Xion leaped to her feet, bounding over to her friend. "We were waiting for you. You went to Christmas Town again?"

"Yeah."

"Oi, saved you a quesadilla," Axel called, indicating a dish on the nightstand.

"It's cold by now," Xion pointed out.

"Well, your human microwave is sitting right here, so that ain't a problem."

Xion took the quesadilla over to Axel, who spread his hand over it for a minute; then she brought it to Roxas, now piping hot. Despite the sandwiches, Roxas was a growing boy and was not about to say no to more food. He munched on his second meal as he watched Axel and Xion resume their racing game.

The room had changed. Axel's bed had been pushed to a different wall, and a second bed had appeared on the opposite side. Xion's seashells, stuffed dog, toiletries, and panels were arranged on the shelves there, and her backpack hung from a hook on the wall.

"Xion? Are you living here now?" Roxas asked.
"Yes. Axel talked to Saïx for me, and I moved my stuff after dinner."

"How come you didn't move to a different room in the castle?"

"Well, Xemnas said no."

"Yeah," Axel added dryly. "Our honorable Superior insisted that all Organization lodgings have to be in the Proof of Existence, otherwise 'the purpose of each carefully chosen chamber will be corrupted.' If you ask me, he's just obsessed with his area names and doesn't want someone snoring in the 'Vault of Secret Silence,' or putting on makeup in the 'Suite of No Reflections' or whatever."

"It's okay. I like staying with you, Axel," Xion assured him.

"Can I move in with you guys, too?" Roxas asked wistfully.

"You wanna run that idea by Saïx, be my guest. I'm not gonna go begging him to let me have even more minors for roommates."

Roxas sighed. He did not want to have any more interaction with the stern Luna Diviner than he had to. "Was Vexen mad about you leaving?" he asked instead.

Xion's shoulders slumped. "Yeah. He yelled at me."

"He'll get over it," Axel said dismissively.

"I'll kind of miss some of the specimens...Ein and Zwei were cute, they used to lick my fingers whenever I fed them...." Then she shuddered. "I'm glad to get away from Ren, though. If I didn't get the sedative measurements just right, she'd break out of her cage at night and come sit on my face while I was sleeping. One time I thought I was going to suffocate to death."

Axel shuddered. "Seriously, Vexen?" he muttered under his breath.
"I'm glad you moved," Roxas said. He had not liked having to peek into the Chilly Academic's room whenever he was looking for Xion.

Roxas ended up spending the night. Axel, staying up too late with the video games, finally sighed and stretched when his vision started getting too blurry to read his score. That was when he noticed that Roxas and Xion were curled up together on the floor next to him, fast asleep. He stared at them. "Ugh. You two are way too friggin' cute," he grumbled. He carried Xion to her bed and spread a spare blanket over Roxas, then collapsed onto his own mattress and fell asleep.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: I stopped liking "Phantom: Requiem for the Phantom" after about the seventh episode ("Let's make this harrowing surgery look as much like a sex scene as possible!"), but I couldn't help slipping in a reference, since it seemed to fit. I just stole Ren's name (from a different series) for the creeper specimen because I hate her, there's no connection.
Roxas woke up early again, probably because there was a crick in his neck from sleeping on the floor. He yawned, looked around, determined that both of his friends were still asleep, then went off in search of food.

The only one at the dining table this time was Lexaeus. Roxas eyed the big man as he sat down and began nibbling on his muffin. The Silent Hero seemed to be preoccupied with an interlocking puzzle, which suddenly came apart with a clink. Lexaeus took a satisfied sip of orange juice.

"So," Roxas finally ventured, "are you looking forward to Christmas?"

"Not particularly."

"Oh." Roxas finished his meal in silence.

When he walked into the kitchen to dispose of his muffin wrapper, he found Axel dumping an obscene amount of sugar into a mixing bowl filled with egg yolks, as Xion broke slices of toast into small pieces. "Roxas!" she greeted happily. "Axel says he found this recipe in Agrabah, and we wanted to try it out. Do you want some?"

"Sure." He was glad he had said yes, because the pieces of toast drizzled with sugar-drowned eggs were delicious. It put him in high spirits as they made their way to the Grey Area, where Zexion was re-arranging his panels and Saïx was waiting to give them their day's missions.

"Number XIV, you're on heart collection. Roxas, you will be destroying Shadow Globs. Axel, I need you to tackle a group of Large Armors."

"What?! Why do they get cushy jobs today, and you stick me with a whole herd of invincible-except-for-their-hard-to-reach-heads fatsos??"
"What is the problem, can you not handle it?" Saïx said icily.

"Dude, don't insult me."

Just then, Demyx came staggering through the doorway. His coat was torn and missing one drawstring, the other drawstring lacking its pendant; the fastening chain was broken and hung to his waist, his hair was a mess, and he had a bruise on his face. He stared at them all with huge eyes. Then he screamed. "Noooooo! Axel, make it stop! Make it stop!"

Zexion covered his mouth to hide a delicate snicker. Everyone else looked at Axel, who threw up his hands in self-defense. "I have no idea what he's talking about!"

"It buuuuurns," Demyx wailed, sinking to his knees. "Dance, water, dan-- GAH!" He was now surrounded by some of his concerned-looking water copies and Dancers, who were reaching out to hug him, pat his head, or offer him cups of Jell-o.

"THEY'RE BITING ME! THE OSTRICHES ARE BITING ME!"

"Demyx," Axel said cautiously, "those are your own minions. And they're fangirling on you."

"Noooo!"

Clearly disturbed, Xion tugged on Roxas's sleeve meaningfully. Nodding, he called for some Samurai to escort the Dancers and water clones away.

"Make it stop burning!" Demyx screeched.

Experimentally, Axel snapped his fingers. His weapons materialized, both in flames.


They all watched in growing incredulity as he picked his way across the room: tripping over nothing, stepping carefully over more nothing, cursing as he banged his hip into emptiness,
shoving his way between a pair of nothings, and swiping air out of his face. "Man, what'd Marly do to this place?" he complained. "It's like a jungle in here."

Everyone looked around the room, which was completely empty except for their bodies and the usual furniture.

Demyx halted in front of Roxas and suddenly grinned. "Meg! Hey there, honey! Whatcha doin' here in the castle?" He leaned over to kiss the very confused boy's cheek. "See, I told you I wasn't serious about Helen--"

Axel angrily snatched Roxas out of the way. "What in the worlds do you think you're doing?"

Demyx gulped and backed away. "Herc! Didn't see ya there, heheh.... Um, Meg, I guess I'll just catch you later." Then he caught sight of Xion and froze. "Ahhhh!" He ran across the room straight at Zexion, stumbling violently over nothing several times, so that he nearly fell. "Xiggy!" he cried, throwing himself behind the young man's couch. "Help! Zexion's gonna kill me!"

"Is he?" Zexion said sweetly. "Why, whatever could you have done to tick him off, Dem?"

"I don't knoooww! Well, I do know, but, really, he's making way too big a deal out of it...you gotta help me, Xig!"

Xion took a confused step forward. "Demyx? I--"

"NOT THE BOOK! NOT THE BOOOOOK!"

"You think I'm Zexion?" Xion realized in astonishment.

"Demyx, Zexion is the one you're hiding behind," Roxas pointed out, but to no avail.

"XIGGY, WARP-HOLE HIM OR SOMETHING! QUICK, BEFORE HE FLIPS TO THE CHAPTER OF DOOM!!!
"Heh, calm down, Dem," Zexion purred, in an eerily perfect imitation of Xigbar's speaking style. "I'm sure he can be reasoned with...after all, you did break your promise like the naughty boy you are."

"He's going to eat me," Demyx whimpered. "With his book."

Axel was laughing by now, he could not help it. Roxas and Xion just looked supremely confused.

"Hm, let's see. What can we do to make Zexion happy and stop him from shattering your mind?" Zexion wondered with relish. "Oh, I know! You can try groveling. Get on your knees and beg for mercy, and promise that you'll--"

"Enough, Number VI," Saïx ordered. "Release him."

"Hmph." Zexion flipped to a page of his lexicon.

A minute later, Demyx blinked. He stared around the Grey Area. "What happened to all the trees?" Then he looked down at himself and yelped in surprise. "Ah, I need a new coat! And a bath. And, like, a gajillion ice cream bars." That was when he noticed that his arms were around the Cloaked Schemer's neck. "AAAAAAAAH!" He flung himself away and ran to hide behind Saïx. "Sai, help, Zexy's gonna kill me!"

"Go away, Number IX," Saïx snapped. "No mission for you today. Clean yourself up and get to work on the holiday preparations. Number VI will be in Wonderland all day, so make do without him."

Demyx fled. He bumped into Lexaeus and Luxord on the way out, who stared after him in puzzlement.

Luxord turned back to the room at large. "Did we miss something?"

"Nope." Axel clapped his hands down warningly on the kids' shoulders before they could speak. "Not a thing."
Twenty-one days before Christmas, and Agrabah was still sweltering. Roxas felt dead on his feet as he jogged along in a zombie-like state, snapping out of it only when a Heartless would pop up in front of him. The last straw was when he tripped right over a Shadow Glob and fell on his face.

Using language that he had picked up from Xigbar and Larxene, Roxas struggled back to his feet and ripped off his coat, flinging it to the ground and then bashing at the Shadow Glob as hard as he could to relieve his feelings. It burst with a satisfying pop, though the munny orb it expelled nearly hit him in the face. "Stupid Agrabah...stupid coat...."

He tossed things out of his backpack to make room for the coat, which he crammed in rebelliously. Then, noticing that one of the discarded items was a Potion he had found in a treasure chest, he drank it, and immediately felt a little better.

No longer feeling like he was trapped in a portable steam room, but with the sun now beating down mercilessly on the bare flesh of his arms, Roxas continued his mission searching for the huge purple globs. Trying to save his magic casts, he was forced into some strenuous acrobatics to reach a glob that was hiding beneath an awning. When he finally smashed it, sweat was pouring down his face and body, and he felt like he was going to faint from the heat. He went back to the pile of discarded items and gulped down another Potion scattered among them. "Forget it. I'm blasting the rest."

A couple of Fire spells later, the mission was done. A few globs were still clinging to the city here and there, but Roxas was not in the mood to pursue a completely full mission gauge. The holomissions, since they were digital simulations, had adjustable weather.

"You, there! Young gentleman with the, er, giant key!"

Roxas hastily dismissed his weapon and turned around. A small man wearing a large turban and blue robes was surveying him greedily. "Might I interest you in my wares? I have quite an assortment of merchandise suitable for a warrior such as yourself...."

Roxas was breaking the undercover rules, but it was too late, the man had already seen him. He supposed there was no harm in looking over the items that were for sale.

"Ah, yes, that's it, come closer. I have here some wonderful elixirs," the man said about a few
ordinary Potions. "A single draught will restore your health, bring refreshment to your bones, and leave you feeling energized!"

"No, thanks. What's in that jar?"

"Hm? Ah, yes. This polish will not only give a shine to your weapon, but its magic will repair any nicks or cracks, sharpen dull edges, improve the accuracy of your strikes...!"

"Hm...will it work on any weapon?" Roxas asked slowly.

"Certainly. This magical weapon polish can be yours, all for the measly price of...!"

Roxas barely listened to the price. He was still thinking. "It'll work on lances?"

"Of course, young master."

"How long will a bottle last if you're using six lances?"

"Well, that depends on the frequency of usage, of course."

"He uses them every day."

"I see. Well, in that case...."

In the end, Roxas walked away with Xaldin's new Christmas present, eager to show Axel and find out how well he had done in picking out a gift on his own, without any help at all.

Twilight Town's frosty winter weather was a welcome shock after the blazing desert of Agrabah. Roxas emerged in an enclosed empty lot, where he tossed his backpack aside, ripped off his coat again, and sat down with his back against the brick wall, sighing. The cold air was a sweet relief to his sunburned flesh, but he soon started shivering as his sweat-soaked tank top dried. Impatiently, he stripped it off and crammed it into his backpack.
With Roxas now shirtless, of course that happened to be the moment when someone decided to wander into the empty lot. They stared at each other. Roxas recognized the girl - what was her name? Olette.

"Oh!" she finally exclaimed. "I know you. You're the guy who beat Hayner and Seifer's Grandstander records! Roxas, right?"

He nodded uncomfortably.

Olette's gaze moved down and then lingered. For some reason, Roxas could feel his face getting hot, despite the wintry air. "Lost your shirt?" she asked with a grin.

"I...well...." Roxas was still mad at his coat, and it would be uncomfortable to wear again anyway without the now-disgusting tank top, so he finally dug out his tin soldier shirt and coat. They went surprisingly well with his black Organization pants, though Madame Holly would not have approved.

"I'd love to chat," Olette was saying, "but I gotta get going. I'm on the clock." She grinned again as she stuck a flier on the wall. "Care to join me?"

"Um...I have to meet someone," he mumbled.

"Okay. I'll see you around."

However, they ended up going in the same direction to exit the lot, and Olette's poster-pasting route seemed to coincide with the way Roxas was heading to the clock tower. As they passed through an alley, the death-screech of an Avalanche caused Olette to gasp in alarm. "What was that?!"

"Uh...." Before he could stop her, Olette had hurried out into the square. Roxas's eyes widened when he saw Xion, her hand still sparkling briefly from the dismissal of her Keyblade, going around to collect the orbs that had been dropped by the defeated Heartless.

"Xion," Roxas called, warning her that they had company.
The girl turned around. "Roxas! Good timing. That was...uh, the last one." Her eyes moved to Roxas's companion.

"I'm Olette," she introduced herself readily. "Are you okay? Did you hear that noise? It sounded like one of the monsters we've been having problems with lately."

"Um...there aren't any monsters," Xion said truthfully. Then, not so truthfully, "I just...dropped my wallet and had to pick everything up."

"Did you get it all?" Olette asked as she put up another flier.

"Yes, thank you."

"Hm, my record isn't going to be very good this time around," Olette said ruefully as she stuck yet another poster to the wall. "I'm gonna have to go another round.... Nah, I'll just deliver some messages after this. It's a lot quicker."

"What are you doing?" Xion asked curiously.

Olette laughed. "Trying to get un-broke so I can finish my Christmas shopping. I spent a bit too much on that skirt last Friday, so now I need more munny."

"You get munny by sticking pieces of paper on walls?" Roxas wondered.

"It's Poster Duty, silly! We're advertising for the next Struggle tournament. You should compete," Olette added, sizing up Roxas. "I think you'd be good at it."

They were now near the slope leading up to Station Heights, passing a shop which seemed to be crowded with girls.

Olette came to a dead halt. "OMG, it's Edward Cullen!" she suddenly screamed, so loudly that Roxas clapped his hands over his ears. "Aahh! Aaahhh! The new stuff FINALLY came in!"
Dropping the stack of fliers she had been carrying, she dashed at the store.

Roxas and Xion stared after her in astonishment, then at each other. Without any spoken agreement, they both shrugged and headed over to see what all the fuss was about.

Inside the store, there was a long line at the cash register, and girls were clumped about here and there, talking to each other in excited squeals.

"Oh!" Xion exclaimed. "I know that guy!"

"Who?"

Xion pointed to a rack of T-shirts with a man's hungry-eyed face and the name 'Edward' printed on them. Roxas shivered. The guy's expression was creepy. "Is that a Dusk?" he asked, noticing the unhealthy-looking, chalk-white pallor.

"I don't know," Xion answered. "Larxene likes him, though."

"She does?" Roxas said in surprise.

"Yeah, she has a picture of him on her panurgh...uh...I know she likes him."

"Hmm...." Roxas took a shirt off the rack and looked at it. Then he shuddered again and crunched up the garment so that he didn't have to see it wanting to eat him. "You sure Larxene likes this?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'm going to buy this for her Christmas present, then."

"Really?" Xion said doubtfully, remembering the Savage Nymph's scary reaction to Xion commenting on her Twilight attire.
"I'll show it to Axel, and if he thinks it's no good, I'll just return it."

"Okay."

Roxas was attracting a lot of attention, especially after he got in line to pay. Everyone seemed to be staring at him. The girls just ahead of him in line were whispering together heatedly while stealing glances at him. Finally, one of them spoke to him directly. "You're really pretty. You are a boy, right?"

"Of course I am!"

There was a chorus of delighted squeals, and then it seemed like everyone was trying to ply him with questions at the same time.

"How long have you been a fan?"

"Which book is your favorite?"

"Are you Team Edward or Team Jacob?"

He stared at them in utter confusion. "What?"

"Come on, you can tell us!"

"Who do you want to get Bella?"

Roxas wondered what 'bella' was and if it was a good thing, but was afraid to ask. "Um...."

"Tell us, hurry! Team Edward or Team Jacob?"

Roxas could not very well say that he was on the Organization's team, and if 'Edward' was the
starving Dusk, he wanted nothing to do with him. "I guess...Team...Jacob?" He threw his hands over his ears as they all screamed, some of them looking disgusted, but others looking ecstatic.

"OMG OMG I KNEW IT!"

"Ugh, figures."

"Hmph, boys never have any taste!"

"I LOVE YOU!"

This last girl actually threw her arms around Roxas's neck and squeezed him tightly. He was about to instinctively summon his Keyblade before he remembered that he would get in trouble for revealing his weapon in public. "Please go away," he whimpered.

Xion pulled the girl off. "Can you not touch him? It makes me uncomfortable," she said.

"Ooohh!"

"Is this your girlfriend?"

"Do you guys ever do reader's theater together?"

"Have you posted any cosplay pictures online?"

Roxas had an idea. He took out some munny orbs and handed them to Xion, along with the still firmly crumpled shirt. "Xion, could you please buy this for me?" He leaned close to whisper in her ear, "I'll wait for you outside."

Xion nodded. "Okay. See you."
Roxas struggled out of the crowd and escaped into the restroom at the back of the store. He took the opportunity to change his pants so that his Christmas Town costume was complete, then draped his coat over his shoulders and opened a dark corridor to a nearby alley. He waited there until he saw Xion come out.

When she did, he walked over to join her, and she handed over the shopping bag with Larxene's shirt in it. He noticed that she was also carrying a second shopping bag from the same store, and supposed that she had purchased something for herself. "Are you ready to go meet Axel?" she asked.

He nodded. "Definitely."

Up on the clock tower, Axel laughed to see Roxas's costume. "We're not going to Christmas Town today, buddy."

"I know. I just...don't want to wear my coat right now."

"You're gonna have to in the corridors."

"I know. I'll put it on when we travel, then take it off again when we get there."

Axel shrugged. "Suit yourself. What's up with the bags?"

He was more than happy to judge the purchases. "Is this okay for Xaldin?" Roxas asked anxiously.

The older Nobody shrugged. "Sure, it never hurts to have a can of blade polish." He blinked, then suddenly grinned. "And considering that you picked this out all by your bad self, I'd say it's an excellent gift. Great job, buddy!"

Roxas beamed.

"How 'bout you, Xion?"
"Oh, this isn't for Christmas," Xion said, swinging her shopping bag. "It's just that the girls in the store kept talking about it, so I got curious. I think I'm probably going to make everyone's gifts by hand."

"Cool. What else you got, Roxas?"

"This is Larxene's." Roxas pulled out the shirt and handed it over.

Axel unfolded it. "GAH!" He snatched his hands back as if the shirt had bitten him, and only some quick reflexes on Roxas's part saved it from fluttering down to the pavement below.

"Be careful! I don't want it to get dirty, or Larxene might get mad."

Axel was staring in shock, as if Roxas had just proposed marriage to him or something. "You bought an Edward Cullen shirt for Larxene?!"

"Xion said she likes him," Roxas muttered. "But it's okay, I can just get her something else."

Now Axel was staring at Xion. "Larxene told you she likes Edward Cullen?"

"Why do you keep saying his name like that?" Roxas wondered.

Xion shrugged. "Well, not exactly, it's just...well, I saw that face, and...er...." She looked distressed. "Larxene will hurt me, so I can't tell."

Slowly, a grin began to spread over Axel's face. "Larxene likes Edward Cullen?"

"Y...Yes."

"Larxene likes Edward Cullen." Axel cackled like an evil scientist. "Oh, you two, this is gold. Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my non-existent heart."
"So...should I get her a different present?" Roxas asked cautiously.

"No! No way. Trust me, this is perfect." Axel laughed heartily again. "Ah, I knew it'd pay off to make friends with you two.... Anyway, we better get going, it's getting late."

They traveled to Wonderland, where they found a shop which sold odd novelties. Roxas and Xion spent far more time playing with the weird merchandise than they did actually shopping, but eventually, Roxas found something that might do for Xigbar: a large red handkerchief that transported anything placed under it behind the ear of the nearest person who was not touching it.

Roxas tested it on Xion first, laying the cloth over a munny orb, then pulling the same orb out from behind her ear. She laughed. Then he tried it on Axel, asking him to take off one of his gloves in order to place the handkerchief over it. Axel cursed and clawed frantically at his ear, behind which the glove had materialized. "Gah! Like a freaking spider or something...."

"Are you afraid of spiders, Axel?" Xion asked interestedly.

"No. Of course I'm not afraid of spiders. That's dumb. Nobodies can't be afraid of anything. We don't have emotions, so even if I was afraid of spiders in my past life - which I wasn't, - I wouldn't be afraid of them now. I'd never be afraid of spiders. There's nothing to be afraid of, anyway; they're just big dumb bugs with eight freaking legs...and googly eyes...and eight legs...and some of them are all hairy and gross and they have eight legs and STOP LAUGHING."

Xion pressed both hands over her mouth to stifle her giggling, and Roxas hid a smile as he folded the handkerchief and put it back in its shopping bag.

As they were passing through the garden, a reddish pink flower suddenly swayed into Roxas's path and said in a delicate, whispering voice, "Give me an Elixir."

"It talked!" Roxas looked at Axel, who shrugged. He looked back at the flower again. It bobbed expectantly. "Um...okay." He dug around for his Elixir panel and held it up. The flower ate it, brushing silken petals against Roxas's palm. Then it expelled a heap of HP balls onto his head.

"...Thanks." Roxas had an idea. "Hey, flower? Do you like it here in the garden?"

"This is where I am rooted."
"Would you like to travel?"

"What is 'travel'?' the flower asked politely.

Roxas smiled. It felt good to be the explainer for once. "It's when you go somewhere else, like to see different things and meet new people. I was just wondering if you'd like to live in a place outside of Wonderland."

He looked at Axel again, who seemed to have caught on and flashed him a thumbs-up.

"Hm...but how shall I leave this place? I do not have legs."

Roxas put his coat on again, then helped the others carefully dig out the flower, taking care not to damage its roots. They placed it in Roxas's hood, which they filled with even more soil. Despite this, the flower apparently did not feel secure enough, and reached out its vines and leaves to twine around Roxas's arms and entangle clumps of his hair in order to anchor itself. Roxas tried not to mind too much as they continued on their way.

Further shopping was pretty inconvenient with a large talking flower growing in Roxas's hood, so they soon decided to call it a day.

"You better RTC straight to your room," Axel advised. "Xion and I'll grab a mission report form for you."

"Okay. See you soon."

When Roxas got to the Grey Area, he was surprised not only to find it empty except for one person, but at the fact that Saïx was sitting in a chair rather than lording it up at the head of the room.

The Luna Diviner looked up at the boy's entrance. "Hmph. Finally." He tucked his clipboard under his arm and stood up. "Give me your report quickly, then go to the dining room. Lord Xemnas has ordered us all to take part."
"Huh?"

It was strange, seeing the entire Organization working together. They were never even all present in the same place except during meetings, yet here was everyone, helping each other decorate the Christmas tree.

Well, as much as could be expected, anyway. Larxene was playing a chess game with Xaldin in one corner, as Xemnas lounged in a chair and surveyed the proceedings with bored detachment. Demyx was bouncing merrily around, giving out enthusiastic orders, suggestions, criticism, and encouragement in a failed attempt to hide the fact that he was getting no actual work done himself.

Everyone else, however, was busy decorating the room and the tree. "Ask Demyx or Zexion what to do," Saïx said. "Or Axel, if you like." He moved off to stop Marluxia from fastening some kind of plant over the kitchen doorway.

Roxas went over to Xion, who was trying to untangle a string of lights as Axel worked to fasten the untangled end around the perimeter of a window frame. "Here, let me help you with that," Roxas offered.

Xion smiled at him. "Thanks. How is, um, our Elixir-drinking friend doing?"

"It's asleep. I put it by the window."

"I'll ask Vexen for a sun lamp," Xion promised. "Plants need sunlight to grow."

"But what if he's still mad at you for moving out?"

Axel spoke up, keeping his voice low so that he would not be overheard. "Then I'll steal one from Marluxia, don't worry about it."

"You're gonna steal one?"
"Hey, he'll get it back by the end of the month, right? Wouldn't want his new pet to die in the meantime."

"I guess you have a point."

Life in the Castle That Never Was was not generally enjoyable, but Roxas ended up having fun that evening. With everyone else's conversations going in the background, he and his friends got the lights up and running, then set up the candlesticks. At one point, Demyx put on a Christmas CD to "set the mood."

It was funny to watch Xigbar walking around upside-down in midair, the only one able to reach the top of the tree without a ladder (well, Xaldin could have gusted aloft if he had been so inclined and not minded blowing apart what everyone had finished so far. Also, Xemnas could have levitated up, but Roxas was pretty sure that their Great Leader had fallen asleep with his eyes open - he stared straight ahead without moving, and did not even blink or react when Xigbar mischievously hung a candy cane from his ear).

Vexen was constantly whining about something or other ("It's too hot in here! Why is my presence required when I wanted nothing to do with this foolishness? My experiments are being neglected! Why isn't anyone listening to me?!"), but Demyx's antics, the chatter, and the CD were enough to drown out most of it. Lexaeus silently did whatever was asked of him, including moving the huge dining room table further away to make more room around the tree. Zexion and Saïx sat together, wrapping fake presents to go under the tree for the sake of appearance, both appearing to be surprisingly happy despite not saying much. Luxord worked on the lower half of the tree with occasional help from Lexaeus, wrapping strings of lights and tinsel around the branches before handing them up to Xigbar to finish, and then hanging candy canes and the ornaments everyone had painted wherever there was bare space. Marluxia went around placing potted plants throughout the room and hanging garlands of artificial flowers, just because "Christmas would not be Christmas without flowers, and anyone who objects can sit on my scythe."

At last, the boxes of decorations were empty, and the Castle That Never Was's dining room was as festive as anything in Christmas Town.

"Okay!" Demyx cheered. "Nearly done! Superior, time for your big finale!"

Silence.

Everyone looked at Xemnas. The candy cane dangling from his ear was so ridiculous that Xion giggled, then clapped her hand over her mouth.
Xemnas stared straight ahead, unblinking.

Finally, Saïx picked up Zexion's lexicon, raised it high, and dumped it with a resounding crash on
the table.

Xemnas jerked. "Why do you despise the Void???" he boomed.

Everyone kept staring at him. "We don't," Xigbar finally said. "We're all for the Void, man. Can't
do without that Void, no sirree."

Xemnas gazed around at them all. Xion was so desperate to stifle her laughter that she dove to hide
behind Roxas, biting down hard on her own sleeve.

"Saïx," Xemnas commanded imperiously, "give me a status report."

"Christmas decorating is 99% complete, sir," Saïx said with a straight face. "Now we simply await
your conclusion."

"Hm?"

Demyx held out the tree topper (shaped like the Nobody insignia) with a smile. "All yours,
Superior!"

"It goes at the very top of the tree," Xigbar added helpfully.

"Ah." Xemnas took the topper, floated up majestically, and placed it on the tree's crown. Several
people applauded, though their expressions were rather sarcastic.

"All right!" Demyx cheered. "Roxas, Xion, hit it!"

They both stared at him, alarmed at being called on. "What?"


Axel poked them in the backs. "Light, dummies. Turn on the lights."

"Oh."

Demyx signaled to Zexion, who darkened the room; a second later, the Key of Destiny and his replica summoned their powers, and the Christmas tree's strings of tiny, multi-colored lights filled the room with a bright glow.

There was a general intake of breath. Cold, heartless, emotionless monsters they might have been, but regardless, several of the Nobodies were overcome with awe for a moment. "It's beautiful," Xion whispered. Zexion, Saïx, and even Larxene seemed mesmerized, a fact which did not escape Axel's notice.

Then Xigbar cracked a joke, and Xaldin made some cutting remark, and Vexen started whining again and someone turned the overhead lights back on and Larxene short-circuited the CD player, and everything was back to normal.

Yet, the image stayed in the minds of Roxas and Xion, and the warmth of Christmas magic seemed to settle where their hearts should have been. She looked over at him and smiled. "Christmas is...a wonderful thing, isn't it?"

He smiled hugely at her. "Yep."

Axel laughed. "You two are such kids."

*To be continued...*

**Author's Notes:** The timeline is off, sorry about that.

I wrote this chapter before *Raindrops & Whiskers*, so the spiders thing in that fic is a reference to it, though the two fics don't take place in the same universe. (Axel actually is scared of spiders here, whereas he was only pretending in R&W.)
Someone was pelting him with HP balls. "Give me an Elixir."

Roxas groaned. He had forgotten about Marluxia's sentient Christmas present. Rolling out of bed, he went to the shelf where he kept his panels and rummaged around until he found what the flower apparently needed for breakfast. "Here." He was rewarded with a shower of more totally unneeded HP balls.

"I feel sick. Where is the sun?"

"Oh yeah." Roxas walked over to the sun lamp Axel had stolen the night before, and turned it on. The flower stretched its leaves and petals toward the light. "Aaahhh," it sighed in contentment.

"I'll be gone all day," Roxas told it. "Will you be okay here?"

"I have my Elixir. I have my sunlight. I am happy."

Roxas nodded. "Good." He grabbed some clothes and headed for the bathroom and then the kitchen, where he and Axel put together a stack of breakfast tacos.

Number XIII was a terrible conversationalist that morning - his attention kept drifting to and fixating on the Christmas tree, which he had re-lit as soon as he had walked into the dining room. It was so, so beautiful. The magic of Christmas completely filled this once cold and bare room, making him feel happy just looking at it.

"Oi! Earth to Roxas!"

"Huh?"
Axel shoved him playfully. "You're off in La La Land again. Admiring our handiwork?"

"Yeah."

"We did do a good job," Axel observed, looking over at the tree. "Not bad for a bunch of emotionless Scrooges."

"Where are we going shopping today, Axel?" Roxas asked, biting into his third taco.

"It's a surprise. We'll meet at the clock tower as usual, but the other place has some great ice cream, so save your munny."

Xion was not in the Grey Area when they came in, and no one had seen her. Axel frowned. "You can go ahead and take off, buddy. I'm going to go check on her."

He nearly materialized straight at his destination, but then remembered that he had a roommate now. At the last second, Axel altered his course so that he ended up in the Proof of Existence instead. Sighing a little, he reached to knock at his own bedroom portal. "Xi? You still in there?"

An Assassin came out, its deadly wings waving about happily when it saw its master. "Oi, Xion's not in there doing female things, is she?"

"She sleeps," the Assassin whispered into his mind.

"What?" Axel pushed into his room and discovered that, sure enough, Xion was still curled up under her covers.

"Xion!" He went over and shook her shoulder. "Get up, you're late for work. Saïx is gonna kill you."

The girl stirred, making a cute sleepy noise before curling up even tighter.
"Xi! Wake UP, this is not a vacation day!"

Misty blue eyes fluttered slowly open. "Mm...Axel...?"

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty. You don't have time for breakfast."

"Huh?" Xion looked at her clock, then shrieked and flew out of bed, accidentally smacking him in the face with her quilt. "Oh no! I'm late!"

"Vexen would applaud your brilliant deduction."

Xion dashed around, cramming random panels into her slot grid and seizing her backpack, boots, and the closest coat at hand, which happened to be the one she had worn the day before.

After the panicked Nobody had streaked out of the room, Axel looked around. A book on Xion's nightstand caught his eye, perhaps the reason she had stayed up so late the night before. It was thick, with a black dust jacket and a picture of a pair of hands holding an apple on the front cover.

Axel incinerated it. There was no conscious decision on his part, it was simply a reflex. Then he shivered as the implication sank in. "Xi...if you become a Twihard, I'm disowning you." He shook his head and went back to get his mission assignment for the day.

o.o.o.o.o

Roxas finished his mission early, and since Axel had told him not to buy ice cream, he got a bag of chips instead, eating them impatiently as he waited for his friends to show up. 'They're all salty, and they don't taste sweet at all.'

The sound of a portal opening caught his attention, and he looked over to see Xion walking toward him. "Finished with your mission?"

"Yes. How did yours go?"
"Same as usual."

They sat and talked until Axel showed up, carrying a shopping bag.

"Did you buy some presents?" Roxas asked.

"Nope, these are the stockings, I stopped by Christmas Town to pick them up. I'm not buying gifts for anyone."

"Really?" they exclaimed in surprise.

"No way. I'm not about to waste good munny on people I don't even like." He laughed at their expressions. "Well, since I like you two, maybe I'll get something for you. If I feel like it."

"That's so nice of you," Roxas said dryly.

"Okay, kiddos, here's the deal. We're going somewhere really fun today, you'll like it. Thing is, you need special entrance passes to go there." He smiled as he brandished two cheerfully-colored cards. "Which, luckily, I still have. Sometimes it pays to never clean out your pockets, or your closet." He handed one of the cards to Xion. "You can use Saïx's. Trust me," he added in response to the alarmed look on her face, "he won't miss it." Axel slipped the second card back into his pocket. "And I'll use mine, of course."

"What about me?" Roxas asked anxiously.

Axel gave him a strange, almost sad look. "Don't worry, they'll let you in."

There were long lines at the town gates, since apparently there was some sort of festival going on. The trio talked about work and ice cream and hair products until it was finally their turn to be admitted. Axel displayed his pass, and the raccoon lady in the booth fastened a plastic bracelet around his wrist. Xion got a bracelet, too. Then the raccoon looked at Roxas, smiling. "And you, dear?"

"Uh...." The boy looked to Axel for help.
Number VIII smiled charmingly at the clerk. "I'm really sorry, we lost his pass, but you should have a record of him." Axel leaned close and said in a whisper that Roxas was pretty sure he was not meant to hear, "He should be listed as 'Ventus.'"

"Hm, really?" The raccoon clerk clicked around on her computer for a minute. Then her eyes widened, and she gave Roxas a big smile. "Ah, here you are! Welcome back, honey! It's been quite a while, hasn't it? My, you still look so young."

"Uh..."

"Yeah, we really can't wait to enjoy this year's festival," Axel broke in loudly. "Are we good to go?"

The raccoon lady fixed a bracelet around Roxas's wrist. "All set!"

The three Nobodies walked into the town's central square, the younger ones staring around in wide-eyed amazement. Xion gripped Axel's hand without realizing and squeezed it in excitement. Axel himself had a faraway look in his eyes and a nostalgic expression on his face before he shook his head and snapped out of it. "Okay, then! What do you guys think? Shopping first, or do you want to play?"

Roxas grasped Axel's sleeve and pointed urgently. "What's that?"

"That'd be Rumble Racing. Wanna try?"

Axel won the first round, laughing and whooping as if, despite his lost heart, he was having the time of his life. The kids demanded a rematch and were so determined to beat him that, in their zeal, they accidentally collided at the end and tumbled over the finish line together.

After that, Axel lost any semblance of control he had had over the excursion. Roxas and Xion dragged him from one end of the town to the other, insisting that he try out everything with them, demanding explanations for everything from karaoke to autograph books, and flaying him with Big Blue-Eyed Puppy Looks when he attempted to refuse squeezing himself onto rides designed for six-year-olds.
"Hey, look, ice cream!" he finally cried at one point, desperate for a break. The kids immediately seized his arms and towed him over to the ice cream shop, where they were greeted by a smiling duck lady. "Welcome! What can I get for--?" The duck suddenly broke off and stared at Roxas. "You look familiar," she murmured.

"I do?" he said uncertainly.

"You got a menu or something?" Axel asked hurriedly. "Roxas, Xion, skip the sea-salt today, you're not gonna find Disney Town ice cream anywhere else."

The duck was staring between Roxas and something in a picture frame on the inside wall of the shop - Roxas, framed thing, Roxas, framed thing, Roxas. Then she gasped. "It is you!" She lunged forward and seized the front of his coat, startling him. "Stay there! Don't run away!" she quacked frantically. Then she ran around the inside of the shop, collecting ingredients and mixing them furiously together. The kids looked questioningly at Axel, but he just shrugged.

Then the duck came back to the counter, beaming and carrying an ice cream concoction in one hand and a strange bulky device in the other.

Seeing the device, Axel made a sound like "Urk" and whipped his hood up, reaching over to yank Xion's hood over her head as well. Roxas started to do the same, but for some reason, Axel laid a hand on his arm to stop him.

"Here we go!" the duck said cheerfully, handing the ice cream to Roxas and adjusting some controls on the device, which she then held up in front of her face. "Tell us what you think of your award, dear! This recipe was created just for you."

Wondering if an 'award' was like a 'reward,' Roxas glanced at Axel again, who nodded, then raised a spoonful of the frosty treat to his mouth.

His eyes widened. "W...Whooooa! This is so good! I-I think I...I might even like it better than sea-salt."

"What?" Axel exclaimed indignantly.

The duck beamed. "I'm so glad, dear!" She pressed some more controls and put the device down
on the counter. "Two down, one more to go," she said happily, looking at the framed thing. Roxas was starting to want to know what was in that frame, but it faced the inside of the shop and he could not see it.

"So we're just supposed to watch Roxas eat his special ice cream and drool longingly?" Axel huffed, lowering his hood again now that the video camera was off.

The duck laughed. "Well, since you're friends of our winner here, I'd be happy to offer you both some ice cream on the house. Just sit tight now, I have the perfect tastes in mind for each of you!"

"Don't go to any trouble, just--" The duck lady did not hear, she was already humming as she scooped ice cream into a handled dish. Axel sighed. "Never mind." He looked much happier, however, when he actually took a bite of his Bueno Volcano. "Gah, this is so good...mm, so good-- " It was at that moment that he burst into flames. "Ah!"

Nearby, Xion squealed as she was suddenly swept up in a gust of wind. Roxas, who had finally resumed eating once his friends had their own 'awards'(?), gasped as six crystal blades materialized at his back like wings.

The three friends stared at each other. Then Axel grinned. "Told ya there's nothing like Disney Town ice cream. Hurry and enjoy it, the effects will wear off."

Xion floated about, looking delighted as she rode the wind. Roxas experimented curiously, seeing if the blade wings followed him even when he ran and jumped and Air Slid and Dodge Rolled (they did). Axel played with the flames dancing around his body, showing off a bit in his mastery of the element.

Eventually they finished eating, and the flames/wind/wings faded away.

So Roxas and Xion insisted on buying a second round, to Axel's exasperation. "You kids have fun getting sick on ice cream overload, I'm gonna go wait over there...."

All the benches in the square were occupied, so Axel chose one that would give him a lot of space between himself and the person on the far end. She was a rather fat woman who was fanning herself and pushing a stroller back and forth, rocking the nearly asleep baby inside. Axel half expected her to either leave or cringe away, but instead, she turned to him with a big smile and said, "You have beautiful children!"
"What?" Axel sputtered.

"Oh, I'm sorry, hon - you're too young to be their daddy, aren'tcha. Taking out your little brother and sister, then, eh?"

"We're--" not related, Axel started to say, but then realized that he looked suspicious enough, he did not want anyone to get the idea that he had kidnapped those two or something. "Yeah," he mumbled. "My, uh, stepmom got sick, but the kids had their hearts set on coming and she couldn't find a baby-sitter, so...yeah."

"Well, aren't you a sweet thing," she gushed, scooting closer. "Just like my grandbaby. Isn't he gorgeous?"

"Adorable," Axel said, without bothering to look into the stroller.

"You can hold him if you like," she said eagerly, already scooping up the baby and bundling it into Axel's arms.

"Eh?! No, wait, I don't--! Oi, doesn't he need his sleep or something?" Axel sat stiffly, his arms rigid around the thing as if the slightest movement would break it.

The infant stirred restlessly and opened its big blue eyes. For a moment, the disconcerted Nobody and the tiny Somebody stared into each other's faces. Then the baby reached up and seized a lock of Axel's hair.

"Ow!"

"Aw, he likes you!"

When Roxas and Xion came over after finishing their ice creams, they were surprised and interested to see the Flurry of Dancing Flames holding a baby, struggling to keep its curious hands away from his face as a large woman sitting next to them blathered on about something called 'diapers.'
"What are you doing, Axel?" Roxas asked.

"Being assaulted."

"It's - It's an itty bitty person! He's so cute!" Xion squealed, touching the baby's little button nose.

Axel tried in vain to give the baby back to its grandmother. "Sorry, but we've gotta get going--"

"Oh, nonsense, you can stay and let your cute little sister play with--"

Just then, there was a sound of trickling liquid. Roxas and Xion watched as all trace of expression drained out of Axel's face.

"Oh, my!" the lady fusses, taking out a handkerchief and swiping ineffectually at Axel's lap. "The poor dear's gone and pee-peed on your coat! Ah well, babies will be babies."

Expression was slowly beginning to creep back into the fire lord's face. Roxas and Xion, recognizing murderous intent, knew they had to act fast.

"I'll hold him for a minute," Xion said quickly, snatching the baby out of her friend's hands and clutching it protectively to her chest, soiled diaper and all.

"I'll go buy you a clean shirt, Axel," Roxas said hurriedly. "Promise you won't kill anyone before I come back!" He raced away.

The lady laughed. "What a funny little boy! Oh, darlin', don't you just look precious holding my grandbaby like that!"

Xion smiled. "Yes, he's really, really cute. I don't see how anyone could ever want to kill him, right, Axel? ...Please?"
Axel, whose murderous intent was actually directed at the child's grandmother, now stood up and burst into ominous flames - this time without the help of any ice cream.

"Well, now! That's certainly an impressive trick. Are you a performer?"

Axel gave her a slasher smile.

*To be continued....*

**Author's Notes:** The record of Ven was the Million Dreams Award, it didn't have anything to do with the generic pass.
By the time Roxas came running back, Axel was making up very creative PG-rated swear words as Xion patted his shoulder soothingly.

"Where's the fat lady and the tiny person?" Roxas asked worriedly.

"The little person's - Axel called it a 'piss machine' - parents came by and took them away before he could do anything to them."

"You found out what 'parents' are?" Roxas asked eagerly.

"Yeah, apparently they're people who make piss machines."

"Huh. I wonder why Axel didn't want us to know that."

Axel, listening to this conversation, was starting to cheer up a little. It just did his non-heart good to hear Xion using the phrase 'piss machine.' "Oi, you got my shirt?"

Roxas proudly held up a lemon-yellow T-shirt with a large Mickey head emblazoned on the front.

Axel went back to making up swear words.

"I think he's mad because you forgot to take the tag off," Xion said uncertainly.

"Oh. Oops. Here, Axel, I'll tear it off so it won't poke you when you put it on."
"Just so you know, kiddos, your utter cluelessness stopped being funny a long time ago," Axel muttered. He stood up and stripped off his smelly coat and then his tank top.

"Oh - why don't you just wear your tank top around?" Roxas asked, realizing that he might have been a dummy again.

"Because it's covered with skulls and dirty rock band lyrics, and the park officials would kick me out for violating the family-friendly dress code."

"Axel, I think you need to eat more," Xion said worriedly, observing her friend's ribs (she could count every single one).

"I eat fine," Axel grumbled, yanking the humiliating T-shirt over his head.

When he was dressed, the kids told him about what they had been interested in before the baby incident. Axel looked where they were pointing, at the stage next to the ice cream shop, in front of which a crowd had been slowly gathering. "They're going to put on a show," he explained. "And before you start shooting me with your puppy eyes, yes we can watch it, because even with this evil T-shirt to motivate me, I still can't resist those eyes of yours, and as long as Saïx and the others don't see me in this yellow monstrosity, I'll survive. "But that sign says we still have ten minutes, and there's something I need to take care of first."

They went over to a photo booth and piled inside, where Axel only responded to their confused inquiries by instructing, "Look at that little circle and smile."

There was a flash of light. Both Roxas and Xion gasped in surprise.

"Don't break it," Axel said sharply, remembering that their element was Light. "It's just taking pictures, don't worry."

"What's pic--?"

"I'll explain later, we've got three more to go. Now, smile!"
Flash!

"It doesn't hurt."

"It's not supposed to."

"Why are we smiling?"

There was no time to reply properly at the moment. "Because I told you to."

Flash!

"Is this some kind of weird training?"

"Ugh, I need to take you guys out more often.... Hey, this is the last one. Do a silly pose!"

Flash!

"Okay, we're done."

"I don't get it."

"Neither do I."

Axel pushed out of the booth and picked up the strip of photographs, examining them in satisfaction. In the first one, Roxas and Xion looked startled; in the second and third, they were smiling uncertainly; and in the fourth, they seemed perplexed as he gave them bunny ears in the background. "Excellent." He looked up to find the kids staring at him. He grinned, carefully tearing off two of the photos and holding them out on his palm. "Here, you guys can have the extras."
"Hey...that's us!"

"How'd you put us into these tiny things?!"

Axel explained it to them as they bought some hot dogs and found seating. When they finally understood, they were eager to hurry back and take some more photos, but by that time, the show was starting.

A lady, wearing a colorful foofy dress and a mouse-ears headband just like Roxas, Xion, and half the people in the audience were wearing, had come onstage and was now booming enthusiastically into a microphone. "Okay, kids! Do you know what time it is?"

"No," Roxas and Xion answered, at the same time seemingly every other child in the crowd screamed excitedly, "IT'S MOUSEKETEER TIME!!!!" Axel facepalmed.

The two younger Nobodies were both confused and fascinated, watching as people in huge ridiculous costumes danced and sang and put on skits, occasionally calling on children from the audience to participate. At one point, someone threw handfuls of black Hidden Mickey stickers to the crowd. Roxas caught one, then gave it to Xion, who smiled and put it on her cheek like she had seen another girl do.

"All-righty!" the lady on stage announced. "Now we'll sing our last song, to say good-bye to our Mouseketeers! Who will be our volunteers? Ah! What about you two cuties in the black coats?"

Roxas and Xion were startled as the spotlight fell on them. Axel quickly scooted over to hide the FLURRY WUZ HERE graffiti he had been singeing into the bench.

"Us?"

"Come on up, come on up!" the lady sang out merrily, as everyone in the audience began shouting encouragement.

Uncertainly, Roxas and Xion got up and made their way down the aisle. An actor in a huge dog costume seized Xion and swung her easily up on stage, then did the same for Roxas.
"Just come right on over here where we can all see you, that's it! What's your name, sweetie?"

After a glance at Axel, she offered the first fake name that came to mind. "My name is...Kairi."

"How pretty! And you, big guy?"

"Um, V-Ventus." Did she really think he was big?

"Wonderful! My, you two must be stifling in those big ol' coats! Jeff, do we have some souvenirs for these troopers?" Someone handed her a couple more Mickey head T-shirts, which she presented to the kids with a smile. "Here you go! Let's see you show your Mouse Pride!"

Feeling uncomfortable about stripping in public like Axel had earlier, Xion pulled the bubblegum-pink shirt on over her coat, fiddling with the chains so that they hung over the outside and were not being squished against her body. Roxas followed suit, though his shirt was fire-engine-red instead of pink.

"Perfect! Aren't they wonderful? Now, Kairi, Ventus, are you ready to help us out?"

"Um, sure." Xion looked around for Heartless to eliminate.

"Excellent! You know the words to the Good Night Song, right?"

Roxas and Xion looked at each other, then down at their shoes.

"Oh, well, that's okay! The words will be on that big screen there, and the Mouseketeers will sing each verse first, you just have to read the lyrics and repeat what they say. Can you do that?"

"Well, we'll give it a try," Xion said nervously, and Roxas nodded.

"Wonderful! Step up to the microphones here, you're going to sing into them so we can all hear you. All right, here we go!"
Roxas and Xion listened hard to the first verse, trying to memorize the tune as their eyes scanned the lyrics on the screen, and the audience roared out the song along with the people on stage. Then it was their turn. Xion began bravely, and Roxas joined in a few seconds late.

The crowd quieted in surprise, and even the other singers faltered. The two young Nobodies reached the end of the verse, then looked around uncomfortably, wondering if it was supposed to be like this. Roxas got an uneasy feeling when he saw Axel staring at them with the same surprised expression as everyone else.

The hostess was the first to recover. "Oh my, oh my, oh my! That was lovely!" The audience had broken into enthusiastic cheers. "Come on, now, Mouseketeers, let's end this show with a bang!"

The rest of the song went more like the young Nobodies had expected: the costumed people sang a verse, the Keybearers repeated it, and the crowd never stopped cheering and following along this time. Then the song came to a close, and everyone went wild with encouraging shouts and applause.

The hostess grabbed the kids' hands, her eyes shining. "Oh, that was wonderful! Kairi, Ventus, you both have terrific voices, my loves. Would you like to work for us?"

"Huh?"

In the audience, Axel flung himself under the bench so that hopefully no one would notice as he dark corridor to a spot behind the curtain. He strode out on stage, detaching Roxas and Xion from the lady's delighted grasp and shoving them behind him protectively. "They're minors, they can't sign any contracts."

"Oh! Of course, of course. Are you their guardian, then?"

"I'm their...stepbrother. I'm baby-sitting today."

"I see! Well, here's my card, please have their legal guardians call me so that we can come to an agreement!"
"Their mom'll be so proud," Axel growled, cramming the business card into his pocket without looking at it.

The hostess turned to the crowd and called out enthusiastically, "Let's have a last big round of applause for Kairi and Ventus, they did an absolutely SUPER job!"

The audience members who were not already getting up to leave all cheered gustily. Axel shook his head. "Man, you two...don't let Demyx know you can sing like that, or he'll never leave you alone."

By then, it was quite late, and the trio only had about thirty minutes left to accomplish their actual reason for coming to Disney Town. After retrieving their stuff, they hurried to the nearest gift shop, where a movie was playing on the screen that hung from one of the walls. "Hey," Roxas observed, "those laser sword things kind of look like Xemnas's weapons."

"It must be Star Wars Saturday," Axel realized. "Those are lightsabers, Roxas."

Xion found toy 'lightsabers,' which did not look anything like the ones in the movie. "You think Xemnas will like them?" Roxas asked doubtfully.

"Roxas, the only thing you can give Mr. Superior that will make him happy is someone's raging, grief-filled heart, and you already get plenty of those for him on missions. Christmas Lesson #78: It's the thought that counts."

Roxas also got a watch for Luxord that had a picture of Mickey Mouse on the face, with Mickey's arms ticking around to indicate the correct time. At the last minute, he caught sight of a 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle that Lexaeus might like, since it was a picture of Mickey and Minnie picnicking by the Easter Island moai.

The Nobodies got kicked out pretty much as soon as Roxas's receipt popped out of the printer. "Thank you, come again!" They were ushered out by smiling employees, who locked the doors and pulled down the security gate as soon as they crossed the threshold.

Roxas yawned. "I think I'm ready to go home."

"Me, too," Xion sighed, covering a yawn of her own. "Axel, what time is it?"
"The park closes at 11:00." All the other visitors seemed to be heading in a slow but steady stream toward the front gates. The trio were heading for a shadowy alley where they could RTC without being noticed, but a sudden whistling sound and a splash of colorful light got their attention before they reached it.

Xion turned around and gasped. "Oh, look!"

"Fireworks," Axel explained before they could ask. He watched the rainbow explosions lightning up the night sky, a wistful smile on his face. "They're like decorative explosives."

"Woooowwww...."

They stood there, enjoying the sight of Disney Town's final farewell. Then the lights stopped, the sky was filled with smoke, the tourists all resumed their trek to the front gates, and it was time to go home.

Roxas arrived directly in his room, needing to drop off his Christmas shopping and the bag of stockings Axel had handed him. He found Marluxia's flower whipping around in a tantrum, crying the same word over and over. "Tired, tired, tired, tired, tired, tired, tired, tired...."

"Oops." Roxas hurried over to the sun lamp and switched it off. The flower immediately flopped over and began to snore. "Sorry...."

In Axel's room, Xion carefully peeled the sticker off her face and stuck it on a fresh page of her diary. She jotted down an entry on her wonderful trip to Disney Town, then headed for the bathroom. She was surprised to find Larxene still there, fast asleep in one of the tubs. "Larxene?"

The petite blonde did not move.

"Hm...." Figuring that it would be best to leave the Savage Nymph undisturbed, Xion stepped into her 'designated' shower. She was tired, so she kept it short, though the water and the scent of her shampoo revived her somewhat.

When she came out, Larxene was awake, wrapped in a fluffy yellow robe and sitting on one of the
cushioned stools, inspecting her wrinkled fingers distastefully. "I can't believe I fell asleep in the bath...ugh!" She stretched her arms over her head, looking cranky. "Work sucked today! I'm sleeping in tomorrow, Saïx can go fall off a cliff. Oi, what time is it?"

Xion realized that she was being addressed. "Oh! Um, almost 11:30."

"Crap...." Larxene leaned over and rubbed her face.

"Um...Larxene? Can I - ask you something?"

"I told you," Larxene growled, "I'm not your mother, all your girly questions go to Vexen."

"Oh - no, it's not that, it just ended a couple of days ago and everything was fine. I was just...wondering about Edward."

Larxene's poison-green eyes snapped to hers.

"I wanted to ask if you can tell me why he seems to hate Bella so much," Xion said unhappily. "I fell asleep last night while they were at the Italian restaurant, and now I can't find my book...I think Axel might have burned it. I thought they were supposed to be in love, but all Edward does is act like she's disgusting."

Larxene regarded her silently, for such a long time that Xion wondered if she was experiencing her final moments and would never see Roxas and Axel again.

Meanwhile, Axel, after switching out the Mickey Mouse monstrosity for his non-family-friendly tank top, had stopped by to pick up some mission report forms, and paused for a moment in surprise. At this time of night, everyone had usually retired to his room. Saïx was the only one still in the Grey Area, except for a bunch of mischievous Dusks who were drawing on his face with a black marker. This was only possible because Saïx was fast asleep, slumped on one of the couches and breathing peacefully.
"Oi, shoo." Axel ignited the slower ones until they had all slithered away into the walls. Then he chuckled, braced one knee on the couch, and started wiping away the scribbles with an extra napkin left over from the Disney Town snacks.

Saïx frowned in his sleep and stirred, cracking his eyes open. He jumped a little when he found Axel so close, and automatically pushed his old friend's hand away. "What are you doing?"

"Restoring your smokin' good looks."

Saïx touched his own face, and his eyes widened in realization. "The Dusks got me."

"Yeah. What are you still doing here, anyway?"

"I need your reports," Saïx said gruffly.

"Aw, you weren't waiting up for us, were ya, boss?"

"Of course not." Saïx reached for the napkin, but Axel held it out of his reach, grinning. With a haughty glare, the berserker scrubbed at his face, accomplishing little more than smearing the greasy marks and making it worse.

Axel burst into laughter. "You look ridiculous, Sai."

"Give me the napkin."

"Nope. Unless you wanna fight me for it."

"As if I'd stoop to your level."

"Wanna go get one from the kitchen? Careful, though; Demyx has been known to go out for midnight snacks, or Xigbar might be prowling around, or who knows, maybe even Mr. Superior himself could be stalking the halls, you never know with him. Any of them would probably find your new makeup job enthralling."
Saïx was silent, and did not move when Axel reached over to finish cleaning his face.

"...Or you coulda corridored straight to your room."

Saïx turned a baleful glare on him, obviously fed up with his teasing. "How come you smell like a wet diaper?" he fired back.

"Urgh...." Axel opened up a corridor down to the laundry room and tossed his soiled coat into it, which landed right on one of the water clones. "Long story. Which has nothing to do with me wetting my pants, just so you know."

Saïx shoved some mission report forms at him. "In my hands, first thing tomorrow morning."

"You're such a workaholic."

"It's better than being the castle nanny."

"Grr! Dog-lover!"

"Pyro."

"Suck-up!"

"Delinquent."

"Scarface!"

"Clown--" Saïx broke off. "I am not doing this," he snapped, turning his back and stalking out of the room.
Axel laughed as he watched him go.

*To be continued....*

**Author's Notes:** **Guys, graffiti is not cool.** Just so you know. Bad Axel.

*Obviously* Larxene wouldn't use her lightning powers while she's *bathing*!

I read somewhere that Disney partners with whoever to have Star Wars weekends? I'm not really sure, but it worked for the fic, so I used the idea.

I was about to write Axel as a hottie who attracted wolf whistles from passersby when he took his shirt off, but then I remembered an Org beach pic I saw recently, where shirtless Axel looks a bit anorexic. He's so skinny, I think that's actually an accurate representation. *sweatdrop* THAT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU LIVE OFF OF ICE CREAM, FLURRY.

To those of you who haven't read the manga - lol, the Dusks do draw on people's faces when they're sleeping, at least according to Amano Shiro. ^_^; I thought it would be funny if they picked on someone besides Roxas, for a change.
"Give me an Elixir."

Roxas groaned and pulled a pillow over his head. HP balls pelted him, not only annoying him with their thumps, but filling him with energy so that he would not be able to go back to sleep.

"I'm hungry. I want my Elixir."

Roxas sighed and climbed out of bed, turning on the sun lamp and rummaging around until he found an Elixir panel. For the first time, it began to dawn on him how expensive this thing's upkeep was going to be in the days remaining before Christmas. "You okay now?" he asked once the flower had been fed.

"Yes. You will stay here all day today."

"No, I've got work to do."

"Stay here," it demanded.

"I'm sorry, I have to go. But I promise I won't get home late, I'll be back to turn your lamp off when you're tired."

"Stay! Stay! Stay! Stay!"
Roxas felt bad about ignoring it, but he was more scared of what Saïx might do to him if he tried to take vacation days from now until Christmas. "I'll be back this afternoon!" he called one last time, and fled.

Axel rolled out of bed, yawning and running a hand through his hair. "'Bout time for a re-gel...." He grabbed a clean outfit and stepped out into the Proof of Existence, heading for the bathroom.

Larxene was stepping out of her room at the same moment - no, not Larxene. Xion. Wait, and Larxene? What the--?! Why was Xion in Larxene's room? Apparently all night, since, come to think of it, Axel never remembered Xion being in her bed; he had just assumed she was taking her time in the bath. Furthermore, why were Xion and Larxene giggling together?

"Oh! Good morning, Axel!" Xion said happily, waving as she caught sight of him. Her hair was uncombed and her eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, but she seemed to be in high spirits. Next to her, Larxene's happy smile vanished. She glared at Axel and shot him the finger (behind Xion's back, thankfully) before flouncing off somewhere.

'Except for that last bit,' Axel thought, 'something is very, very wrong here.'

Whose turn is it to go grocery shopping?' Roxas thought unhappily. There was almost nothing left in the cabinets or refrigerator. All that was left of the cereal was some dust at the bottom of the bag. No Pop-Tarts, no eggs, no bagels or muffins, just the heel left in the last bag of bread....

Nearby, Xaldin was combing the place for food as well, grunting in dissatisfaction. He finally cut up and boiled the last few withered carrots, threw them into the handful of rice that was left, and walked out with the meager result. Roxas took the heel of bread and smeared it with the last few globs of peanut butter that were clinging to the sides of the empty jar.

When Roxas came into the Grey Area, the sight of Demyx chilling on one of the couches reminded him of something. "Oh!" He corridor to his room, grabbed the Christmas Town bag, then went back and walked over to the Melodious Nocturne. "Hey, Demyx, here's the Christmas stockings."
"Hm? Oh! Hey, thanks, little buddy!" Demyx actually put down his sitar and dug eagerly through the bag. "Aaahhh! This is mine! I love it, I love it!"

Roxas had not actually looked at the stockings yet, so he got curious about them after seeing the chibi sleeping merman with an elegant Roman numeral IX embroidered at the top of Demyx's.

Demyx held up Vexen's stocking, laughing. "Love it, kiddo." The fourth stocking featured a picture of a maniacally cackling mad scientist. "Man, I was just gonna give you a Bronze, but this is good stuff." He handed over a better synthesis item, which Roxas pocketed happily. "Eeeeee, CUTE!" Saïx's had a picture of an adorable blue puppy on it. With gold eyes. And a familiar-looking facial scar. It would probably not be a good idea to claim any responsibility whatsoever for providing the berserker with this particular design.

Everyone else in the room began coming over, attracted by the commotion and the realization of what it was about.

"Why does mine have the Apple logo?" Zexion said, inspecting his stocking with a frown. "I don't even use a Mac."

Roxas shrugged. "I don't know. Axel came up with most of the designs."

"Heh heh, that guy," Xigbar laughed, admiring his with its chibi eyepatched pirate face.

Vexen had caught sight of his by this time. "What?! Why does mine look so ridiculous? Is that a mad scientist? I find that highly insulting! I demand an exchange!"

"We bought them in Christmas Town," Roxas said. "If you don't like yours, I guess you can go back there and get a different one."

"You stupid boy, we run a covert operation here! I can't just parade about in public!"

"You can if you wear a Christmas costume. The elves all think we live in a little cottage in the forest."
"Gah! I refuse to degrade myself by donning such silly garments!"

"Then just put up with a Santa hat," Zexion snapped. "Everyone wears silly clothes there. You stand out more when you don't look ridiculous."

Leaving everyone to delight in or complain about their stockings, Roxas went over to Saïx, who was conversing with Number XI. The berserker turned and said, "You and Marluxia are on shopping duty today, so I have arranged for you to work together on your mission as well, for the sake of convenience." He handed over copies of the mission brief and the grocery list. "Depart as soon as you are ready."

"Okay." Roxas looked up at the scythe master, who smiled down at him rather calculatingly. "Um, well, my panel arrangement is fine, so I'm ready whenever you are."

"I, too, have finished my preparations. Let us be off."

They went to a new world for recon, emerging in a luscious green meadow full of wildflowers. A sparkling stream meandered through it, past a quaint, rather lopsided tower in the middle. "That would be 'Rapunzel's Tower,' I suppose," Marluxia mused, referencing the name of the world.

"It's really pretty here," Roxas said, thinking about how much Xion would like it.

"What conclusions do you draw from that observation, Thirteen?"

"Huh? Oh! No, that wasn't really a clue, I was just...you know. Admiring it."

"Hmph. We have no time to waste on sightseeing."

"Sorry."

They wandered around, occasionally remarking on any distinctive characteristics they noticed. Roxas found a place where the hanging vines hid a small cave-like entrance, which opened out into
a much larger forest. Marluxia identified the tower as a classic example of 18th century Rococo architecture in the style of Francesco de Lange, and also told Roxas the names of every single flower in the meadow.

Finally, they dark corridored up inside the tower itself - since there was no other way to get in. The tower had no door. That was obviously a big clue about...something, but Roxas could not figure out its significance, so he just filed it away with the other, less remarkable clues.

They found themselves in a large round room that was open in the middle, though it had a whole lot of stuff arranged around the perimeter: newspapers; ballet shoes; cleaning supplies; a chess board; puppets; whole boxes full of brushes, combs, hair products, and hair ornaments; and lots and lots of paints and paintbrushes - just to name a few.

"Man," Roxas murmured, "if this stuff really is detangler, then there's more of it in here than in our bathroom cupboards at the castle. No gel, though."

"They might have not invented it yet in this world."

"I guess a lot of hair otaku live here, just like at home."

"Or else just one person with a great deal of hair to manage."

Roxas laughed. "That'd have to be a lot of hair." He put the box of detangler bottles back. "He - or she - must really like to paint, too. I mean, there's a ton of stuff, but it's the hair stuff and the paint that really stand out."

Just then, a girl's singing voice wafted out from an upstairs room. "And then I'll read a book, or maybe two or three...." The words trailed off, but she kept humming. Roxas and Marluxia looked at each other and nodded, silently agreeing to be more quiet now that they knew the tower was occupied.

Roxas kept looking around, pushing back a curtain to find a large picture that had been painted on the wall, of a girl with a river of golden hair, watching a stream of glowing lights in the night sky. 'She has so much hair...hm. The person who lives here obviously has a lot of hair to take care of, too. If she also likes to paint, then...maybe this is a self-portrait?'
New breakthrough!

Just then, a woman's voice called from outside the tower. "Rapunzel! Let down your hair!"

"Coming, Mother!" the girl called from upstairs.

Marluxia threw himself behind a curtain. Roxas ran to a wardrobe standing against the wall and yanked its doors open - then nearly screamed like a little girl as a dead body flopped straight at him, knocking him to the floor.

"Rapunzel! I'm waiting!"

"Just a moment, Mother, I'll be right there!"

There was no time to freak out. Roxas struggled free of the corpse, slammed the wardrobe doors shut again, then seized the dead guy under the armpits and dragged him into a dark corridor.

Just in time. Roxas huddled inside the dark wardrobe with his new creepy friend, holding his hands over his mouth to muffle his panicked breathing, and listening to the girl's footsteps as she came down the stairs. There was an odd rustling sound, too, as if she was dragging something heavy.

"I'm sorry, Mother!"

"Well, it's about time, dear. What were you taking your sweet time doing, trying to bleach out all those hideous freckles of yours or something?"

"Um...."

"Oh-ho-ho, look at your face! Of course I'm just teasing you, darling, you're a lovely girl. You'll never be as gorgeous as your mama, of course, but, hah! As if there's anyone you need to impress."

"Um...thanks?"
To Roxas's profound relief, he realized that his wardrobe buddy was not dead after all, just unconscious. The man's breathing was tickling his neck, but there was no room for Roxas to get away from him.

"Mother, there's something I wanted to show you. See, in my wardrobe I've got--"

Roxas hastily dark corridored over next to Marluxia, who promptly clapped a hand over his mouth. 'Hey, if I managed to keep quiet when I thought a DEAD GUY was attacking me, I'm not gonna be dumb enough to give you away!' Roxas thought, but Marluxia was strong and wielded a giant scythe, and a tussle might attract attention, so he did not resist.

"You are NOT LEAVING THIS TOWER, Rapunzel!" the old lady was yelling. "Ever!"

'I missed it,' Roxas thought. 'What did that Rapunzel girl say that made Mother so mad at her?'

They listened for a while longer, as the cowed Rapunzel asked for a birthday present of sea shells instead, and her mother reluctantly agreed to undertake the journey to fetch them. Roxas tugged carefully at Marluxia's glove until the older Nobody finally leaned down to hiss, "Don't make a sound" in his ear before releasing him.

'I wonder why Rapunzel can't go herself,' Roxas thought. 'Is it because the present is supposed to be a surprise? But no, she told that Mother lady what she wanted. Maybe these birthday present things are different from Christmas presents.'

He listened to the sounds on the other side of the curtain, realizing that Mother was climbing down somehow. 'That's how she got up, too - through the window. She - she can't have been climbing up Rapunzel's hair, could she?!'

He remembered how he could not find the tower's entrance. 'The window must be the only way in or out, not counting corridors of darkness. And if Mother climbs up and down Rapunzel's hair, that would mean Rapunzel can't do it herself. She...she must be trapped in here. I feel kind of...sorry for her. Weird, since I don't have a heart.' He paused. 'Wait, how'd Rapunzel get here in the first place, then? Man, that must have been a tall ladder....'

There was a lot of banging, thumping, and rustling. Then Roxas yelped a little in surprise at the sound of a man's startled yell, which luckily covered up his slip - apparently, Rapunzel was not
alone in her tower. 'Oh yeah, the not-dead guy. I guess he woke up?'

As Rapunzel and Mr. Wardrobe started yelling at each other, Roxas, knowing that they probably would be too preoccupied to notice the rustling curtain, tugged at Marluxia's sleeve. "Mother climbed up on Rapunzel's hair, didn't she?"

"What?"

"Mother. That old lady. Does this count as a new breakthrough?"

"I told you not to make a sound."

"It's not like they're going to notice us...."

From the other side of the curtain, the argument continued. "The only thing I want with your hair is to get out of it - literally!"

Apparently, Rapunzel was finally convinced that the guy meant her no harm, and their conversation got a little calmer. By the time they finally left ("Huh...I guess Rapunzel can climb down her own hair after all...maybe it's that Mother who was keeping her trapped here. ' New breakthrough!)), Roxas was stifling. He burst out from behind the curtain, sucking in lungfuls of air. Marluxia came out of hiding as well, fussing with his own tousled hair and glancing around the tower one last time. "So, Roxas, what have we learned?"

Roxas sighed and began speaking like a schoolboy reciting his lessons. "A girl named Rapunzel lives here. She has really long hair, she likes to paint, and she wants to see a bunch of floating lights. She's outranked by someone named Mother who won't let her leave this tower, which doesn't have a door. That Flynn guy has something important in his satchel, but Rapunzel hid it and she'll only give it back if he takes her to see the lights." He arched an eyebrow. 'Good enough?'

Marluxia nodded. "That would be the gist of it, yes. Come, Roxas. I think we've done enough for today."

At the grocery store a few worlds away, Roxas pulled out the shopping list and read through it. "Milk, eggs, apples, bananas, ramen, paper towels, sandwich bags, dental floss, carrots, refried
Marluxia grinned. "Please make sure to ask Axel that in public, while Larxene is present. I'll buy them, though...you'd probably be dim-witted enough to bring home even more XIV-sized ones, and then Larxene would destroy you and we'd only be left with one Keyblade wielder."

"Huh?"

"I'll also get the produce. You go look for all these ridiculous snacks."

"Where should we meet?"

"By the pharmacy."

Roxas grabbed a cart and went around tossing cereal and crackers and ramen into it, plus some packages of cookies because they looked yummy. He saved the super-sized box of ice cream bars for last, since he wanted them to melt as little as possible by the time he could get them into the freezer at home.

He and Marluxia met up, grabbed the last few items they both had missed, then went to go pay for them.

"Having a party?" the chatty clerk asked as he scanned the box of treats.

"No. My, er, family just likes ice cream," Roxas said. (He was not entirely sure what a 'family' was, but he had heard the others use the term once or twice. It seemed like a good blending-in thing to say.)

"Wow, you must have a big family!"

"Yeah."
"Let me guess, that pink-haired guy in the next line over must be your dad, right? I can tell because of the matching coats!"

"Um...he's my-- stepbrother," Roxas mumbled, remembering what Axel had told the lady in Disney Town. "I'm baby-sitting today." The clerk laughed so loudly that several people looked over at him in surprise, including Marluxia. The Graceful Assassin glared warningly at Roxas.

"Thanks so much," the boy said hurriedly, dumping a pile of munny on the counter. "Here, I'll help you bag everything."

As they were pushing their carts out of the store, Roxas asked, "What's baby-sitting?"

"Hm? It's when somebody looks after a child when the child's regular guardians have business to take care of."

"...Oh." Why had Axel said that, then? Roxas didn't need to be looked after!

"What brought that up?"

"Huh? Oh, well, that clerk asked about you, so I said you were my stepbrother and I was baby-sitting."

Marluxia raised an eyebrow.

"...I guess I got that wrong. Oh, and what's a family?"

"I'm not Axel. This is your last answer."

"Okay...."

"A family, loosely defined, is a group of people who are very close-knit and want to look out for each other's well-being."
"Oh. I think I got that one wrong, too."

"On the contrary, it's a good cover story when you're out among humans."

"But...it's not true, right?"

"Of course not. To have a family, you must be capable of love, and we're a bit lacking in that area, aren't we?"

Neither of them trusted Dusks for the task, so Roxas summoned a bunch of Samurai to carry the groceries home. When they arrived in the kitchen, the rest of the Organization came flocking in like hungry ravens.

Demyx immediately pounced on the goldfish crackers; Xaldin began washing vegetables as Luxord got out a cutting board; Saïx peeled and bit into a banana, his expression almost blissful; Axel and Xigbar fought over who would get to use the oven first, since there was not enough room for both of the frozen pizzas and all the taquitos; Lexaeus plugged in the rice cooker; Vexen, Larxene, and Marluxia all jostled each other trying to use the stove at the same time; and Zexion seized what little counter space there was left to put together a sandwich.

Xion came over to help Roxas put away whatever food had managed to escape the ravages of the starving horde. As she pulled a certain box out of the last shopping bag, Roxas remembered something. "Axel," he called, "can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, what is it?" Axel grumbled, clearly unhappy that both his pizzas were now covered with taquito filling.

"What are tampons?"

Everyone turned around and stared at him. Marluxia looked like Christmas had come early, but everyone else's expressions gave Roxas the feeling that he had just done something really stupid.

"For the love of Kingdom Hearts, Roxas, don't do this to me," Axel groaned.
Roxas suddenly noticed that Xion was blushing. "Xion, you know what tampons are?" he said in surprise.

"Not when Larxene's around!" Xion yelped, and ran to hide behind Axel. She and Larxene might now have a common interest, but she knew without a doubt that their new friendship was nowhere near strong enough to sustain this kind of damage.

Some of the others were now laughing, and many were looking eagerly at the Flurry of Dancing Flames.

"Well, Axel?" Xigbar said mischievously, clapping Number VIII on the back, "You gonna answer the little guy's question?"

Larxene came over and gripped Axel's hood tightly, almost strangling him. Knives materialized in her other fist.

"They're...ammunition," Axel choked out. "For toy guns.* Kids run around and shoot each other with them for fun."

Some of the others burst into laughter. "I gotta get me one of those," Xigbar said gleefully. "Try some tampon target practice on Xem."

Roxas frowned at Axel. "Really? Why's everyone acting so weird, then?"

Xion leaned around Axel and said nervously, "It's true, Roxas. It's just that...they're, um, toys, so...no one really expected you to bring it up."

"...Okay," Roxas said doubtfully. That still did not make sense.

Larxene released Axel, kissed Xion on the temple (which had to be the scariest thing Roxas had ever seen her do), tossed the tampon box into a corridor of darkness, then flounced back to the stove. Everyone else was talking about seemingly random stuff and laughing frequently at jokes he didn't understand. For some reason, Axel kept yelling things like, "Not in front of the kids!" or "They're not that stupid, they know what you're talking about!", and Larxene kept making threats...
along the lines of, "If you say anything about 'vampire tea bags' ONE MORE TIME, I will castrate you."

Roxas was a very confused and frustrated boy when he finally returned to his room.

"You came back!"

"Hi, Marluxia's flower," Roxas said tiredly. "I told you I would."

"I'm sleepy!"

Roxas turned the sun lamp off.

"Good night," the flower said.

"Good night."

It closed its petals and went to sleep. Roxas flung himself across his bed and thought idly that he would like some ice cream right about now.

Meanwhile, Axel went to pay Zexion a visit.

"Number VIII," the young Nobody greeted. He was sitting in an easy chair, holding a book with the word LOVELESS on the cover. "It's not often I get a personal visit from you."

"I need to borrow your computer," Axel said shortly. "And a dictionary."

"Hm...decided not to leave Number XIII in the dark, did you?"

"Can you imagine the trouble a kid like him can get into, thinking those things are what I said they are? I can imagine it. I can imagine it a lot. It's not pretty."
Zexion put the book down and went over to wake up his laptop. "The Wikipedia article will do, I suppose."

"Sure, whatever. Just make sure there's no photos that'll blow the kid's brain."

After having obtained the necessary materials, Axel went over to Roxas's room, dodged out of a Samurai's range before it could duel him for a glomp, and dropped the computer printout and the dictionary on Roxas's bed. The boy looked up at him in surprise. "What are these for?"

"Educate yourself," Axel snapped. "Because this subject will be forever taboo between us. No awkward questions on the clock tower tomorrow, got it?" He walked out again.

Frowning, Roxas pulled the printout closer and started to read.

Axel went to his room and nearly bumped into Xion coming out, already in her nightwear. "Whoops, sorry."

"It's okay. Are you going to bed, Axel?"

"Yeah, I think I'll turn in early."

"All right, then. Good night, Axel."

"Night, Xi." Axel went in, took off his coat and boots, crawled into bed, and failed to notice that Xion never came back.

She was, in fact, spending the night in Larxene's room. The Nymph met her with a grin as she came inside. "You ready?"

"Yup. I brought snacks," Xion said proudly, pulling a bag of cookies and a package of popcorn out of her pocket.
"Excellent." Larxene touched the bag, causing most of the kernels inside to explode. Then the girls went to settle on the bed, Xion in her usual purple shirt and black shorts, Larxene in a sunshine-yellow tank top and briefs.

"Now, the movies suck," Larxene warned as she picked up the remote control, "but somehow, they're fun to watch anyway."

"That's fine, as long as we don't stay up too late again," Xion said. "It's kind of hard to get through missions when I'm tired."

"Tell me about it," Larxene groaned in commiseration.

As the movie started, Xion cuddled closer to Larxene and reached for some more popcorn, wondering if this was what it was like to have a sister.

Meanwhile, Roxas had finished reading. He thanked his Somebody (multiple times) that he was a boy, and had a hard time getting to sleep that night.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: Marluxia's Rococo blathering was cobbled together from Wikipedia. XD It's not actually true. Also, KH remakes of Disney movies don't go exactly according to the original, so I didn't worry about synchronizing everything about the Tangled scene exactly right.

*Larxene's tampons are a reference to some fancomics by BlackLillian. If you're reading this on FFN, go to DeviantArt and type in "Even Villains Need Groceries" and then "The Untold Story." XD If you're reading this on MMO or DA, here are the specific comics I referenced: http://blacklillian.deviantart.com/art/Even-Villains-Need-Groceries-2-37605173 and http://blacklillian.deviantart.com/art/The-Untold-Story-Part-Two-39536602

The stocking designs that never made it into the fic:

Xemnas - Heart-shaped happy face XD

Xaldin - A mini-tornado, I guess.

Lexaeus - His squeaky hammer ;p
Axel - Bomb monster

Luxord - Christmas-themed playing cards

Marluxia - A pink flower with a face

I originally had Zexion at the stove and Vexen making the sandwich, since I figured Vexen wouldn't like hot food because of his ice element, but then...I remembered his pot lid. And that the sandwich actually belongs to Zexion. XD Worked out perfectly. If you don't know what I'm talking about, you haven't played Days enough. :p

I couldn't decide whether Axel would actually have The Talk with Roxas or wimp out. I finally decided that it could go either way depending on the circumstances, and for this fic, I preferred the latter.

...Marly & Larxene talk. Sometimes. About stuff. That Larxene wouldn't tell anyone else. Such as that her latest pet peeve is hunting through the bathroom cabinets for "lady necessities" and only finding ones in Xion's size. I didn't mean to make Marly sound pervy....

This chapter was originally posted, by pure coincidence, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of the year 2011. So, so perfect. :D
Roxas twirled his ice cream stick and sighed. "I just need to find presents for you guys and Saïx now, but I have no idea what to get him. Axel, you know him better than me, what do you think I should give him?"

"I don't know, man...the guy deserves a box of coal for working us so hard this year," Axel grumbled.

"I heard that you two grew up together," Xion said. "Did you ever get him a Christmas present in the past?"

Axel frowned. "Someone's been telling you too much."

"What kinds of things did he used to like back then?" Roxas asked curiously.

"Ah, it doesn't matter, he's a different person now." Axel's discontent expression suddenly turned into a grin. "...He's a werewolf, you know. He turns into a big ugly dog every full moon. You should get him a chew toy or something."

Xion gasped. "Saïx is a werewolf?!!"

"Yeah, we've all known it for years."

"Oh my gosh!" Xion's hands were over her mouth, her eyes huge. "I can't believe it!"

Axel looked at her more closely. "Xion...you do realize I'm kidding, right?"
She stared at him. "What?"

"Saïx is not a freaking werewolf. It was a joke."

"...Oh."

After dinner, Roxas screwed up his courage, went to stand in front of Saïx's room, drew in a deep breath, then knocked on the portal.

A Berserker came out. It looked at him for a minute with its non-face. Just when Roxas lost his nerve and decided to make a run for it, the Berserker lifted its dangling arm and seized him around the neck, the heavy claymore dragging them both inside.

Saïx was working at his desk, the lamp throwing his facial scar into sharp relief. As his servant and its prisoner entered, he put down the pen, swiveled around in his seat, and studied the boy for a long, disapproving moment. "What do you want?"

"Can you call him off?" Roxas asked, finding it hard to breathe as he gestured at the Nobody who had him in a chokehold.

Saïx nodded, probably issuing a silent command, and the Berserker stumbled off. Roxas got to his feet, rubbing at his sore throat.

"Is there a particular reason you are disturbing me at this hour?"

"Well...yeah. I...wanted to ask...if...."

Saïx raised an eyebrow.

Roxas took in another deep breath. "What's your homeworld?" he blurted out.
"Pardon?"

"You...you and Axel are from the same world, right? I wanted to know where it is...."

"That is no business of yours, and if Axel did not tell you, I see no reason why I should."

Roxas sighed. "Never mind. I'm gonna go to bed. So that I'm all rested up for tomorrow's super-fun mission," he could not help adding, a little resentfully. "I'll probably just give Axel a Bronze or something for Christmas...." He turned around and walked out.

Saïx watched him go, then simply sat frowning at his desktop for a long time.

The next morning ("Give me an Elixir"), Roxas went to the Grey Area and was very surprised upon receiving his assignment.

"I will be your partner today. Stay out of the way until I've gotten everyone else packed off."

Roxas sat on one of the couches and fiddled with his deck. 'There's never enough Slot Releasers,' he thought ruefully.

Xion arrived and came over to join him. "Good morning, Roxas."

"Hi, Xion."

"Are you working solo today?"

"No. I'm paired with, um, Saïx."
Xion's eyes widened. "You're working with Saïx?"

Roxas sighed. "Yeah."

She put her arm around his shoulders. "I'm sure it will be okay."

"Yeah."

"He can't be *that* bad, if Axel used to be friends with him."

"Yeah."

"I'll buy you an extra ice cream when you get back, okay?"

"Okay."

Xion squeezed him in a comforting hug, then got up to get her mission assignment, wishing she could do more to cheer him up.

When everyone else had departed, Saïx sighed, put his clipboard into his backpack, and opened a dark corridor. "Let's go."

"Okay."

They arrived at a world Roxas had never seen before, though he had an odd sense of *déjà vu* as he looked around. Maybe the boy in red had been here. "What's this world called?" Roxas asked.

"Ra-- That is, they call it Hollow Bastion now." Saïx started walking.

"You never gave me a mission brief. Are we doing heart collection, or looking for a specific Heartless, or what?"
"All my jobs are recon."

"...Oh." 'Jerk.'

Saïx frowned as if he could read Roxas's mind. "It's not quite the usual recon. My role in the Organization is to monitor Heartless activity in all the known worlds, and arrange missions for the other members based on their suitability to handle the workload. It is more difficult than it sounds."

'Yeah. Sure.'

"Since I have a Keyblade wielder today, I expect you to collect hearts as we go, but there is no specific goal to aim for. Follow my lead, and don't fall behind."

They trekked through what seemed to be an entire mountain range, taking out any small Heartless who dared show their faces. As for the bigger ones....

"Roxas! What are you doing? Get out of there!" Saïx grabbed Roxas's arm and corridored him over to the next valley, just as a Clay Armor nearly squashed him.

"Huh? But that was a Heartless! I have to exterminate it."

"I told you to follow my lead. You are not to battle any tough Heartless today, it will take too long to defeat them. We have far too much ground left to cover, and we're running out of time." Saïx took out his clipboard and scribbled something on it. "Clay Armor in Hollow Bastion," he muttered to himself, "send XIV after it tomorrow...."

"What do you mean, we're running out of time? It's not even noon yet."

Saïx briefly closed his eyes, which seemed to be the Saïx-equivalent of rolling them. "The earliest anyone has ever returned from a mission is 2:30 p.m. I have to be back by then, but before that, we've got to finish combing the mountain path, I.D. any noteworthy Heartless, record the locations of every single blasted treasure chest, plant badges, set up barricades, capture a specimen of any new Heartless breed so that Vexen can run an analysis on it, coordinate a suitable return corridor..."
location, and investigate the town without anyone seeing us. *All by 2:30.* That's not even counting the tasks that can be done at home, such as deciding on suitable mission rewards, processing mission reports for the entire Organization, and determining an appropriate workload for a reasonable mission, as well as who should be offered the assignment and whether or not they should be allowed a partner. Some days, I don't even get a chance to eat." He suddenly blinked and stopped speaking.

"Oh." Roxas fidgeted uncomfortably. "I guess it *is* harder than it sounds. I didn't realize how much work went into organizing mission stuff."

"Hmph."

The work seemed to get harder from then on, so that Roxas was exhausted by lunch time. He was grateful to be allowed to sit down on a crumbling set of steps that led to a pile of rubble, shaded by a small tree that had grown out of a blackened stump, and eat the sandwiches he had packed.

They did not speak for a while. Roxas looked out at the silent, devastated neighborhood, a debris-riddled street lined with shattered and half-overgrown dwellings. Saïx sat nearby, nibbling absently on his own sandwich as he worked on a complicated-looking diagram, occasionally scratching things out and making frustrated sounds.

"This place feels...sad," Roxas mused, not really expecting his companion to answer him. "I wonder who used to live here."

"Axel did."

"Huh?" Roxas looked at him, startled.

Saïx glanced up briefly. "This used to be Axel's house, back when he was a teenager. You're sitting on the porch steps." He pointed with his pen. "Mine was across the street, three houses down."

"Whaaaat?!"

Saïx went back to his clipboard, seeming to have lost interest, but Roxas was fascinated. He got up and began combing through the debris of the house behind them. Amidst the rubble were some
easily identifiable items: a spoon, a broken mug handle, a doll's arm, a ruined video game cartridge, half a book with singed pages, an earring, a bike helmet, a tube of gooey lip gloss.... Roxas picked up a Frisbee, dirty and cracked along the edge, but with a picture of a Bomb monster still discernible on the front. "This kind of looks like one of Axel's chakrams," he called to Saïx.

"I don't really care," was the preoccupied response.

Roxas shifted, and heard a high-pitched crunch. Looking down, he found that he had accidentally stepped on and crushed a picture frame. The photo caught his attention - he picked it up carefully, shaking it free of glass dust, and examined its subjects. There was a tall, dark-skinned man. A woman with blonde hair and a smile just like Axel's. Two little girls. And...a spiky-haired boy, about Roxas's age, smiling into the camera with bright, innocent green eyes that showed not a trace of the world-weariness they now carried in the present day. "Axel," Roxas whispered.

"Roxas, we need to get going," Saïx called.

"I'll be right there." Roxas carefully slipped the Frisbee and the photograph into his backpack, then followed the older Nobody as they resumed work.

They did not, in fact, get to finish everything. At 2:28, Saïx opened a corridor of darkness back to the castle, grumbling that Roxas had slowed him down and he would have to put in overtime that night to catch up. Back in the Grey Area, he took up his usual post at the head of the room and waited for everyone to check in.

Roxas, after being informed that he obviously did not have to fill out a mission report this time, hid Axel's presents in his room and then opened a dark corridor. He felt bad about skipping ice cream with Axel and Xion, but if he hung out with them, he would not have enough time to finish his Christmas shopping before it got dark.

He had meant to go to Neverland, but the beach he ended up on was unfamiliar. At least...he knew he had never been here before, but the déjà vu was stronger than ever. 'White sands...a blue sky...the shining sea...I know this place. Somehow, I know this place. It feels like Home.'

He wandered around for a while, soon realizing that this world had seashells that were just as good as, perhaps even better than, the ones in Neverland. He trekked along the shore, picking up all the pretty shells he saw and dropping them into a small pocket of his backpack. The terrain was far from ideal for his shoes, and the sun beat down on his black-clad shoulders, so that he was soon soaked with sweat. 'Just a few more....' His gloves were soggy and covered with wet sand, his coat flecked with it. 'Man, I'm a mess.'
He reached a wooden bridge that had some trees growing nearby. Clusters of yellow fruit were visible, high in the branches. Roxas was parched, and he knew from one of Axel's lectures in Neverland that seawater was not fit to drink. He ended up climbing one of the trees (a much easier task after he had ditched his shoes and gloves), having the strangest feeling that he had done this many times before. He grasped one of the star-shaped fruits, got back to the ground, and bit into it. "Ohhh...."

It was delicious. 'This is so good. I...want to eat this with...someone.' By the time he finished it, he had decided that he would come back later and pick some fresh ones for Xion and Axel. 'But...there's someone else I really want to give one to...who is it?'

Before leaving, he got up as high as he could and Glided around the beach, wanting to familiarize himself with this place in case he was ever sent here on a mission. In the distance, he spotted more land, much bigger than the deserted little island he had been collecting shells on. The land in the distance seemed to be populated - there were buildings and streets, and he could almost make out the figures of people moving about.

Roxas Glided towards the mainland. He had to swim the last part of it, since the distance was a bit much for the wind to carry him the whole way. There were people lounging and playing on the beach who looked at him as he came slogging out of the waves. His coat was sopping wet, so he took it off and slung it over one arm to carry. His pants and tank top were soaked, too, but at least they would dry faster without the coat over them, and he would not have to put up with heavy waterlogged fabric slapping around his legs at every step.

A nice lady offered him a towel, and he gratefully dried his hair and arms. "Thank you. Um...do you know where I can find a chew toy? Like, for dogs?"

"Why, certainly, sweetie. The pet shop's on Seagull Street over there, that blue building between the library and the ice cream shop."

"Okay. Thanks." Roxas handed back the towel, hefted his seashell-laden backpack over his shoulders, and marched off eagerly to purchase his very last Christmas present.

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Some time later, Roxas was heading for the clock tower when a dark corridor appeared in front of him, and Xigbar came through it. "Found you," the Freeshooter said in satisfaction. "I knew you
three always crept off to Twilight Town every day."

"Um...did you need something? Because I have to go meet Axel and Xion, so...."

Xigbar waved his hand dismissively. "Ah, you can live without ice cream for one day. Come on, we've got work to do."

"But--"

"No buts! Listen to your sempai!" Xigbar grabbed his arm and hauled him into the corridor.

They emerged in Twilight's View, where a very strange scene had been set up: two Dancers and a Sniper were sitting at a little table, two of them dressed in ragged clothes and the third in a threadbare dress and a yellow wig that was shaped almost exactly like Larxene's usual hairstyle. A tiny lopsided Christmas tree was set off to one side, while a pot full of something boiling was hanging over a little pile of burning kindling.

"Won't Saïx get mad at you for starting a fire in the castle?" Roxas asked, remembering the numerous times Axel had gotten in trouble for just such a thing.

"Ah, we'll clean it up before he notices," Xigbar said dismissively. He dug out a long-sleeved shirt, a pair of pants, a floppy hat, and a scarf, and shot holes in all of them. Then he pushed the ensemble toward Roxas. "Here, put these on."

"Why?"

"Because Xion's coming any minute now, and if you dawdle, she'll see you in your underwear."

Roxas ripped off his coat and scrambled into the holey outfit, feeling ridiculous. He had just swung the scarf around his neck when Xion and Demyx showed up via another corridor.

"I caught her!" Demyx announced triumphantly, raising the confused-looking Xion's arm and waving it around like a trophy.
"Excellent," Xigbar said happily. "Poppet, just hang out over there for now, we'll call you when we need you. Demyx, to your post!"

Demyx sat down at the little table and twiddled his thumbs expectantly.

"Now, Roxas," Xigbar instructed, handing him a stick and a piece of paper, "go to the top of the stairs. When I tell you to, hobble down the steps as if it's hard to walk, and make sure you lean on the crutch. Your lines are on the paper."

"What? Why do I have to pretend it's hard to walk?"

"Well," Xigbar mused, "I could break your leg so that you won't have to go to the trouble of pretending...."

"No, no," Roxas said quickly, "I can hobble."

Axel nearly choked on his ice cream.

"Because yesterday Xigbar made me ask God to bless everyone, so I wanted to make sure that wasn't a bad thing...."

"X-Xigbar did what?" Axel said weakly.

"You do know who God is, right?" Roxas asked apprehensively.

"Buddy, I am the wrong, WRONG person to be answering that...WTF, Xigbar!"
"What does W.T.F. stand for?" Xion asked.

Axel facepalmed. "Note to self, never adopt kids ever again," he muttered.

"What does 'adopt' mean?"

"Gah! You guys are doing this on purpose, aren't you!"

To be continued....

Author's Notes: Saïx's job? THAT'S WHAT TEACHING'S LIKE. Thankless, harder than it sounds, and the work never, ever, ever ends. On the up side, it was really wonderful when Saïx suddenly decided that he's comfortable enough with me to reveal that we have something like that in common. I can finally relate to him! :D I love him now on his own terms, not just because of Isa or his relationship with Axel.

I realized that I've been writing this fic as if the dark corridors are like teleportation, but the manga and certain bits of canon have made me think that it's probably an actual corridor they walk through, that it's not instantaneous. (...Sometimes. 'Cause other times it really does look like teleportation. o.O)

I'm pretty sure it was Kairi whom Roxas felt like sharing a paopu with, since he was flashbacking to Sora so much.

A "sempai" (or "senpai") is someone who's higher in rank than you, like a high school senior when you're a freshman, or someone at the company you work at whose position is higher than yours.
On Christmas Eve, just like every other day, the alarm clock began buzzing at exactly 5:00 a.m. He had not gone to bed until past midnight, so he was sorely tempted to hit snooze and then simply roll over and go back to sleep.

However, he was not a teenager anymore. There was so much work to be done, he could not afford to show weakness and lose Xemnas’s trust in him. He had to be the best. Even if he was alone now, that promise from so long ago was still worth fighting for.

It was just really hard to remember that sometimes.

A warm, rough tongue ran over his chin. Saïx looked down at the Chihuahua curled up by his neck, who wagged her tail happily when their eyes met. "Good morning, Chi," he greeted the tiny creature who had followed him home a week ago, from that world with the obnoxiously self-centered young emperor. "Are you telling me to do my best today?"

She yipped and bumped her head against him affectionately.

"Very well." Saïx climbed out of bed, yawning. ‘So tired...and so desperately behind...should I just send someone to do recon in Wonderland instead, and stay home for a Paperwork Day?’ No, he had just done a Paperwork Day last week. He could not afford to look like he was slacking off. ‘Wonderland it is, then.’ Saïx sighed. ‘And if there are guards in the hedge maze again, the non-interference rule can burn, I am ripping up ALL OF THEM.’

Chi followed him around adoringly as he got dressed, packed his backpack, looked something up in one of his files, and made sure that the pen attached to his clipboard still had plenty of ink. Then he picked her up and nuzzled her as she happily licked his face. "Be a good girl today. Take pieces out of the Dusks if they try to sneak in. I'll be back later."

"Yip!"
"If I had a heart, this would be where I'd say you are adorable and I love you."

"Yip, yip!"

Saïx kissed the top of her head and then set her down, going over to refill her water bowl and make sure her food dispenser was full before he headed out.

The Proof of Existence was deserted at that hour. Saïx pulled out his daily list of matters that needed the Superior's attention and headed up to Number I's suite. He knocked on the portal.

"Lord Xemnas?"

It took a while, as it usually did, since whatever Sorcerer on guard duty had to go to the Altar of Naught and drag Xemnas away from oogling Kingdom Hearts before he would come down to see his de facto second-in-command. At one point, Saïx thought he heard a giggle - he looked around, frowning, but there was no sign of anyone.

The portal shimmered. Just as Xemnas was stepping through it, Xigbar suddenly popped out of nowhere, upside-down in the air as he gleefully held a sprig of mistletoe above the Superior of the In-Between's head. Before Saïx could react, Demyx came bounding out of hiding to kiss Xemnas's cheek. "Merry Christmas, boss!" He burst into laughter, as Xigbar seized his arm and warped them both away to safety.

The two remaining Nobodies stared after them. "What was that?" Xemnas finally asked.

"...That would be Numbers II & IX, acting like bratty eight-year-old girls again." Saïx absently touched the intersection of his scars, where Xigbar had gotten him earlier that week. No amount of scrubbing could seem to erase the sensation of another man's lips on the bridge of his nose.

"Permission to Dusk them, sir?" he asked for what felt like the fiftieth time.

"No, Number VII. This mistletoe business is harmless enough, and we need all the manpower we can get."

Saïx sighed. He, Zexion, and Larxene had planned a counteroffensive to Xigbar, Demyx, and Marluxia's Mistletoe Brigade - however, he would need Axel's help, and the Flurry of Dancing Flames didn't give a flip about the Mistletoe Wars as long as the children stayed off limits. Which meant that Saïx could probably recruit him if he told Axel about Roxas getting ambushed by Marluxia the other day.
"What was it you came to discuss with me, Number VII?"

Saïx shook himself out of his thoughts and looked down at the list. "Well, first of all, the Castle Oblivion preparations were going well, but I am chagrined to report that the printer is out of order and card production has stopped until Vexen can get it working again...."

By the time he had finished, it was nearly 5:30. After hurrying through his preparations in the bathroom, Saïx dropped the comb and gel bottle back into his locker and made his way downstairs.

The kitchen doorway was blocked. Saïx automatically shot a fire spell at the clump of mistletoe hanging above it, but the couple wrapped in each other's arms did not seem to notice.

Larxene's eyes finally flew open, and she shoved Demyx away. "What do you think you're doing?" she snarled. "In case you've forgotten, you are not my boyfriend anymore!"

"Yeah, and I'm kind of starting to regret that, since you kiss way better as a Nobody than a Somebody." Demyx grinned and kissed her again. Larxene hit him. She raised her fist again but then seemed to forget to complete the action, since she was apparently too busy kissing him back.

'What?' Saïx thought.

Larxene remembered herself again and jerked away. "Why do you have to be such a good kisser?" she screamed. "I hate you!" Her entire body began to crackle with lightning, and Saïx took a prudent step back.

Demyx's eyes widened. "Wait! Relena--!"

"Don't call me that!" Sizzling and screaming filled the hallway. Satisfied, Larxene flounced off to get breakfast. Saïx followed her into the kitchen, stepping over Demyx's smoking, twitching body.

When Saïx came into the dining room with an egg sandwich and a mug of coffee, he found Larxene sipping tea and giggling as she watched a couple of Dusks winding Zexion's long bangs into several little braids. The Cloaked Schemer was passed out with his face resting on his laptop keyboard, surrounded by piles of books and papers, some candy canes, and a coil of Christmas lights.
"Begone." The Dusks took one look at Saïx's expression and hastily wriggled away. "Zexion."

When that produced no response, Larxene yelled in her most obnoxious tone, "Wakey wakey, shorty!"

Zexion jerked. Then he shifted some more and blinked his eyes open blearily. "Mm...?"

"Did you ever go to bed last night?" Saïx asked.

Zexion raised his head and stared around the room. "What time is it?" His left cheek was red and covered with blocky imprints from the laptop keys.

Larxene burst into laughter. "You look ridiculous."

Zexion reached up to start untangling his hair, his expression sulky.

"It's nearly 6:00 in the morning," Saïx told him, biting into his sandwich. He only had a few minutes to finish eating and get to the Grey Area before people started showing up for their assignments.

"Ahhh...." Zexion rubbed his face with his hands, obviously frustrated. "I can't believe it, this is ridiculous." He looked up and asked apprehensively, "What is my mission for today? I would really appreciate it if you could cut me a break and assign me to Shadow Globs or something, there is still so much left to--"

"Your mission," Saïx said shortly, "is to finish holiday preparations here at the castle." On the rare occasion when he decided to be nice, there was always the impulse to sound as irritable as possible, as if he somehow had to make up the difference.

Zexion sighed in relief.

"How about me?" Larxene asked.
"You're with Axel and Xion on heart collection today."

For once, he had deliberately organized the groups so that (almost) everyone would be in an arrangement that he or she would like best. Xaldin and Lexaeus got along well, and had been working as partners for over a decade. Luxord did not mind Vexen's whining, since he amused himself by insulting the Chilly Academic in such mysterious terms that Vexen never caught on, but would instead feel that he was getting proper respect from the polite gambler. Larxene and Xion were so friendly with each other now that they enjoyed being partnered for missions, and Axel, one of the few who could get along with Larxene when necessary, would be pleased to get to work with his precious puppet. In an unprecedented move, Saïx would even have thrown in Roxas if they were not so behind on heart collection. Only a limited number of Heartless showed up during each mission, so he needed the Keybearers to split up, but he would give the boy a Level Doubler and quadruple his mission rewards or something.

"Really?" Larxene was saying. "Well, that actually sounds fun, for once."

Saïx nodded. "It's Christmas Eve, so everyone is paired up for easy missions today...." He smiled vengefully. "...Except the Mistletoe Brigade. Each of them has a solo assignment for two giant Heartless."

"Nice one," Larxene whistled appreciatively, as Zexion laughed.

5:59. Saïx stood up to leave. "Will you fare all right without Demyx?"

Zexion rolled his eyes. "That idiot's been almost worse than useless. I could probably get more done without him."

"That's what I thought."

O.o.o.o.o

Xion woke up to find Larxene shaking her shoulder.

"Xi, get up already! We get to work together today."
The younger girl sat up eagerly. "Really?"

"Yup. And guess who else is coming with us?"

Xion held her breath, hardly daring to hope.

"I'll give you two guesses."

"Well, that doesn't help."

Larxene laughed. "Okay, it's Axel."

Xion gasped in delight. "I get to go on a mission with you and Axel?"

"Yep. We might even get done before lunch."

"Oh, that's wonderful! If we could have Roxas, too, that would be perfect." Xion said rapturously.

"No way! Then you'd leave me and Flame-head to do all the work while you lag behind sucking face with your boyfriend."

"Roxas is not my boyfriend!"

Larxene dodged, laughing, and went to check her panel arrangement as Xion got dressed.

The younger girl had moved for the second time in less than a month, but it was pretty cool to get to share a room with another female. For one thing, she did not have to go all the way to the bathroom whenever she wanted to change clothes, and she could leave her underwear lying around without worrying about freaking out her roommate. "Today is going to be so fun," she said to herself happily.
The morning of December 24th dawned with the usual rain of HP balls (Roxas had long since stopped bothering to set his alarm clock). "Give me an Elixir."

Roxas opened his eyes and sat up. He felt strange, as if the HP balls had suddenly dragged his health back up rather than simply giving him an unnecessary energy rush. "Good morning, Maruhana." (It was easier than calling the thing "Marluxia's flower" all the time.)

"It is not a good morning. I do not have my Elixir or my sun."

"Guess I'd better fix that, then." Roxas turned on the lamp and handed over the last Elixir in his inventory. He did so with a great feeling of relief - now he would no longer have to hoard those particular items, avoid using them in battle, wager the Poker League members for them, or beg Elixir recipes from Axel and Xion.

As always, the flower perked up considerably after being fed. "Good morning, Rocks!"

"You okay now?"

"Yes. Do not come home late."

"I won't," Roxas said patiently. Maruhana had still not gotten over the Disney Town incident. "Hey, you remember what I told you, right?"

"What did you tell me?"

"Today's your last day with me. You're going to go live with Marluxia starting tomorrow. He'll be your new friend."

"Rocks will always be my friend."
Roxas smiled. "Yeah. I guess so."

The energy high from Maruhana's HP balls faded, and Roxas felt tired as he got dressed. His movements grew more and more sluggish, and he wondered how he was going to get through the day's mission. 'What's wrong with me? I don't know if I'll be able to fight like this....'

He tried to sling his backpack on - and nearly fainted. 'What?! It's like I'm--' He summoned his Keyblade. Sure enough, it was glowing in readiness to unleash a Limit attack. 'But that's ridiculous, I haven't taken any damage!' Weakly, Roxas fought to get the stopper out of a Hi-Potion, and drank the whole bottle. Then he downed another.

Feeling much better, he got up and finished his preparations, though he had to keep swallowing Hi-Potions as if he had been Ignited or something. 'I feel awful....'

Roxas had developed something of a doorframe phobia after getting mistletoed by the Graceful Assassin, so now he almost never went anywhere in the castle without using dark corridors. He appeared in the kitchen, yawning, and found that he did not have the energy to prepare a breakfast consisting of anything more complicated than an untoasted bagel. Plain, since he felt strangely queasy at the thought of anything sugary or greasy. 'There is definitely something wrong with me.'

He drank another Hi-Potion as he ate, so that he would not pass out on the dining room table. Then he dragged himself to the Grey Area, where Demyx was whining at the unyielding Saïx ("What do you mean I've got a mission?! It's Christmas Eve, man! Today's supposed to be a vacation day! HAVE YOU NO HEART??!! .... Okay, lame joke, but come on!") and Vexen was whining at the Moogle ("How dare you, you little ingrate! I ought to report your swindling to the Superior! He'll throw you out on the streets where you'll be eaten by Heartless, and I'll just get my synthesizing done...er...somewhere else!"). Luxord was lounging on one of the sofas, idly shuffling his cards and enjoying the show.

"Is Axel still here?" Roxas pleaded.

"I'm afraid you're out of luck - you just missed him. He and the ladies have gone to see what fate has in store for them in Twilight Town."

"...Okay," Roxas whimpered. He was seriously scared now. This was some status effect he had never encountered before and had no idea how to combat; Panaceas had no effect. He shuffled over to the Luna Diviner, shoulders hunched in anticipation. "Saïx...I...might take a while...to
complete...this miss--" He closed his eyes and toppled forward, leaving the startled Saïx with an armful of cute boy.

"Hey, what's the matter with Roxas?" Demyx wondered.

Saïx lowered Roxas to the ground, eyes narrowed in irritation as he pulled out a Potion and forced the contents down the boy's throat. "What a fool.... How did his HP get so low here in the castle?"

Roxas stirred, opening his eyes slowly and staring at the ceiling. Demyx waved a hand in front of his face. "Yoo hoo, Roxas! Time for work, buddy! Hey, you wanna take my mission if I give you a...I don't know...a Slot Releaser or something?"

Roxas slowly sat up. "Why am I on the ground?"

"That's what I should be asking you," Saïx said coldly. "Heal up and read your mission brief. We need to step up the heart collection, so I'm sending you to--" He broke off abruptly.

Roxas, feeling dizzy, had found himself gradually drooping until his head came to rest against the blue-haired Nobody's chest. Horrified, he tried to lift his head again, but could not move. He lost consciousness before he could try again.

Demyx laughed. "Sleepy Roxas is sleepy."

Saïx noticed the unnatural pallor of the boy's face. "Vexen, come here," he snapped. "Tell me what's wrong with Number XIII."

The Chilly Academic minced over, still complaining. "Honestly, no respect in this castle, what are the worlds coming to...?" He halted and stared down at Roxas.

"You didn't make another defective replica, did you?" Saïx said severely.

"Of course not! This is definitely the real Number XIII." Vexen snorted. "That doesn't mean he isn't defective, though."
Zexion, who had been trying to get work done on the other side of the room, now sighed and came over to them. He knelt beside Roxas, pulled off one of his gloves, and laid the back of his hand against the boy's forehead. "He has a fever," Zexion stated. The word 'idiots' hovered unspoken at the end of his sentence.

"How unfortunate," Luxord remarked.

"Roxas, wake up!" Demyx cupped his hand so that it began to brim with water, which he splashed in the boy's face.

"Demyx!" Saïx snapped, who had also been in the line of fire and now had a soggy coat.

"Whoops! Sorry. *snerk*"

"Don't make me decide to add a third giant Heartless to your assignment," the Diviner growled.

"Eep! I'll be good!"

Roxas blinked at the ceiling and did not know whether to be amazed or terrified when he realized he was lying in Saïx's arms. He intended to scramble away, but his limbs felt like lead. "Where's Axel?" he whimpered. "Something's wrong with me."

"You've just got a fever," Saïx grumped. "It won't kill you."

"Feels like I've been Ignited," the boy whispered, his mouth feeling dry as a bone. "But it won't go away. Panaceas don't work...Hi-Potions don't last long...." Seeing the water droplets still dripping from Demyx's glove, he reached desperately for the Nocturne's hand, but lost consciousness again before his fingers had done more than twitch.

"Not battle damage," Vexen mused. "It seems that lesser recovery items are not effective when the bodily weakness is natural. Zexion," he ordered, "restore his health with Cure spells. For Science."
Zexion sighed and did as he was told. Roxas's eyes flew open. He gasped and hurriedly got to his feet, looking around at all the people whose attention was fixed on him. "I've been acting weird, haven't I," he said nervously. "Sorry. Um, Saïx? Do you have my mission brief?"

The Diviner said nothing. Everyone just kept watching Roxas expectantly. It was a little creepy. "Guys?"

No one said anything except for Vexen, who seemed to be counting under his breath for some reason. "44, 45, 46, 47...."

Roxas felt the fatigue creeping back. "Well...I guess I'll just...sit over here and arrange my panels, or something." Roxas went over to sit on the couch, looking over his shoulder nervously as everyone followed him. They all watched in bizarre fascination as he began replacing a lot of his attack spells with healing magic. So tired....

"61, 62, 63, 64...."

He wanted to lie down on the couch, but was too scared to do so in front of Saïx. When he felt like he could no longer keep his eyes open, he struggled to get a Hi-Potion out of his backpack, but Vexen took it away before he could drink it.

"78, 79, 80...."

"What's going on?" Roxas tried to demand. He did not manage to get all the words out of his mouth before he flopped over sideways, unconscious again.

"87 seconds," Vexen announced. "So magic is no good, either. Aside from natural recovery, only an Elixir would be powerful enough to immediately restore his full functionality."

There was a pause. "Well, administer one, then," Saïx said.

Vexen snorted. "As if I'd waste such a valuable item! Use one of the boy's own."

"I'll give him an Elixir if he does my mission for me," Demyx offered.
"That mission was designed for you, Number IX," Saïx snapped. "Get going before I double it up with Roxas's task as well." Not that Demyx was actually capable of heart collection, but of course he didn't actually know what the Keybearer's assignment was.

"I'm going, I'm going!" Demyx pouted, disappearing into a corridor of darkness.

"We shall be on our way, as well," Vexen said grandly. "Come, Luxord!"

Saïx was left alone with Zexion and the unconscious Roxas. "This is highly inconvenient," Saïx remarked.

"I can imagine. If you will excuse me...." Zexion went back to his computer to resume where he had left off. Saïx sighed, then lifted the boy over his shoulder and headed off to the Proof of Existence.

When he walked into the thirteenth portal, his attention was immediately caught by all the clutter. 'Oh, yes. Teenage boys are messy. I had forgotten about that.' He hefted Roxas onto the unmade bed and then stared at the large pink flower that was waving gently in a pot on the windowsill. The flower leaned over Roxas's still figure, gazing intently into his face. Then it spat out a cluster of HP balls.

Roxas revived, opening his eyes and smiling when he saw what had woken him. "Hi, Maruhana," he murmured, affectionately reaching up to stroke one of the silken petals.

"Your leaves are wilting," the flower observed.

"Yeah," Roxas agreed sadly.

Maruhana paused, apparently thinking. It finally said softly, "Give me an Elixir."

Roxas smiled a little. He could no longer seem to keep his eyes open. "Sorry, Hana...I'm all out...you ate...the last one...this...morning...." He was asleep again.
"This is quite unfortunate," Saïx said in displeasure.

The flower looked up and seemed to glare at him. "Give me an Elixir," it demanded.

"No."

"You are an aphid nymph," it hissed. Saïx was pretty sure he had just been insulted, but he did not really care. Instead, he turned to the clutter, wondering if he should make a new rule about members having to keep their rooms tidy.

There was a pile of (very badly wrapped) presents in one corner. Saïx went over for a closer look. There were twelve of them, all with labels bearing names: one for each member of the Organization except Marluxia and Roxas himself. Come to think of it, that Maruhana thing's pot had had a gift ribbon tied around it, along with a tag. 'Maruhana...Maaru-- Oh.'

Slowly, Saïx reached out and picked up a box covered with blue gift wrap and far too much tape.

To: Saïx

From: Roxas

Merry Christmas

Saïx stared at it for a long time. Then he looked over at the sleeping boy. 'Merry Christmas, hm?'

He put the box back on the pile and walked over to the bed. He stared at Roxas for so long that Maruhana got uneasy and hunched over him protectively.

'I don't want to give him one of my Elixirs, but he'll be useless otherwise. He could always pay me back. With interest. Or I can make that Moogle give him one from its stock.' However...it might be useful having a sick child to care for. '...Perhaps...I can have that Paperwork Day after all.' Saïx smiled.

"If you try to pick him," Maruhana warned, "I'll rot your roots."

"I have no intention of 'picking' him. You might as well get used to me, because I'll be here all day."
Saïx went to change into a dry coat, informed Zexion and the Superior of his whereabouts, packed a box full of water bottles, dragged his desk through a dark corridor into Roxas's room, and settled down to get some work done.

For Roxas, it was a strange day. The second time he woke up in bed, wearing a tank top and shorts instead of his coat, he remembered that he was running super-late for work and that Saïx would be furious at him - but he felt weak and shivery and sweaty, and it was so hard to move.

Someone in a black Organization coat lifted his head up and pressed a straw to his lips, telling him to drink. He knew only one person who would be that gentle and authoritative. ‘Axel came back,' Roxas thought in great relief. "I...have to get...to the Grey Area...I never...got my mission...from Saïx...."

"You have the day off today." The voice seemed quieter and more collected than it should be. "Rest and regain your strength. And drink some more water, you need fluids."

"Okay...." The rest of the day went pretty much the same. He would sleep for an hour or two, wake up feeling so achey and weak that he thought he might be dying, and always Axel would coax him to drink something or take more medicine, and pull the kicked-away covers back over him if he was shivering, or replace the cool cloths on his burning forehead when they had dried out.

Around noon, as Saïx was trying to get some soup into the boy, Roxas, eyes closed and face still flushed, asked softly, "Axel?"

"Mm?" It was easier than explaining that Axel was still away on his mission.

"Am I...gonna miss Christmas?"

"You'll be fine," Saïx grumbled.

"It would be...so awful to sleep through Christmas like this...."

"I told you, you'll be fine."
"Axel?"

He sighed, starting to develop a newfound respect for Number VIII's patience. "What?"

"I feel so awful...am I fading into darkness?"

"Eat more soup and I'll tell you."

Roxas obediently swallowed a few more spoonfuls.

"No, you are not fading into darkness. Bodies can be frail things, especially yours--" Saïx surveyed the skinny arms with distaste. "--but a fever's not enough to kill most people. You'll be all right."

"...Okay...."

Roxas drifted off again, and Saïx settled back at the desk. Shortly after that, Xemnas himself came in, striding over to the bed as if he owned the place (well, he actually did own the place) and gazing down at the sleeping young Nobody. "Is he still broken?"

"Yes," Saïx said curtly.

"When will he be operational again?"

"Most likely when Axel returns."

"Good. So this setback won't be as costly as the last one. Perhaps if Vexen can alter his memories, he will not keep falling into disrepair."

'They're not the same, you idiot,' Saïx thought. 'He has a fever because he caught some germs, not because the Keyblade Hero's memories are interfering.'
"Let me know if Axel's return does not correct the problem."

"Certainly."

Xemnas turned and walked back out again.

Despite having to look after Roxas and getting frequently interrupted by Zexion ("I need the seventh basement's security code...your Berserkers are clogging Naught's Approach again...did Xigbar and Larxene not get popcorn on the last shopping trip? I can't find any in the kitchen...those incompetent Dusks are mangling the popcorn strings, is there any chance you can you help me put some together before everyone gets back?"), Saïx managed to work his way through quite a lot of paperwork. At 2:20, he removed all traces of his presence in the Key of Destiny's room, and at 2:30, he was at his post in the Grey Area, prepared to receive the other members as they returned.

Not surprisingly, the first back was the team of three. Xion scampered out of a dark corridor, her eyes shining. "That was so fun!" she was calling over her shoulder. "I hope we can do it again soon." She turned to Saïx and smiled. "Hello, Saïx. Is Roxas back yet?"

"He is in his room."

"Oh, good!"

Saïx met Axel's eyes, his tone as irritated as he could make it. "You had better see to the boy."

Axel frowned. "Huh?"

"That useless excuse for an Organization member cost us an entire day's work."

"What are you talking about?"

"Go take care of it."
"Is something wrong with Roxas?" Axel asked sharply.

When the Luna Diviner did not deign to reply, Axel quickly dark corridored to his friend's room, followed closely by Xion. "Roxas!"

"Give me an Elixir."

"Not now, Hana," Axel said impatiently, striding over to the bed and yanking off his glove. Roxas's face was sweaty, his flesh seeming to sear Axel's palm.

"Axel, what's wrong with him?" Xion cried in distress.

Axel swore and began digging around in his backpack.

"I need an Elixir," Maruhana insisted.

"Shut up, you stupid flower! It's Roxas who needs an Elixir!"

"Yes," the plant agreed. "I need an Elixir to water Rocks with before all his petals fall off."

"Here," Xion said hurriedly, finding one before Axel did. "Will this make him better?"

Axel carefully lifted Roxas with one arm and held the Elixir to his lips. "Come on, Roxas, swallow...."

Roxas opened his eyes. "Axel?" he said weakly.

"Hey, buddy, good job. Come on, drink the rest...."
Roxas lifted a hand to grasp the bottle so that he wouldn't feel like such a baby. It was the most he had been able to do all day, and he felt a little proud of himself.

When the bottle was empty, he sat up, alert for the first time in what seemed like ages.

"Do you feel better now?" Xion asked anxiously.

Roxas held up a hand to quiet her. He was counting, for some reason. "13, 14, 15, 16...."

"Roxas?" Axel questioned.

Roxas waved his hand impatiently in a Shut Up gesture. "19, 20, 21, 22...."

Axel and Xion looked at each other, then settled back to wait.

"...88, 89, 90." Roxas stopped counting and paused. He sat there, his body tense.

"Roxas?"

"Wait," the boy said in exasperation. He hopped out of bed and summoned his Keyblade, swinging it around energetically. "Hah! Hah! Hah!" He paused again, then dismissed the weapon and turned to his friends with a smile. "It worked! I feel fine."

"That's great!" Xion said happily.

"What was all the counting about?" Axel wanted to know.

Roxas shrugged. "This morning when I got hit with that status effect, Saïx and the others cast Cure spells on me to see if that would make it go away. They counted to see how long it worked, and I passed out again after 80-something seconds."
"Saïx did, huh," Axel said tightly. "He didn't think to try an Elixir, I suppose."

Roxas frowned. "I guess not...he gave me a vacation, though. That was pretty nice of him."

"Yeah. Real nice. If you kids will excuse me, I've got a jerk to go chew out...."

"Okay."

"See you, Axel."

Axel corridored to the Grey Area, where Saïx was handing a mission report form to Lexaeus.

"You!" Axel growled, storming over.

Saïx turned to face him. "Did you need something?" he asked coldly.

Axel stabbed an accusing finger at him, his voice shaking with anger. He felt like he was simply going through the motions, but his body's reactions were genuine. "You left him like that? He was sick, and you just abandoned him all day like he's worthless?"

"He was unfit to carry out his duties," Saïx said. Axel wanted to punch that arrogant look right off his face. "The Organization has no use for such baggage."

"One Elixir," Axel snarled. "That's all it would have taken. You know I would've paid you back."

"I'm not going to waste valuable resources on leeches who don't pull their own weight," the Diviner said in his iciest tone.

Axel suddenly felt energyless. There was just...no point to it. Getting worked up would only give Saïx the satisfaction of seeing him show more false emotion, more proof that no matter how much Axel tried to care, he could not. "You are scum, Saïx." Axel turned his back and left.
When he returned to Roxas's room, the kids were hanging out, still talking. "...no, she's pretty nice about most things now, it's just that she can still get grumpy if she hasn't slept enough."

"Huh. I'd never have guessed things would turn out like that." Roxas looked up at their friend's re-appearance. "Oh! Axel, I almost forgot. Thanks for taking care of me today."

The red-haired man blinked. "What?"

"You know. Being there whenever I needed you, and changing the cloths on my head and stuff." He grinned. "We have fruit juice too, you know. Did I really have to drink all that water?"

Axel stared at the boy, wondering if he had just made a fool of himself.

Xion frowned. "Huh? Roxas, Axel was on the mission all day with me and Larxene."

Roxas looked surprised. "Really?"

"Yeah," Axel said slowly. "I didn't even know you were sick 'til we got home just now."

Roxas looked confused. "But...but then who was taking care of me all this time?"

"Maybe it was one of your Samurai," Xion suggested.

"No, he was wearing our coat, and he talked. Like, out loud."

"Huh. Weird," she murmured.

"Yeah."

Axel made a mental note to have his Assassins ask the Samurai some questions later on, when the kids were not around.
Since it was Christmas Eve, everyone was ordered to eat dinner together, which was a first in Organization history. Luxord taught the kids how to properly set the table, and soon Zexion and Lexaeus came out of the kitchen to serve a feast of roast goose, pudding, and other holiday treats that Roxas and Xion had learned about in Christmas Town.

The meal was much more successful than the after-dinner activities Demyx and Zexion forced everyone to participate in, which included chestnut-roasting ("For once in your friggin' life, Axel, stop making things explode just because you can!"), and carol-singing ("OH MY CHEESE WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME YOU COULD SING LIKE THAT YOU HAVE TO COME TO OUR NEXT REHEARSAL!!!!" "I told you not to let Demyx hear you sing, kiddos").

Eventually, however, everyone was left to their own devices. "Oh...I'm so sorry, Larxene," Xion apologized, "but we...kind of had other plans...."

Axel rolled his eyes in response to the Savage Nymph's expression. "Oh, whatever. You can come, too, as long as you keep up the nice act."

"Hmph. I'm not so desperate for company that I'll stoop to your level of patheticness," Larxene scoffed. Nevertheless, she ended up lounging on the makeshift futon with Xion as Axel set up the DVD player.

Roxas came in, carrying Maruhana. Larxene wrinkled her nose. "What is that?"

"Marluxia's Christmas present," Xion explained.

"It's Maruhana's last night with us," Roxas explained, "so...I dunno, I didn't wanna leave him all alone in my room...."

Axel laughed. "You're gonna miss ol' Hana, aren't you."

Roxas smiled sheepishly, hugging the flowerpot closer. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Will Marsh forget to turn the sun off at night?" Maruhana inquired, sounding anxious.
"No," Roxas said reassuringly. "He takes a lot better care of flowers than I do."

"Good."

Roxas set the flower on the floor nearby, then climbed onto the futon next to Xion. There was just enough room for Axel to squeeze in on the end after he had started the film. "Now commencing Operation: Cheesy Christmas Movie Night!"

Maruhana was the first to go, nodding off after about half an hour. The kids lasted until around midnight, and Larxene held out until 2:00 in the morning.

At 3:00, Axel, so tired that he could barely look at the screen, smiled at the sight of his sleeping, makeshift family. "Looks like I win." He yawned. "So weird...even if I still had a heart...feels like...it couldn't get any better than this...." He yawned again, then laid his head down and drifted off.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: This ended up being my favorite chapter in the fic. And was also the chapter where Maruhana blossomed (har) into a full-fledged OC instead of just a fun extra, so that was pretty cool. Speaking of which, "Maaruusha no hana" (Marluxia's flower) --> Maruhana. And I found out afterwards that "maruhanabachi" means "bumblebee," heh.

Like Kadaj's Ao-chan, Chi came out of NOWHERE. ^^; She gave me the perfect excuse to cuteify Saïx some more, heh.

I don't like yaoi, so as far as I'm concerned, the only lip-locking involved was Demyx & Larxene's.

Uh, yeah, so while I was trying to figure out mistletoe dynamics, Demyx & Larxene started making out, and Saïx pretty much served as an "Um, wut?" author stand-in. ^^; Though ever since then, I've gotten attached to the idea of ex-DemLarx, even though in this fic it had zero development and came out of nowhere. And I have a hard time seeing her as an 'Arlene,' which was why I was so happy when Infamousplot mentioned 'Relena' instead. It'll serve as a placeholder 'til we find out her real name.
For some reason, I find it really difficult to write Luxord's game/luck dialogue. Though I've noticed that he's got something in common with Axel...they both have different speaking styles, depending on whether it's text-only or a high-quality cutscene. They're opposites, though: Axel's spoken dialogue sounds odd, but his text-only dialogue looks normal; whereas Luxord sounds normal when he speaks, but does all the weird game-talk in his text-only scenes.
Xion's eyes snapped open. She sat up abruptly, staring around.

The TV was playing a loop of the menu screen for a movie she could not remember Axel starting. Maruhana's petals were still peacefully closed. Larxene was snoring a little and spooning her on one side; Roxas was cuddled up to her on the other, and Axel was over on the end, mumbling something in his sleep that sounded like, "ButIsalthoughtyousaidyouweren'tallergic...."

Feeling so full of squee that it was hard to keep silent, Xion shook her fellow Keyblade wielder's shoulder. "Roxas? Roxas, are you really still sleepy?"

Blue eyes cracked open. Then they widened, and Roxas shot upright, staring at her. "Is it...Christmas?" he asked breathlessly.

"It's Christmas!" Xion squealed in excitement. They both made a whispered sound like, "Eeeeeeeee!

Roxas rolled over and yanked on Axel's arm. "Axel! Axel! Axel! Wake up!"

It took a few tries, but eventually they got the Flurry of Dancing Flames to pry his eyes open. "Wuhbbuh?" he mumbled intelligently.

Xion wiped a bit of drool off the corner of his mouth with her wrist. "Axel, come on! This is the part where we open presents, right?"

Axel groaned and peered at the clock. Then he made a noise like, "Glaargh!" and added, "It's 4:00 in the morning! Go back to SLEEP, you crazyheads!" He flipped over and buried himself beneath the covers.
"Axel!"

"Axel!"

It was no use. Xion looked at Roxas in distress. "Do you know what time Christmas is supposed to start?"

"No...." Roxas sighed and climbed out of bed, stretching. "Do you want to see if anyone else is awake?"

"Sure."

They padded through the Proof of Existence, sizing up portals. "Demyx is probably excited for Christmas," Xion said hopefully.

"Yeah. And I don't think he'll bite our heads off if we go into his room," Roxas agreed.

They entered the ninth portal cautiously. The room was dark except for the illuminated fish tanks lining one wall, which was enough for the young Nobodies to sidestep all the teetering piles of CDs, the stacks of papers, the music stands, and an open sitar case on the floor. They could make out Demyx's figure curled up on the bed under a heap of Dancers, still fast asleep.

The kids looked at each other in silent dismay. Then Roxas cautiously reached over to shake the Nocturne's shoulder. A few Dancers woke up and peered at him curiously, making him nervous. "Demyx? Hey, Demyx, can you wake up, please?"

It took both of them shaking Demyx hard, bouncing on the bed (and then having to push away the excited lesser Nobodies who seemed to think they were dancing), and yelling in his ear before the Nocturne finally showed signs of life. He yawned and blinked sleepy green eyes at them. "Eh? It's time to get up already?"

"Well...it's Christmas morning," Roxas lamely tried to explain.

"Yeah," the musician agreed happily. "No work today, hurrah!" Then he saw the clock. "EH?!
What the-- Why did you come in so early?"

"It's...well, it's Christmas morning," Xion fumbled.

Demyx let out a wail. "Yeah! Christmas morning! Which means I'm supposed to be able to \textit{sleep as long as I want}!"

"But...but aren't you...excited?"

Demyx snorted. "Are you kidding? I don't give a jellyfish's tentacle about Christmas, I just wanted to be able to sleep in for once. Good night!" He flipped over and snuggled deeper into his pillows, causing a Shadow plushie to drop to the floor. Within moments, he was asleep again.

Roxas and Xion looked at each other in disappointment. "Well...now what?"

"I guess...we could always go get breakfast...."

They went to the kitchen to toast some Pop-Tarts, but to their surprise, the door to the dining room was blocked by one of the huge, X-shaped barricades they had only ever seen before on missions. Both their Keyblades failed to remedy this problem. Even dark corridors did not work, since the portals sputtered and dissipated every time they tried to aim for the inside of the dining room. They gave up eventually, and after some consultation, finally went to eat in the Grey Area.

"Oh!" Xion exclaimed upon their arrival. "G...Good morning."

Zexion looked up from his book and nodded. Saïx merely glanced at them, then returned his gaze to the heart-shaped moon drifting in the sky outside the window.

"Um...do you know why we can't get into the dining room?"

"I sealed it off," Saïx said shortly. "The whole Organization should be gathered together before we start."
"About that," Roxas ventured, "what time are we supposed to start? I know that Christmas is on December 25th, but...well, everyone's still asleep."

"It's not surprising," Zexion put in. "Only someone looking forward to the festivities would bother to rise at such an unreasonable hour."

Both Roxas and Xion found this to be an interesting statement. "So...you guys are excited for Christmas, too?"

Both young men looked startled. Then they exchanged glares, their faces coloring.

"It's my job to be awake before anyone else," Saïx snapped.

"Since I ended up on the organization committee, intentionally or not, I need to be in place to supervise," Zexion added in a growl.

"Oh." After an awkward moment, the kids finally went over to sit on a couch together and eat their breakfasts. They felt too intimidated to talk casually with the older Nobodies in the room.

Eventually, they decided that they might as well get dressed, so they did so. Then they went and watched another movie, cranking up the volume in hopes that their older friends would get out of bed, but all that happened was that Larxene angrily stalked back to her own room, and Axel grunted before pulling a pillow over his head.

However, by the end of the movie, Roxas sighed, looked over, and realized that Axel was lying there awake, watching the credits roll. "You're finally up!" the boy cried.

Axel looked over at them and grinned. "Merry Christmas, you doofs." Then his eyes widened. "Ahh!" Roxas and Xion both pounced on him, seized his arms and legs, and hauled him bodily out of bed. They began towing him toward the door, their eyes full of grim determination. "Wait, wait, wait, wait!" Axel cried, half-laughing. "I gotta give you guys something before we go out there."

They paused and glared at him suspiciously.
Axel laughed again. "Let me go. I wanna give you guys your presents where the others can't see and get all jealous."

"I thought you weren't gonna buy any presents."

"Yeah, well, you two are special, okay?"

When they finally decided to release him, he went over to his closet and pulled out several small packages, which he tossed over to them. "Catch."

"What's in these?" Xion asked.

"You'll find out when you open them, silly."

Roxas opened the envelope first and pulled out a little paper square that was inside. His eyes widened when he saw what the gift card was for. "Twenty free ice creams?!!"

"Merry Christmas."

"T-Twenty?! I can get twenty ice creams if I turn this in?!"

"Well, you might not want to redeem them all at the same time...."

"Axel! Axel! Thank you!"

"Eh-- No! NO! Bad Roxas, no hugging!"

Xion, meanwhile, had uncovered a silver locket with a flower engraved on the front. "Ohhh! Oh, Axel! It's beautiful!"

"Open it."
"It opens?!

Axel pried it open for her, revealing a photograph of their faces tucked inside. It was, in fact, one of the pictures they had taken in the Disney Town photo booth. "Oh, Axel! It's perfect!"

Roxas was moving on to the little package. He unwrapped it and found.... "Wah! It's a Keychain!" he exclaimed in delight. He summoned his weapon to try it out, as Xion did the same.

"Yours is called 'Frolic Flame,'" Axel told Roxas, "and 'Bond of Flame' for you, Xion."

"Wooooww!" They were both waving their transformed Keyblades around like idiots, grinning hugely.

"This is so cool!"

"It looks just like your chakrams, Axel!"

He smiled. "Yeah, I figured you'd like those."

"Um, wait right here!" Roxas raced to his room, grabbed the gift with red wrapping paper, and ran back again. "Here!" he said breathlessly, thrusting the package at Axel. "I didn't buy it like the others, but I thought you might still like it...maybe. If you don't, I can get you something else."

Axel grinned and started tearing off the paper ("Nice wrapping job"), looking as if he was preparing to fake an expression of great surprise and delight. Then he actually saw what was in the box, and his face seemed to drain of color. Roxas and Xion grinned in anticipation, looking forward to Axel's reaction.

Seconds ticked by, one after another, and Axel stared at the items in the box as if they were his own severed body parts.

"Um...Axel?" Roxas finally ventured. "I...I'm really sorry...I can give you a Level Up panel or
something if you want...."

Axel suddenly closed his eyes, drew in a shuddering breath, hunched over the box as he hugged it close, and dark corridored away.

The kids stared at each other in dismay. "Wow," Roxas said faintly. "I messed up big time."

"Well...at least he didn't burn it," Xion said, casting about for something positive to say.

"He's probably doing that right now," Roxas said glumly, "he's just too nice to do it where I can see."

However, when Axel unexpectedly returned a few minutes later, he was still holding the unscathed contents of the box. He laughed weakly when he saw them. "Sorry. I, uh...needed some time to myself." He rubbed hard at his face, which still seemed to be off-color.

"Axel, I'm really, really sorry," Roxas said earnestly. "This is my first Christmas, at least that I remember, so I know I really suck at it, but...but I'll do better next year, I promise, so...so you'll still be my friend, right?"

"What?" Axel waved his hand in amused exasperation. "No, wait, you got the wrong idea! Look, I...I don't know how the-- how the heck you found these, but flaming pants, they're...I...." He tried to pull himself together. "It just surprised me, that's all. I wasn't expecting...."

"Are you okay, Axel?" Xion asked softly.

Axel laughed shakily and rubbed at his face again. "Oi, you two...we don't have hearts, right?"

They nodded solemnly.

"Well...I can't believe I'm saying this...do you guys ever feel - something, anyway? Like...not a complete emptiness, but...something you can feel, in here?" He laid his hand over his chest.
They both nodded hesitantly, then looked at each other in surprise. *You, too?*

"Heh. Somehow, I figured that would be the case. Well...swear you won't tell anyone, right? I kind of...felt something. Just a little feeling. But it kind of threw me, you know?"

Roxas was not quite sure what this meant. "So...?" he said cautiously.

Axel hesitated, then reached to pull him into a hug, to Roxas's surprise. "Thank you," Axel whispered.

"...Heh. Bad Axel. No hugging."

Axel laughed.

Xion was studying the battered photograph. "That red-haired boy kind of looks like you, Axel," she said. "Who are these people?"

He laughed again, finally seeming back to his normal self. "None of your business, little girl," he said playfully, tugging the picture out of her hands.

"Xion," Roxas said, now very anxious to see Axel's reaction to whatever she had gotten for him. "Are you gonna give him your present now?"

"Well," she said shyly, "I was thinking that I kind of wanted to give everyone their presents at the same time...is that okay, Axel?"

His eyes narrowed. "Where did you get mine?"

"Um...I found it yesterday in a world where a singing dog with sunglasses was going around the city with a bunch of other animals, stealing sausages."

For a minute, Axel looked stumped. Then recognition dawned. "Oh - *Oliver and Company,*" he murmured to himself. "Dad never went there, as far as I know...yeah, should be all right." He
looked up and smiled at Xion. "Okay. I'll open mine with the others, and if it's another blast from the past, I'll just corridor away faster this time."

Xion smiled back, a little confused, but glad that he seemed happy.

Axel pulled on a T-shirt and cargo pants ("No WAY I'm gonna wear that stupid coat today"), which prompted Roxas to run and change into his birth clothes, and Xion to fetch a purple blouse and black skirt that she had bought in Twilight Town ages ago but had never had occasion to wear. Then they made their way to the kitchen so that Axel could warm up a few pizza slices for his breakfast and fry some eggs for the kids ("Whaddaya mean all you ate was Pop-Tarts?!”).

As they were eating, Larxene came into the Grey Area, carrying a bag of what looked like candy. "Come here a minute, Xi," she called. As the girl went over to her, Larxene smiled and tossed a handful of chocolates at Axel. "Here, it's Christmas. Have some Kisses, since they're the only kind you'll ever get from me."

"Aw, Larxie, you shouldn't have!" Axel fake-squeed, handing half the chocolates to Roxas.

"Yeah, I know. And here, for my fellow mistletoe haters." More chocolates went sailing toward Saïx and Zexion, who did not seem displeased to receive them.

The girls left. Axel and Roxas chatted until they returned, Xion smiling happily and Larxene now wearing a tank top and cutoffs. Caving to their examples, Zexion went away and then returned wearing jeans and a lab coat, replying huffily to Axel's and Larxene's derision, "This is what I feel most comfortable in." Saïx stubbornly retained his regulation black coat, though he made no objection to the others' wardrobe choices.

AT LAST, everyone was awake and gathered in the dining room, which looked magical. Roxas and Xion held nothing back as far as their powers went, even forming sparkling orbs of light to drift around on the ceiling.

"Okay!" Demyx crowed, now bouncing around energetically since he was no longer allowed to sleep. "It's CHRISTMAS TIME! And to get us all in the proper spirit, we're gonna dress accordingly!" A chorus of groans arose as he began handing out Santa hats, but only a few members outright refused to wear them. "Now, who's got presents? This is your moment, go ahead and haul 'em in!"
Roxas and Xion correorated off to fetch their gifts. It seemed like Axel was not the only one to have skipped Christmas shopping, but Xigbar was stacking brightly wrapped packages under the tree, along with Lexaeus, Zexion, Demyx, Luxord, and Marluxia. Even Saaix brought over a festive-looking little basket filled with envelopes.

After Zexion insisted on photographs of the entire Organization standing in front of the tree, "All-righty!" Demyx yelled. "Our little Christmas elf is gonna beee...you!"

Xion blinked. "Me?"

"Yup! Since you're the newest member. You get to hand out all the gifts! And don't forget the stockings."

A low rumble of (mostly bored) chatter started up as Xion walked around the room, reading the labels on all the presents and delivering them to their proper recipients. Roxas and Axel soon got up to help her. It made Roxas happy to see that the stockings were now magically laden, as if Santa really had come during the night. At some point during the month, Vexen had replaced his mad scientist stocking with a snowflake one, Saajx had bought a crescent moon stocking to take the place of the puppy, and Larxene had exchanged her chibi witch face for a lightning bolt. As Roxas handed them out, he wondered if Saaix had destroyed his old stocking, or if it was still salvageable somewhere...that puppy had been kind of cute....

The gift opening commenced: Roxas and Xion both got umbrellas from Xigbar, Rubik's Cubes from Lexaeus, books from Zexion (*Peter Pan* and *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, respectively), vacation coupons from Saaix to be redeemed at their own discretion, CDs of his own music from Demyx, playing cards from Luxord (samurai-themed for him, Disney Princesses for her), and flower seed packets from Marluxia. Which reminded Roxas.

He went to get Maruhana, carefully carrying the flowerpot over to the Graceful Assassin. "Um...this is for you. I started calling him Maruhana - or maybe it's a her, I'm not really sure - but I guess you can name him whatever you want. If he doesn't mind. He eats one Elixir every morning, and don't forget to turn the sun lamp off at night, or else he won't be able to sleep. Oh, and you can have your lamp back, too; we borrowed it for a while so that Maruhana wouldn't get sick."

Man and flower sized each other up. "You are a lot bigger than Rocks," Maruhana concluded.

"A talking flower, eh? Hm." Marluxia gently cupped a hand around the silken petals and inhaled deeply. "Magnificent."
Maruhana preened, and Roxas smiled at them both in relief.

As he was heading back to rejoin his friends, he noticed that everyone seemed to have some sort of stuffed animal - a zebra for Xemnas, a wolf for Saïx, a dolphin for Demyx, and so on - except for himself and Axel. Lexaeus seemed to be particularly spellbound by the toy bear he was holding. "Where did all the stuffed animals come from?" Roxas wondered.

Xion blushed. "From me. It took a lot longer than I thought, but I managed to get them all done in time."

"...Oh."

Xion smiled. "You and Axel have special ones."

"Really?"

"Yes. I didn't want to bring them out until all the other gifts were opened, but I think now is a good time. I'll be right back." She opened a dark corridor and disappeared within it.

"Oi, Xigbar!" Axel called. "What the heck am I supposed to do with a couple of fake pizzas?"

"Try 'em out on your next mission," Xigbar answered mischievously, raising a couple of hair dryers in his trademark battle pose.

Roxas inspected his umbrella more closely and realized that if he held it by the tip, he could wield it in a very similar manner to his Keyblade. "I can really use this in battle?" he wondered.

"Don't try it," Axel warned. "Joke weapons are usually awful." Then he grinned. "But they can still be kind of fun, so save 'em to play with in a holo-mission or something." He flipped up one of his pizzas and caught it again as it came back down.

Xion returned, lugging a large box with a much smaller one perched on top of it. "Here," she said a
little breathlessly, handing the small box to Axel and pushing the bigger one toward Roxas. "I
hope you like them."

Roxas looked at his present. "Why does it have all those holes in the top?"

"Oh, crap!" Axel gasped, though he also seemed to be laughing. "Little girl, please don't tell me
you've done what I think you did...."

Roxas suddenly yelped and scrambled away. His box had lurched, all by itself. And now it was
making noises. "Is - Is there a Heartless in there?!"

The room's chatter died as everyone turned to stare at them.

Xion cleared her throat nervously. "Everyone - I actually wanted to get presents like this for all of
you, but I wasn't sure if you would be happy about that, so I made toy ones instead...but if you
want real ones, please let me know, I'd love to get them for you."

After a pause, Axel grinned at Roxas. "Why don't you go first, buddy?"

Roxas glared. 'Oh, thanks.' Gripping his umbrella in one hand, Roxas slowly reached out with the
other and began tearing the wrapping paper off, jerking back every time the box moved of its own
volition (which was often). Then he cautiously peered inside.

A face was staring up at him, but it had warm brown eyes, not the creepy glowy yellow ones of a
Heartless. A long, furry tail began beating excitedly against the sides of the box.

Then the puppy suddenly launched upwards to lick Roxas in the face, its momentum knocking
over both the box and Roxas. Before Roxas could recover, it had romped joyfully onto his chest
and was now showering his face with puppy-kisses.

"Aaahhh!"

Some of the others were laughing now. Xion pulled the puppy off of Roxas and cuddled it
apprehensively, searching her friend's face for a sign of approval. "I've been calling him Destiny,
but you can rename him if you want...."

Roxas stared at the puppy. "That's for me?"

"Um...yes?"

Roxas stared some more. "Destiny?" The dog yipped and struggled vainly to get back to him.

Roxas slowly crawled over and reached out a cautious hand, but before he could touch Destiny's head, the dog broke free and nearly bowled him over again.

Roxas finally laughed, steadying himself and managing to hold the overeager creature away from his face. "He's cool." The sensation of fur against his fingers was wondrous. "...And really soft.

Xion smiled in relief.

Axel rolled his eyes as he briskly rid his gift of its wrapping paper and tipped a disgruntled ginger kitten into his hand. "Well, aren't you cute," he cooed sarcastically at it. "Too bad Mr. Saïx McStrictface won't let me keep you."

"That is up to the Superior," Saïx said stiffly. "I will not concern myself with the matter as long as your mission performance remains unchanged."

Everyone looked at Xemnas. He gazed back dispassionately.

"Well?" Xigbar finally prompted. "What say you, boss? Is Axel gonna be buying kibbles and sifting through cat litter for the next fifteen years?"

Roxas wrapped his arms protectively around Destiny without realizing what he was doing.

"Those with no hearts have no use for such distractions."
Axel shrugged. "Well, nice meeting you," he told his irritably mewing Christmas gift. "Time to go chuck you into the Void now, I guess."

"Oh, Axel, no!" Xion gasped. "Please, Lord Xemnas, please let Axel and Roxas keep them! We'll work extra hard, we promise!"

Xemnas frowned at her. "What nonsense is this?"

Xion looked close to tears. "Please...they're so little...please let us keep them."

"They're really cute," Demyx spoke up, in what he must have thought was a persuasive tone.

"The way I see it," Xigbar drawled. "Superior didn't actually say No. Which means the 'No distractions' thing is really a suggestion rather than a rule, eh?"

Xemnas's only response was a bored "Hn."

Xion's eyes lit up. "So we can keep them?"

"Let's take that as a Yes," Xigbar finally said when Xemnas did not bother to answer.

Roxas smiled and hugged Destiny in relief.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Xion burst out. She turned to Axel. "Do you like him? You're going to keep him, right?"

Axel looked down at the kitten, who hissed and sank its tiny fangs into his flesh. Even the most acute observer of his face would not have noticed any change in expression, so successful was he in hiding the moment when he fell completely and irrevocably in love. "Eh," he said with false nonchalance, tucking his new treasure into a pocket, "I guess I'll get used to little Bomb here." He looked over and grinned at Saïx. "Nice chew toy."

Saïx, who had just been thinking that it was perfect for Chi and wondering if Number XIII had
somehow guessed his secret, now realized that it had been meant as an insulting joke. Not that he
minded, but one did have to keep up appearances. He frowned and said icily, "A useless item. I'll
see that it gets properly disposed of."

"You could always give it to li'l Destiny there."

'No! It's for Chi!' "No doubt the creature will have plenty of objects to destroy without adding
another to the list."

Roxas and Xion were playing with the puppy, who nearly choked on Xion's new seashell bracelet
before she rescued it and put it safely back in its box. "By the way, thank you so much for this,
Roxas! Did you make it yourself?"

"Yeah. Well, I mean...I was just gonna give you the shells, but then Luxord saw me wrapping
them and was all, 'You should make something out of them,' and I was like, 'I don't know what to
make,' so he helped, kind of, and it's still all crooked, but...yeah."

She smiled at him. "It's beautiful. So you found that world with the islands, then?"

"Yeah. Have you tried one of those star-fruits they have there? Taste it, it's really good."

Axel turned back to them, digging Bomb out of his pocket again. "Oi, Roxas, hold your hands
out."

"Why?"

"Just do it." Axel adjusted the boy's palms so that they were face up and cupped together, then
dropped the kitten into them.

Roxas's eyes grew huge. "Ehhh...so soft!" Ten times softer than Destiny, it was threatening to
send his texture-starved hands into sensory overload.

Just then, a roar of laughter caught everyone's attention. They all looked over to see Larxene
holding up the Twilight shirt with a stricken look on her face, as Xigbar seemed unable to control
his amusement.

"Is that an...Edward Cullen shirt?" Zexion said in disbelief.

Larxene's blazing glare zeroed in on Xion. "You told," she said flatly.

The younger girl's eyes widened. "No! I didn't, I promise! I never said anything about your underwear!"

It took less than three seconds for most people to hear 'Edward Cullen' and 'underwear,' and add two and two together. Hilarity ensued. At least, for some people.

Larxene got to her feet, knives flashing between her fingers. "I will KILL YOU."

Xion was a reasonably intelligent girl. She fled screaming, hotly pursued by her third-best-friend-now-turned-enemy-for-life. Axel dashed after them ("Larxene! If you hurt her, I will roast you alive!"), leaving a very confused Roxas behind to wonder if perhaps Larxene had not liked her present after all.

While Xion was being rescued (though not before Larxene had zapped the Twilight Saga boxed sets she had given her that morning into smoking piles of rubbish...which, in Axel's opinion, they had already been to begin with), Saïx and Zexion bullied everyone into cleaning up the dining room, and Xigbar made them bring in the couches from the Grey Area for some reason. Then Demyx announced with great enthusiasm that it was "Time for some quality entertainment! Everyone kick back, relax, and enjoy our rendition of the greatest Christmas story ever told: Saïx's Christmas Carol!"

Saïx blinked. "What?"

Demyx grinned and slipped a homemade DVD into the player. "Prepare for those empty little holes in your chests to be warmed by some good old Christmas cheer!"

To be continued....
Author's Notes: Demyx's Shadow plushie is Chester from JenxtheJinx's videos on YouTube.

Bomb is one of Oliver's littermates. I'm sure that if Xion had known that Oli would've ended up all alone in the rain, she would have grabbed him, too. ^^;

Thank you, Taliax! Because R. girl is just as much of a dope as Roxas is, and would have just given the shells straight to Xion if you hadn't suggested making something out of them. ^^

Xion made a raccoon for Xigbar, a penguin for Vexen, a cat for Zexion, and a bumblebee for Marluxia. And no, Lexaeus does not have a crush on Xion or anything, he just thought that the bear was really cute. I don't think I ever figured out what Xaldin's, Luxord's, or Larxene's animals were. ^^;

I found something like this on BeautifulShadowsKeybearer1317's profile and thought it would be fun to fill out my own. Organization XIII's opinions on Raberba girl!

I. Xemnas: "Who?"

II. Xigbar: "R.g., you let us make the Christmas Movie From Hell. 'Nuff said. XD *affectionate hair ruffle*"

III. Xaldin: "You have three seconds to get out of range before I send a lance through your gut."

IV. Vexen: "GIVE ME A SAMPLE OF YOUR DNA SO I CAN THROTTLE YOU WITH YOUR OWN REPLICA."

V. Lexaeus: "...."

VI. Zexion: "...Much as I hate to admit it, I kind of appreciate you. Though the next time you force me to read manga, I will destroy your computer."

VII. Saïx: "Hmph. *ignores me snuggling him*"

VIII. Axel: "I'M AN ASSASSIN, *censored*, NOT A NANNY! *rages*"

IX. Demyx: "R. giiiiiiiirl, I thought you loved meeeemeeeee!!!!!!!!! *SOB* *lets me bribe myself back into his good graces with a truckload of ice cream*"

X. Luxord: "Young woman, will you kindly get off your lazy backside and give me more screen time? *polite huff*"

XI. Marluxia: "*gives me a creepy, calculating look*"

XII. Larxene: "COME HERE SO I CAN KILL YOU HORRIBLY."

XIII. Roxas: "Why do you always write me all clueless like I was in Days? Write KH2-me or Coded-me, where I'm cooler. *pout*"
XIV. Xion: "Ummm...you do realize that manga-me is totally different from game-me, don't you...? *sweatdrop*"
Christmas at the Castle: Chapter 11 - ...Two hot-pink scythes...

Christmas at the Castle, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 11 - ...Two hot-pink scythes...

A/N: I HATE (most of) THIS CHAPTER SO FREAKING MUCH. The numerous perspective inconsistencies in particular bug me very much, but I couldn't really fix them.

0.0.0

9✗2✗9✗2 DEMYX & XIGGY’S MOVIE OF AW3S0M3! 2✗9✗2✗9

Swirling fog filled the screen as old-fashioned Christmas carols played with haunting softness in the background. A recording of Demyx’s voice began an overdramatic narration.

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far aw-- *cough* J/k, our story begins in the foggiest swirling of fog...um, ever seen...in any clichéd movie opening ever! In London. Watch as the mists magically clear to reveal our hero-- He's not really a hero...but he's the por-- pot-- pr0n-- Xig, what's that word again? Protago-huh? Whatever; he's the main character! And he's moving offscreen so I gotta talk faster; anyway, it's Ebenezer Saitx, the richest and most miserly man in town.

There was a rustle of laughter from the audience, for the figure on the screen was actually a sultry Dancer wearing a long blue wig and bearing an X-shaped mark on its almost featureless face, drawn in ink. The real Saitx was not amused.
Ebenezer Saïx forges through the snow-choked streets without so much as a nod or a smile or even a friendly insult to anyone he passes on this bleak Christmas Eve. He walks by a group of wretched beggars warming themselves around a pitiful fire.

The beggars - ALL the figures on screen, actually - were lesser Nobodies. One of Sniper-beggars, wearing a blonde wig and jewelry like Luxord's, held out a hand to Ebenezer Saïx. When it spoke, it was in an outrageously accented voiceover by Xigbar, since lesser Nobodies are mute, of course.

"Please, sir. Won't you spare a penny for this poor gambler who's run afoul of Lady Luck this Christmas season?"

"What nonsense," the real Luxord remarked. "I'm not so unskilled at wagering that I'd end up destitute."

"Bah!" Ebenezer Saïx retorts [in Demyx's voice]. "The jails have plenty of warmer beds, go turn yourself in if you want a less miserable hearth!" He continues on, until he reaches a counting-house bearing the sign he's been too lazy to change, Xemnas & Saïx Inc. Co. Ltd. Etc., though his partner Jacob Xemnas has been dead and gone these past seven years.

"Ah, the Ultimate Void," Xemnas said, almost dreamily. Those sitting near him surreptitiously scooted farther away.
Saïx enters the counting-house, where his handsome, talented, underpaid, and horribly, horribly, horribly overworked clerk, Demyx Cratchit, sits working industriously at his desk.

"As if you're capable of being industrious in anything," Zexion grumbled. Demyx stuck out his tongue at him.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Saïx!" Demyx says brightly.

"Bah! Humbug."

"Why, Mr. Saïx! How could you be so callous toward such a wonderful holiday as Christmas, where everyone gets to sleep in late and buy me presents?"

"Hmph. Congratulations, Demyx. I didn't realize you knew the word 'callous.'"

"Hey, I know lots of things!"

"I have no use for Christmas, because I'm a grumpy poopehead and I live for assigning people ridiculously hard missions."
Everyone immediately looked (not without some gleeful anticipation) at Saïx, who appeared to be contemplating preferred murder methods.

"Joke!" Demyx squeaked. "Joke, joke, it's a joke!"

"Well, Merry Christmas anyway, Mr. Saïx! You may be a meanie, but you're still one of my Dancers, so I love you!"

"See?!"

A knock sounds on the door. "Ah!" Saïx says greedily. "Another customer to send on awful missions. Open the door, Demyx!"

To his disappointment, it's not a customer, but actually his gorgeous niece-I-mean-nephew.

"Ebenezer Saïx's niece-I-mean-nephew turned out to be a Dancer decked out in a garish pink coat, with flowers trailing in its wake. Maruhana nearly had a meltdown until Rocks, Nice, Sea Foam, Marsh, Insects, and Dig More all insisted that the flowers were artificial, not corpses.

"Good afternoon, Uncle Saïx!" Marluxia says happily [in Xigbar's version of a girly voice]. "And a Merry Christmas to you!"
"Bah! Humbug."

"Well, *that's* pretty rude."

"I told him the exact same thing," Demyx says in a huff.

"Anyway! Uncle Saïx, I've come to invite you to Christmas dinner! We're having roses, tulips, begonias, and marigolds."

- 

"*What? That's not even real food.*"

- 

"Bah! As if I'd waste my time with silly flowers."

Marluxia begins to cry.

"Give me a cold, lonely counting-house any day! Now, be off with you, before I catch any of your otomen cooties."

- 

"Axel, *what's an otomen?""

"*Manly guy who likes girly things. Not to be confused with a guy who's just gay."

"Oh! That explains a lot."
"Well, let me know if you change your mind, because even though you're a jerk with a big ugly scar and hair that looks like a rat's nest, you're still kind of cute and I want to deck you out in flowers." Marluxia leaves, but no sooner does the door slam shut behind him than it bursts open again, admitting two weirdoes in a swirl of snow.

"Ah! Real customers this time," Saïx says happily.

-One of the newcomers was actually two Snipers bound into a single coat, with the top one wearing a Lexaeus wig. The other was a Dancer wearing a Zexion wig, with dark bangs flowing down to the waist.

"Merry Christmas," Zexion mumbles. "If it can possibly still be merry after drowning in my emo-waves...."

"Your what?"

"We're looking for Misters Xemnas and Saïx."

"Xemnas is dead," Demyx says cheerfully.

"Ohhhh...then he's in the Ultimate Abyss of Despair," Zexion says rapturously. "Just a sec, I have to write a poem about that."

"NO, you don't," Saïx snaps. "I'm Saïx. What do you want?"
"To slit my wrists...."

"I meant, what do you want with ME?"

Zexion sighs loudly. "We're taking up a collection for the poor and those in desperate need of haircuts. Please give us lots of munny."

"Hah! Haircuts, indeed! Why should I waste my hard-earned munny on such drivel?" Isn't 'drivel' a fun word? Driveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldriveldr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"Guess there's a reason he's called the 'Silent Hero,' eh?"

"...I'm not that silent."

"Ah!" Saïx moans when the emo guy and the Hulk are gone, "What is this world coming to, Demyx? Next they'll be asking me to give munny to orphans, or widows, or the dog pound."

"You sure talk about dogs a lot, boss."

"That's because I'm a werewolf, duh."

"Why does everyone always make werewolf jokes about Saïx?" Roxas asked.

"Because moon element + berserker mode + ratty hair = werewolf!" Demyx explained brightly. "See, I'm smart."

"No, you're not," someone snorted.

"What? Yes I am!"

"Gotta disagree with you there, Demyx."

"Superioooor, everyone's picking on me!"

There was a long pause.
"I think he fell asleep again," Xion observed.

When the clock begins to chime, Demyx happily throws down his pen and swings his threadbare but still trendy coat across his shoulders.

"Huh!" Saïx exclaims, pulling out his pocket watch and frowning at it. "The office clock is two minutes fast."

OF COURSE IT IS. Demyx's face falls, and he has the most adorably sad look as he resumes his seat, but of course Ebenezer Saïx is immune to woobieness.

"Oh well. Even though I'm a big jerk, I'll let you go home early, but you'd better make up that time tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But tomorrow's Christmas Day!"

"So?"

"So everyone except insane little kids get to sleep in on Christmas Day!"

"Well, I must be an insane little kid at heart, because I am not going to be sleeping in, and neither are you!"

"Aw, come on!"

"Oh...all right; since you're so persuasive, I'll give you tomorrow off. But you get no mission rewards, and you have to wash my stinky laundry, too!"

"But I always wash your stinky laundry! And your dishes, and your floors, and every single
bathtub, sink, and toilet in the entire freaking castle...."

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Vexen snorted. "It's your water copies that do the cleaning, not you personally."

"You've never made water copies before, have you," Demyx grumbled.

-

"Well, in that case, you can wash my stinky laundry and sign all my mission reports, since that takes soooo much effort. Now get out, before I bite you like the rabid werewolf I am!"

-

"From this point forward, anyone who calls me a werewolf will forfeit five Challenge Sigils," Saïx growled.

*insert whiny protests here*

-

"Okay, I'm going, I'm going!"

Saïx stays extra late at work that night, counting his piles of munny and kibbles.

-

"THAT SO DOES NOT COUNT! And we made the movie before your stupid Sigil-stealing rule, anyway!"
"Demyx, do you even have any Challenge Sigils?" someone asked dubiously.

"Of course I don't! Why d'you think I'm falling over myself not to owe any?"

Then he makes his way through the cold dreary streets and arrives at his cold dreary house. Which is painted pink, because we thought that would be funny. XD

For the record, Saïx did not even crack a smile.

However, Organization XIII now had a bigger problem. "Someone wake up the Superior. If he misses his scene, he's gonna make us rewind it and watch it again."

There was more than one horrified gasp. "SUPERIOR, WAKE UP."

Xemnas did not move or respond in any way.

"Zexion, let me borrow your lexicon for a second."

"I can slam it down myself," the Cloaked Schemer huffed, raising his weapon high in the air.

He goes inside, chews on a bone for dinner, then sits down to do his oh-so-important paperwork.
"The paperwork is actually harder than it looks," Roxas spoke up. Everyone, including Saïx, looked at him in surprise.

"What? How would you know? Have you DONE Saïx's paperwork?" Demyx asked interestedly.

"Well, no, but when we--" Roxas broke off when he happened to glance at Saïx and became suddenly convinced that it was indeed possible for one to keel over dead from the sole power of an intensely burning gaze. "We...um...uh...oh, look, we're missing the movie!"

"No, we're not, because I paused it," Xigbar said cheerfully, brandishing the remote. "Do continue your interesting story, young Key of Destiny."

"Ummmm.... Hey, we should all have a contest, and see who can do the mission paperwork the best."

Axel slapped his hand over his face. "You really are His Nobody, aren't you."

"Huh? Whose Nobody?"

Half the Organization suddenly lunged for the remote. "LET'S GET BACK TO WATCHING THE MOVIE, SHALL WE?"

Suddenly, chills creep down his spine as he hears the clanking of chains and movement on the floors below. He huddles in his chair, a picture of abject terror.

"Just so you know, Number IX, your next mission will be involving a Leechgrave, an Antlion, and an Infernal Engine, all at the same time."
"WHAT?!"

"And I am seriously considering voiding your vacation coupon as well."

"Oh, come ON!"

The footsteps and rattling creep across the lower floors, up the stairs, down the hall, and RIGHT THROUGH THE LOCKED DOOR INTO THE ROOM WHERE SAÏX IS WETTING HIS PANTS IN SHEER TERROR!

"Why is that Dancer wearing a ridiculous white wig?" Xemnas asked, saving Demyx from further punishment.

"Because it's pretending to be you, Superior."

"Oh. ... It does not look like me at all."

"I think that goes without saying, sir."

"Saïx," the apparition whispers in a chilly voice [well, as chilly as Xigbar can get while apparently trying to not burst into laughter], "Saaaaiiiix...."

"Go away! You're scary!"

"Saïx...do you not recognize me? It is I, your old partner, Jacob Xemnas, back from that Void I'm
"I've come to warn you, Saïx. You see these heavy chains I bear? You will be cursed to carry chains just like these for all eternity, unless you issue more vacation days and stop confiscating Xigbar's porn."

"Axel, what's--?"

"Shut up and watch the movie," Axel grumbled.

Someone else laughed. "Heh, bet you've got a nice collection stashed up by now, eh, Saïx?"

"It goes straight into the incinerator," Saïx said shortly.

"Suuure it does."

"Never! Because I am a total jerk who loves bossing everyone around just because I have evil yellow eyes and pointy ears!"

"But Xigbar, you have yellow eyes and pointy ears, too," Xion pointed out in confusion.

"I have golden butterscotch topaz eyes, not yellow ones," Xigbar said primly.
"There's a difference?"

"Of course there is!"

"Xion, don't listen to a word he says," Axel said in exasperation, even as he hastily reached out to stop Roxas from actually getting up to compare the two.

"Very well. Then you had better start lifting weights, because you're gonna need those muscles to cart around your chains in the afterlife."

"Wait, Xemnas! Tell me how else I can weasel my way out of this fate, besides not being a control freak about everyone's personal lives!"

"Well, tonight you're going to be visited by three spirits. If you listen to them and do what they say, then this story might have a happy ending."

"For realz?"

"Totally. Well, I guess I'd better get going. Kingdom Hearts gets awful cranky when I'm late for our dinner dates." With that, the ghost disappears, leaving Saïx alone in his cold dreary pink house once again.

He soon goes to bed, but is woken up at 1:00 in the morning by a character who isn't a lesser Nobody for once, since we finally found out where those three disappear to every afternoon. He opens his eyes to see--

"Hey, Xion, that's you!" Roxas exclaimed. "I mean, the real you, not a Sniper in a black wig or something."
"Do I really look that creepy with my hood up?" she gasped in dismay.

"...Yeah, you kind of do."

--a creepy hooded figure swathed in black. "Hello," the spirit says, lowering its hood to reveal the face of a cute but very confused-looking little girl. "I'm the Spirit of Christmas Past, but you can call me Poppet?"

"What have you come to show me?" Saïx asks.

[Poppet reads from a piece of paper she is holding.] "What, you think I'm named 'the Spirit of Christmas Past' because I'm gonna show you Kingdom Hearts or something? I'm gonna show you Christmas Past, duh? Take my hand?"

Saïx takes the hand of the still-confused-looking spirit, and the two of them walk to the Hall of Empty Melodies, where a bunch of Snipers and Dancers are dancing. One of the Dancers is wearing a spiky red wig.

"You did not just make me Scrooge's ex-girlfriend!" Axel burst out.

"Yeah, we kinda did," Xigbar laughed remorselessly.

"Hey, that's my old boss!" Saïx gasps. "I remember this party! That sulky, pockmarked teenager in the corner is me! And over there under the mistletoe, it's...it's Axelbelle!"
"Xigbar, you and me, boss battle, tomorrow, 6:00 p.m. Demyx, remind me to shut your head in the oven later," Axel growled.

"Of course I'm not going to remind you to do that! It would hurt!"

"Exactly."

"Oh, Axelbelle...s/he was so lovely back then...oh, I haven't thought about her/him in years!" Saïx and Poppet watch as Axelbelle tries to drag young Saïx under the mistletoe, then manages to get him to dance. Mist wafts over the scene, until we see the young couple in a garden at twilight some time later.

"Dear Saïx," Axelbelle says softly.--

"Oh, for crying out loud!"

--"please, I must have your answer. For years I have waited for you, and watched your face grow hard with greed and control freak...ism. Tell me, once and for all: Do you love me? Is your non-heart still true after all this time?"

Young Saïx replies, "Yo, do you think your dad'll be able to salvage his chew toy company, or is he gonna take that new job on the catnip plantation after all?"

"Oh, Saïx, what has that to do with whether or not you love me?"
"Well, my answer's kinda based on how you reply, so...."

"Alas! This is answer enough. You care more about my father's chew toys than you do about me!"

"Well, duh."

The lovely girl/boy/Nobody/thing is sobbing now. "Then farewell forever, O beautiful slayer of my heart...!" Saïx never saw her again.

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"That's it, run, Axelbelle! Run far, far away!"

"Axel, you do realize that you're yelling at a Dancer in the TV, right?"

"I DON'T CARE."

- 

"Dude, Xion! I mean, Christmas Past!" Saïx cries, "Don't show me anymore, I can't stand it!"

"All right?" Poppet agrees. "But remember, Saïx, you drove that lovely creature away yourself, and therefore you have only yourself to blame...?"

As the spirit vanishes into the mists of time, Saïx opens his eyes to find himself in his bed once more. "Wah, it was only a dream...man, I gotta lay off the Bacon Bits before bedtime. I think they're giving me indigestion."

However, the blue-haired miser's adventures are far from over!
As the clock strikes 2:00, his room starts getting super-cold. Shivering, Saïx stumbles out of bed to re-light the fire in the grate, but stops cold (LOL) at the sight of a second intruder in his bedchamber. "You!" he shouts.

The being he shouted at was a Dancer sporting a long, dark blonde wig.

"What are those unappealing markings on my-- I mean, on that lesser Nobody's face?" Vexen demanded.

"I think those are supposed to be your cheekbones."

"What?!"

"Oh! You're right, Luxord, I see it now," someone else remarked.

"My cheekbones are not that gaunt!" Vexen insisted.

"Sorry, dude, but they kind of are."

"Disrespectful amateurs, the lot of you!"
"What are you doing in my room?" Saïx demands.

"I am the Spirit of Christmas Present, but you may call me Dr. Whinemaster."

"Excuse me?!"

"So it wasn't a dream," Saïx gasps in horror.

"Of course not, you incompetent fool! I'm here to show you how much fun everybody manages to have when you're not sticking your big slashed-up nose into our business. Come! We are going to Demyx Cratchit's house."

The spirit yanks Saïx straight through the wall and out into the street, where they pass lots of happy people stuffing their faces with delicious food and wishing each other Merry Christmases. Eventually, they come to a falling-apart shack decorated with seashell/mermaid/dolphin/sailboat/you-get-the-idea ornaments that are NOT tacky, Xigbar. "Demyx lives here?"

"Yup."

"What a dump."

"Ah, but the treasure is inside."

Eyes kindled with goldlust (*goldlust*, har, see what we did there?), Saïx peers through a window to find Demyx laughing by the fireplace and playing expertly on his wonderful sitar.
Also visible through the window was a Dancer with a familiarly-styled yellow wig, clapping in time to the beat as another Dancer twirled about with a Sniper in the middle of the floor.

"You made me your wife?" Larxene thundered.

"Well, just in the movie."

"Come here, Demyx, I need to stick these knives up your nostrils."

"Ahhh! Xiggy, help!"

"I don't see any treasure."

"You are looking right at it, you imbecile."

The song finishes, and the merry Cratchit family claps their hands in delight. Demyx takes his wife in his arms and gushes, "Oh, Relena, if you were the real Relena, and not just a Dancer wearing a wig, I'd sweep you up to our bedroom and--"

Axel swiftly put his left hand over Xion's left ear and his right hand over Roxas's right ear and jerked them close so that their other ears were squashed against his body and they could not hear what was said next. Actually, the sounds of an enraged Larxene chasing the screaming Demyx around the room were so loud that they might not have been able to hear, anyway.
"--but you're not, so I won't," the Demyx onscreen finishes cheerfully. He huggles the Dancer and then calls up the stairs, "Tiny Roxie, come on down! We're about ready to have Christmas dinner."

A figure appears at the top of the stairs: Demyx's adorable but clueless little son, hobbling down on a crutch.

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Rather than a bewigged lesser Nobody, the role of Tiny Roxie was played by Roxas himself, which finally explained that confusing day back when Demyx and Xigbar had not let him and Xion meet Axel for ice cream. "Why does the movie make me look so cute?" Roxas asked in distaste.

Xion giggled. "But you're always that cute, Roxas," she explained, at the same time Axel mumbled, "Because you're like that all the time."

"Huh? I am?"

---

"I just love Christmas," Demyx sighs in contentment, "the time of year where people can sing all the Christmas carols they want without having rotten tomatoes or empty Potion bottles thrown at their heads. Now, for our feast!"

"Look at all this...er, wonderful food to eat," Tiny Roxie says doubtfully.

"Dr. Whinemaster," Saïx says, looking shocked, "what the heck kind of messed-up feast is this? That scrawny bird is barely enough to feed one person, much less five! Also, it's purple."

"Yes, I pick up some extra cash by selling my discarded specimens to unscrupulous shopkeepers."

"...Ew."
"Flaming pants, Roxas, you didn't actually eat that thing, did you?" Axel exclaimed in horror.

"Well...."

"CRAP, NO WONDER YOU GOT SICK, DEMYX I'LL KILL YOU."

"But I ate it a couple of weeks ago," Roxas said.

"Yeah, he ate it weeks ago!" Demyx cried frantically. "You're fine now, aren't ya, little buddy? Guh, can't breathe...Axel, really, I can't breathe...Xiggy, help!"

"I should probably pay more, so my clerk won't be reduced to buying leftover science experiments for dinner and giving his whole family food poisoning. Hey, Dr. Whinemaster? That Tiny Roxie kid. He's crippled, isn't he? Will he ever get better?"

"If things continue in their current course, I foresee an empty throne Where Nothing Gathers. Perhaps we should let Thirteen in on more of our secrets."

"Oh no! I have to do something to save Tiny Roxie! Dr. Whinemaster, can-- Dr. Whinemaster? Where are you? Hello?" He can't see a thing because of all the swirling snow and smoke, but it's pretty obvious that Dr. Whinemaster has disappeared (hooray!). Instead, someone different is looming out of the darkness, shrouded in black like Poppet.

"Is it too much to hope that you're another cute little girl?"

The only response is a sinister nod.

"Poopie. Well, drag me off to wherever you have in mind, so we can get this over with and wrap up filming already. Ugh, I can already tell this thing is going to be a pain to edit...."
The next moment, Saïx finds himself in a tavern, invisible to all the Dancers and Snipers in hooded black coats who are discussing the same topic [all in either Demyx's or Xigbar's voices].

"Didja hear that old Scarface finally got what's comin' to 'im?"

"Aye, that mangy werewolf's done for at last."

"Yay, I don't owe him munny anymore!"

"I snuck in and looted his room - he had a lot of Frisbees for some reason...."

"HAH, I went and burned all my mission reports! Then I got some new forms and filled in all the blanks with Monty Python quotes! That'll show him!"

"Ugh, I can't take anymore of this," Saïx moans. "Christmas Future, is there anyone ANYWHERE in any of the worlds who's sad that I'm dead? Or are all of them glad to get rid of me?"

The Spirit of Christmas Future raises his hand and points ominously, where the scene has changed to a familiar red-wigged Nobody.

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"Nooooo!"

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Axelbelle sobs in a room somewhere, wailing Saïx's name. "Oh my love, now you are truly gone forever!"
"Axel, why are you banging your head against the back of the couch?"

In the movie, another figure entered the scene: a Sniper wearing a Roxas wig and carrying a cardboard Keyblade.

"Hello, Axelbelle. Um, so, now that Saïx is dead, I was wondering if you'd finally be my boyfriend-I-mean-girlfriend."

"YOU GUYS ARE DISGUSTING."

Axelbelle immediately cheers up, running over to glomp Roxas. "Okay! Do you want to be seme or uke?"

"Axel, what's--?"

"SHUT UP, ROXAS, SHUT UP NOW."

The couple skips out of the scene arm-in-arm, leaving Saïx desolate. "S/he left me for a fourteen-year-old?"
Christmas Future sternly puts his hands on his hips.

"Well, okay, so we broke up ages ago and I should be happy that s/he didn't ruin his/her life because of me, but...still!" Saïx grumbles for a while, pacing restlessly back and forth. "Everyone hates me, they're glad to see me gone...even Axellbelle didn't care enough to miss me once that rooster-headed kid showed up...argh! Is this seriously the only thing I have to look forward to in the future? Because it's lame and I want a refund."

Saïx now notices that they are standing in a dark and spooky graveyard. Not a thing moves except a burly Sniper with long black braids and bushy sideburns, singing to itself as it digs a fresh hole.

"Ohhh, a sailor's life is the life for me, how I love to sail o'er the bounding sea, and I never never ever do a thing about the weather, for the weather never ever does a thing for me!" Xaldin wipes sweat from his brow (I mean, not really, it's just a lesser Nobody, but PRETEND, OKAY?) and tosses down his shovel. "Ah, forget it, I'm takin' a coffee break. It's not like there's anyone around here who'd mind...."

He marches off, leaving Saïx to creep fearfully closer to the tombstone and read the name engraved upon it. "Why - that's my name!" he gasps.

Christmas Future suddenly throws back his hood, revealing the madly grinning face of my partner in crime, Xigbar! His one good eye, craggy features, and jagged scar look positively demonic in the sudden firelight raging in the depths of the open grave. "Sure is, Werewolf Boy!" he whoops, knocking the blue-haired miser into his final resting place with a hearty slap on the back. Saïx descends screaming, sobbing, and begging for mercy--

"That triple mission I mentioned, Number IX? There won't be treasure chests. And don't expect any mission rewards upon your return, either."

"Whaaaat?!"

"Though I'll make sure there's ten or twenty extra ordeal badges for you to pick up."

"You've gotta be kidding me!"
--but instead of being devoured by hellfire, he instead finds himself struggling with the hopeless tangle of his bed sheets. "I...I'm alive?!"

Indeed he is! Because who would we pick on if Sai-Sai wasn't around? Zexy's too big now, and Vexen's too creepy to be funny, and Superior never gets it and he'd kill us if he did, and Axel turns all Mama Bear on us when we try going after Roxy and Xi, so....

Anyway! Saïx staggers to his window, which is full of early morning sunlight. "The spirits are gone...those awful things haven't actually happened yet...I still have a chance to set things right!" Flinging open the window, Saïx calls down eagerly to the first person he sees, "You there! Boy! What day is it?"

"Day, sir?"

"YES, YOU STUPID MORON! I mean, yes, young one. What is today? I need to know because, um, all my calendars broke."

"Why, it's Christmas Day, sir!"

"Excellent! I shall now run down to dear Demyx's house and give him the whole next month off, as well as 5,000 munny and about 20 slot releasers...oooh, this is going to be so fun!"

Saïx is as good as his word. Flying out into the snow wearing nothing more than an old coat thrown over his Power Rangers pajamas and fluffy bunny slippers, he races down the street, tossing a handful of munny orbs into the gambler's begging cup as he passes, and pausing a moment to whip out a pair of scissors and lop off Zexion's hazardous bangs. "Merry Christmas to all!" he cries merrily, blowing a kiss to Axelbelle and hurrying on his way. "My dear Marluxia!" he shouts as he happens to pass his nephew, "Make sure you save some daisies or petunias or whatever for me, I'll be by later on this afternoon! Ha ha ha!"

"I think I'd better add some fruitcake to the list while I'm at it," Marluxia muses.
Saïx makes only two stops on the way, once to buy the biggest, freshest, non-experimental fish he can find at the grocer's, and once to clean out a toy shop. Then, giggling with glee, he arrives at the unsuspecting Cratchits' house. After taking a moment to get hold of himself, Saïx knocks on the door, putting on his frownyface again.

Demyx flings the door wide, smiling warmly, but then yelps and slams it shut again when he sees who's outside.

"Demyx! Demyx!" Saïx shouts, pounding on the door again. "Open up before I have my Berserker thugs break in!"

When the door opens again, it's actually Relena Cratchit standing there. "Hello, Mr. Saïx," she says. "I'm afraid that my dear husband--"

"Ow!"

"--who I adore with all my shrewish heart--"

"OW!"

"--has run away to hide."

"Hmph." Saïx barges in and glares around the room. The two older Cratchit kids cringe away in terror. After a very long pause, Tiny Roxie, who's apparently a bit dense as well as crippled, blinks and scoots his chair back too, though his face doesn't change at all.
"Hmph!" Saïx stomps upstairs and drags down the man of the house. "Now, prepare yourself, Demyx Cratchit! I'm here to give you what you deserve!"

"Oh, no, please don't!"

"You can't stop me, Demyx! I will give you what you deserve, and it's...!"

There is another very long, expectant pause. Finally, Demyx looks over his shoulder and says meaningfully, "Kids, why don't you check out that big suspicious bag Mr. Saïx here just brought in?"

At the mention of his name, Saïx turns to look at the children as well, swaying uncertainly.

"Huh?" the youngest child says intelligently.

"You know. The bag of you-know-whats. Maybe you'd better check inside."

Realization dawns. Tiny Roxie gets out of his chair and walks over to the bag (totally forgetting to hobble or even bring his crutch, the little doof), then pauses. "Wait, I thought you said to dig through the bag when that Saïx-thing wasn't looking."

"Roxas, you are a terrific actor," Axel murmured.

"Really? Thanks."

"Are you acquainted with the term 'sarcasm,' Number XIII?" Zexion asked conversationally.

"Um...not really. Axel, what's--?"
"YOU KNOW WHAT, we really shouldn't be interrupting the movie, ha ha ha!"

"Argh!" Demyx grabs the Dancer-Saïx by the arm and yanks it the other way. "There, he's not looking."

"Okay." Tiny Roxie digs through the bag and pulls out a teddy bear. "Look, a toy."

"That's right," Saïx says, "you deserve toys! I mean, not toys, a promotion! Congratulations, you're my new boss."

"X-Xiggy...oh, help, Xig, his eyes, his eyes are burning me...!"

"Really? Yay! Didja hear that, Relena? I'm in charge of the Organization now!"

The Spirit of Christmas Future randomly warps into view, crossing his arms meaningfully.

"Well, okay, you can be the shadow ruler, Xig."

C.F. nods in satisfaction and disappears again.

"Geez, you two," Axel complained. "I'm the one who'll be losing beauty sleep whenever those"
'Eliminate the traitors' orders come in. Didn't your mothers teach you to be considerate?" 

"Ah, you know we're just joking," Xigbar said, waving his hand dismissively. 

"Superior, we LOVE you," Demyx gushed. "You're the best Organization boss ever, and we'd NEVER try to overthrow you for realz!"

"Don't bother. He's asleep again."

Onscreen, Tiny Roxie had grasped the teddy bear in both hands and was waving it up and down, apparently under the impression that this was how a normal child would play with it.

"Oh, what a wonderful Christmas this is!" Demyx goes on rapturously. "Lots of real food, toys for my cute little kids - Roxas, you're holding that teddy bear upside down...there ya go, buddy! - and the chance to make a living by slacking off for the rest of my days...it's just perfect! Having you for a new pal is just icing on the cake, Sai."

He slings his arm around Saïx, who laughs. "I have so much to thank those wonderful spirits for! I'm going to be a lot nicer from now on."

"Atta boy," Demyx says cheerfully. He gestures at the children. "Hit it, Tiny Roxie!"

Tiny Roxie gives him a strange look and knocks his fist against the teddy bear's head.

"No, I meant your line!"

Tiny Roxie sighs, digs the script out of his pocket, and raises his fist again.

"No! You're supposed to say the line now, Roxas."
"Oh." Tiny Roxie raises his head and announces, "God bless us, every one."

Directed by: Demyx the Melodious Nocturne

Producer: Xiggy

Screenplay: Xiggy & Demyx the Melodious Nocturne, based on the book by Charles Dickens.
Kind of.

CAST

(in order of appearance)

DEMYX THE MELODIOUS NOCTURNE as The Narrator, the voice of Saïx (and young Saïx), Relena, Roxas, and other random voices; and Demyx Cratchit

DANCER #1 as Ebenezer Saïx

SNIPER #1 as Luxord the beggar

SNIPER #s 2, 3, & 4 as the other beggars

XIGGY as the voice of Luxord the beggar, Marluxia, Xemnas's ghost, Axelbelle, Dr. Whinemaster, Xaldin, the Boy Who Says "It's Christmas Day," and other random voices; and the Spirit of Christmas Future

DANCER #2 as Saïx's niece-I-mean-nephew Marluxia

SNIPER #s 5 & 6 as Lexaeus the Silent Charity Guy

DANCER #3 as Zexion the Perilously Long-haired Charity Emo

DANCER #4 as the ghost of Jacob Xemnas

XION as Poppet, the very confused Spirit of Christmas Past

Lots of random DANCERS and SNIPERS as the partygoers

DANCER #5 as Axelbelle

DANCER #6 as young Ebenezer Saïx

DANCER #7 as Dr. Whinemaster, the Spirit of Christmas Present

Random DANCERS and SNIPERS as random people

DANCER #8 as Relena Cratchit

DANCER #9 as Cratchit Kid #1
SNIPER #7 as Cratchit Kid #2
ROXAS as Tiny Roxie
SNIPER #8 as Roxas
SNIPER #9 as Xaldin the Singing Gravedigger
SNIPER #10 as the Boy Who Says "It's Christmas Day" (except that he doesn't actually SAY "It's Christmas Day" because he's a Sniper and can't talk to anyone except the other lesser Nobodies and Xiggy)

No Nobodies were harmed in the making of this movie, except Roxas when he ate that purple chicken we stole from Vexen, but we fed him a Panacea and he got better.

This is a work of fiction. All similarities to any real persons, living, dead, partial, mixed-and-matched, or non-existent, is entirely coincidental. ENTIRELY.

The makers of this film would like to thank Lord Xemnas, who didn't get mad at us for wrecking the castle while filming; all the Dusks who cleaned up after us when we broke things; Axel, who didn't kill us that time we kidnapped Roxas and Xion before they made it to their ice cream date with him; Saïx, who totally understands that this was all a joke and we were just teasing and we still love him, kind of, actually not really since we don't have hearts; Vexen, who won't make us pay him back for the chicken because we have no intention of doing so anyway; Xiggy, just 'cuz you're my awesome homeboy; DEMYX THE MELODIOUS NOCTURNE, cuz I'm even awesomer; and last but not least, to all the wonderful Dancers and Snipers who dedicated themselves to this project. We couldn't have done it without you, sweeties!

This has been a Production That Never Was.

0.0.0

No one commented on the credits, because they were all too busy ranting, sleeping, furiously chasing Demyx and/or Xigbar around the room, or bemoaning the approximately 45 minutes of their non-existences which had just been utterly wasted.

"I lost so many brain cells!" Vexen wailed. "I can feel it! They're gone! They were there before, and now they're gone!"

"Roxas. Xion," Axel said sternly. "As soon as the stores re-open tomorrow, I am going to buy you
these magical things called cell phones. The next time you're running late to the clock tower or won't be able to make it, CALL ME, or I will come looking for you."

"Okay," Xion agreed.

"Axel, I think Destiny peed on me."

To be continued....

Author's Notes: I admit that the credits were pretty fun, but the rest of it, blaaaaaaargh. Though the current version of the chapter is actually lots better than the initial draft that I wrote back in August or September 2011, so you can imagine what the first draft must have been like. SO MUCH RE-WRITING, I might have given myself a concussion from headdesking so much.

Although I did re-read the Dickens novella for the sake of this chapter, most of it was inspired by the Disney version.

The "golden butterscotch topaz" stuff is how Cleolinda Jones pokes fun at Stephenie Meyer's descriptions of Edward Cullen's eyes. :p

Otomen - not the most amazing manga ever, but it's still pretty cute.

I was making ZERO attempt to portray actual emo culture, just so you know. Purely going off of stereotypes, and I'm sure I even got the stereotypes wrong.

Lol, because I know someone or other's gonna ask:

Xemnas - Humus
Xigbar - Dig More
Xaldin - Whoosh
Vexen - Fox Den
Lexaeus - Leeks
Zexion - Sedge
Saïx - Aphid Nymph (though it changes to something else in my second "Fire & Moonlight" drabble)

Axel - Nice (explanation in next chapter)

Demyx - Insects

Luxord - Sward

Marluxia - Marsh

Larxene - Zap

Roxas - Rocks

Xion - Sea Foam
Christmas at the Castle: Chapter 12 - ...and a set of really sharp cutlery!

Christmas at the Castle, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Chapter 12 - ...and a set of really sharp cutlery!

A/N: Chapter of Awkward, Round 2.

For the record, Demyx's punishment-mission is most likely gonna get passed on to Roxas, just like all his other not-easy missions do. :p

0.0.0

By the time Axel had lent Roxas a pair of jeans, Roxas had changed into them, and Xion had pinned up the hems so they weren't dragging on the floor, the trio (and their new pets) returned to find that the party was beginning.

Luxord was helping Zexion arrange food on the dining room table, which had been pushed up against one wall. Having apparently survived the fallout from the movie viewing, Demyx had started yet another blaring Christmas playlist. He was trying, with dubious success, to explain to a couple of his Dancers how to run the sound system. Xigbar led the Superior around the room, feeding him totally false information with a straight face.

"...and as for Christmas trees, the tradition started when people used to believe in creatures called candy cane fairies, so they would bring trees into their houses and decorate them in hopes of attracting the fairies, who would then drop prizes when they came to investigate."

"I see," Xemnas intoned, frowning. "Are these candy cane fairies in possession of hearts?"

"Um - assuming they're real, let's say...no, they're not."

"What a purposeless endeavor, then."

"Heh, well, wait 'til you hear about something called ice skating...."
Xaldin was polishing his lances with the Christmas present he had gotten from Roxas; Vexen was interrogating Maruhana and eagerly taking notes on the talking flower's natural environment and living habits; Lexaeus was starting to put together his new moai puzzle with Marluxia; and Larxene had just picked up the stack of mission reports Saïx was working on, tossing them through a dark corridor before he could stop her.

"So, what do you guys want to do?" Axel asked, turning away from the resulting boss battle.

He should have known better. Roxas and Xion simply stared at him blankly.

"Do you want to eat, play karaoke or DDR with Demyx, work on the jigsaw puzzle, take sides in the Saïx vs. Larxene battle, play with the puppy, or use those brains I hope you were born with to think of a different way to pass the time?"

"Play with Destiny," they decided. So they petted and cooed at and wrestled with the dog, and Axel taught them how to play fetch, and when that annoyed too many of the other members ("If that creature comes near me again, I'll schedule it for dissection!"), they got a bunch of food to use as treats and tried to teach the puppy tricks. Destiny was much more cooperative than Bomb, who seemed more interested in exploring the room and leaving claw marks on Axel's pants. The kids got as far as coaxing Destiny to flop over on his side and gaze at them adoringly in response to the word "Sit" before they started nibbling on the reward treats themselves.

"Man, it is way past lunch time," Axel realized. "Go get some stuff from the snack table."

"Okay," Roxas said absently. Five minutes later, he was tickling Destiny's wriggling belly and showing no sign of going to obtain nutrients. Axel finally rolled his eyes, scooped the kitten back into his pocket, and got up to do it himself.

That was when he noticed some odd things going on. The horrible wailing in the karaoke corner turned out to be from Zexion and, of all people, Lexaeus, who were unashamedly belting out the lyrics to some pop song that was big in Twilight Town right now. Demyx accompanied them on his sitar and provided slightly less headache-inducing background vocals. All three were flushed and appeared to be enjoying themselves far more than was healthy, and frequently interrupted each other to slurp from plastic cups that had been clustered on a table nearby.

Vexen and Luxord were slapping down cards in a pile at a furious rate, shrieking in either outrage or triumph whenever a Jack appeared, and then taking the opportunity to down some more punch
(or whatever was in those cups). Larxene, her eyes sparkling with mischief, was crooning at Xigbar as she gave him a shoulder massage. He was flirting back and making visible efforts to keep his hands away from a cup of probably-not-punch. Xaldin was sitting on a couch, glaring straight ahead as he swallowed cup after cup. Xemnas and Saïx were practically draped over the punch bowl, taking turns scooping the contents into their own plastic cups and apparently trying to collaborate on a rap song about "masterless hearts" and "the dark void where Nothing dwells."

Only Marluxia seemed to be acting normal, hanging out with Maruhana and surveying the scene with a look of great satisfaction. As Axel watched, Larxene gave Xigbar a last pat and then went over to confer gleefully with the Graceful Assassin, so that Axel realized she was in on it, too.

"Hm...." Axel went back to the oblivious kids. "Oi, Roxas, Xion. Let's go make...uh...." It was hard to think of something that was not already available on the snack table. "...Spaghetti. Let's go make spaghetti for lunch."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because I just feel like spaghetti today." Axel scooped up Destiny and strode off to the kitchen, knowing that the kids were sure to follow their new pet. As soon as they were inside, Axel shut the door and said in a low, urgent voice, "Guys, do not eat anything from the snack table. I think Marluxia and Larxene are up to something, it looks like they've drugged the rest of the Organization."

"Huh?"

Axel went around piling a pot, a muffin pan, a package of noodles, some cans of tomato sauce, a box of cake mix, and all the other stuff they would need on the counter. He flipped a cookbook to the spaghetti recipe and handed it to Xion. "Here, you guys get started, I'm gonna go check things out. And we're making cupcakes, too, but don't eat them yet. I have an idea." He leaned down and playfully shook his finger at the curious Destiny. "You keep out of the food, 'kay?"

Then he went back out into the danger zone. Marluxia and Larxene were now wandering around, sweetly offering everyone refills, so Axel was able to casually sidle up to Maruhana. "'Sup, Hana."

"Hello, Nice." (Following the plant's discovery of Axel's element, it had taken a week of dedicated coaxing from Roxas and Xion, since flowers were apparently immune to Puppy Eyes, before Maruhana finally decided that the fire lord was a nice person and not Evil Incarnate.)
"Oi, Hana. Got a question for you. You know your new friend, Marluxia?"

"Marsh loves flowers. He loves me."

"Great. Hey, so, did he or the woman with the yellow petals do anything to the, er, water supply?"

"Yes," Maruhana answered matter-of-factly. "They mixed in some mushroom spit. I am not sure whose, though."

Axel took a second to decipher this from flower language to human language. "You mean they spiked the punch with something?"

"...What?"

"What?" Axel shook his head. "Okay, obviously the punch is a lost cause, but did they mess with any of the other food?"

"What food?"

Axel waved his hand at the snack table. "All that colorful stuff. It's human food."

"Oh. No. Just the pink water."

"Okay. Thanks, Hana." 'Man,' he added to himself as he walked away. 'If this is you neophytes' plan to take over the Organization, it's gonna need some work....' Axel went back to the kitchen, where he found the kids munching on cinnamon twists. "Oi! Way to spoil your appetites, you doofs!"

They grinned at him sheepishly. "We were hungry."

"Which is why you're supposed to be cooking spaghetti." Axel shook his head. "Okay, Roxas, you hold down the fort. Xion, I need your help with something."
"Me?"

The two of them sneaked into Vexen's room, where she pointed out the items he was looking for. He took out Bomb and handed the kitten to Xion in order to make room for the vials in his pockets. "Soooo cuuute," Xion cooed. "Who's a cute kitty, whooooo's a cute kitty?"

Bomb mewed in a preening sort of way, rubbing his tiny face against her fingers.

"Squee over the cat later, we've got some cupcakes to spike."

Roxas was heavily splattered with tomato sauce when they got back, which nearly gave Axel a non-heart attack before he realized that his friend was just the victim of his own cooking incompetence rather than, say, Larxene. Axel got that mess sorted out and then started on the cupcakes, as the spaghetti bubbled away in its pot. "Gah, Xion, get Bomb outta that cake mix bag, he's gonna suffocate."

Roxas went to go change clothes yet again, this time to his tin soldier costume since he was running out of options. (It was either that or the Mickey Mouse shirt.) When he came back, Xion was happily beating the cupcake batter in a mixing bowl, and Axel was slumped in a chair, too tired to care that Destiny was chewing on his shoelaces.

Xion giggled. "You look kind of silly wearing that outfit here in the castle, Roxas."

"Your face looks silly." Roxas came over and peeked into the spaghetti pot. "Is it ready?"

"No," Axel mumbled.

"When will the cupcakes be ready?"

"After the spaghetti."

"Can I go out there and get something from the snack table?"
"No."

"But you told me to earlier."

"Circumstances have changed."

"Can I have another cinnamon twist?"

"No."

"Well, I'm going to eat one, anyway," Roxas decided, and pulled another one out of the bag. It burst into flames. "Yow!" He dropped it, then hurriedly held Destiny back when the puppy came romping over to investigate. "Stay away from fire, Destiny, it's bad."

"It is not bad," Axel huffed. "Just depends on how you use it."

Since Destiny was already in his arms, Roxas hugged the puppy close and rubbed his face against its fur. So, so, so, so, so, so SOFT!

"Oi, clean that up."

"You're the one who set it on fire."

"It's your fault I had to in the first place."

When the spaghetti was ready, the kids shoveled it into their mouths as if they hadn't eaten in a week. Axel himself only nibbled absently, more interested in the cupcakes. He got Xion to help him mix the right amounts of Vexen's potions into pink and yellow icing, which he then sculpted into inviting flower and lightning shapes.

"Don't," he said sharply when Roxas reached for one. "Trust me, you don't want these. Go eat
another cinnamon roll or something." Axel took the tray of cupcakes and carefully dark corridor them onto the snack table in the dining room.

Then, at long last, they were ready to rejoin the festivities. Xion opened the kitchen door first and then just stopped dead, staring. Axel, coming up behind her, swore and clapped both hands over her eyes, but not in time to rescue her from being scarred for life. "In the name of all that's non-existent, put some freaking pants on, Xemnas!" he shouted. "There are ladies present!"

"Some ladies don't mind a bit," Larxene called merrily from where she was running a video camera. "Mm-mm, our Superior's a fine one."

"In the dark where Nothing dwells," Xemnas intoned as he stood on a table, presenting a completely unobscured view of a certain Keyblade wielder's magnificent body, "the Void will take all hearts, and from out of darkness, Kingdom Hearts shall rise again."

"Hear, hear," Luxord called drunkenly, downing another cup. Vexen was already passed out beside him.

"Fee cheers fa Hindon Karts!" Demyx giggled, overbalancing himself and toppling back into the Silent Hero's arms.


Axel shoved Xion safely back into the kitchen and slammed the door. "Roxas, find Xemnas's coat," he ordered. "Larxene! Marluxia! What the heck!"

"Thirsty?" Marluxia suggested with a grin, holding out a cup of punch.

"No, thanks, I think I'll pass," Axel snapped.

"Hmph." Larxene bit into a lightning frosted cupcake as she surveyed Axel with calculating disdain. "Aren't you a clever one. We're gonna have to figure out something different for you, but that shouldn't be hard."
"Hey, as long as you keep the kids out of it, I'm all for this Take Over the Organization thing. But seriously? Letting Xemnas flash everyone when Xion's around?"

"Ah, she'll get over it," Larxene said dismissively.

Axel went and opened the kitchen door. "Xion? You okay?"

The poor girl had not yet recovered from her Blue Screen Of Death. "It's like...an elephant, a...furry elephant...."

Axel hastily shut the door again. "See?!"

Meanwhile, Roxas was patiently following Xemnas around the room, holding the man's coat and trying to coax him to put it on. "Come on, Superior, it's cold in here. You've got goosebumps. Don't you want to put your clothes back on?"

"There is no feeling in the void of nothingness," Xemnas announced, before raising his cup to gulp more punch. Roxas seized the opportunity to try to fling the coat over him, but the drunken silver-haired Nobody pulled off a Reversal to avoid it. Since he was drunk, he promptly fell down right afterwards. He stared at the ceiling, looking as if he was wondering how he had ended up on the floor, then shrugged and swallowed the last few drops remaining in his cup.

Roxas retrieved the dropped coat and, with Axel's help, wrestled the Superior of the In-Between into it, who fell asleep before they were finished.

"Well done," Marluxia laughed, eating the last of his pink flower cupcake. He licked his fingers and reached for another one.

Hiding a smile, Axel got Xemnas propped on a couch, and was startled when someone suddenly grabbed him. He looked over to find Saïx sobbing into the back of his neck. "Leaaa, I miss youuu...!"

"Oh, great."
Just then, a dark portal opened in the middle of the room, admitting Xion. "Oh - so everyone's still here."

Axel stared at her. "Xion? Are you...all right now?"

She held up her hand. "I just drank from a bottle of Lethe water Vexen brought back from his last trip to the Coliseum. I don't remember anything that happened in the last fifteen minutes, so whatever it was, it must have been pretty bad. Please don't tell me what it was."

"...Roger that."

"What this party needs is some poker!" Luxord was yelling. "Who's willing to take me on?"

"Me." Xigbar crawled over, deliberately knocking over Luxord's cup as he did. "Must...stop...drinking punch...."

"I forgot the real 'Jingle Bells'!" Demyx screamed. "All I remember is the Batman Smells version!"

Larxene, her eyes glazed, stalked over and shoved Demyx onto a couch, climbing on top of him as she did so.

"Axel?" Roxas said in alarm, "what's she doing to him?"

"She...it's like she's eating his face!" Xion cried in horror.

"Don't worry, he seems to be enjoying it," Axel said dryly. "Oi," (this was to Säïx) "get off me, will you?"

"I've - been - so - mean to you!" Säïx wailed. "What kind of friend am I?"

"Oh, are we still friends? News to me."
"I cared more about toppling Xemnas than I did you!"

"Saïx, I know you're drunk or high or whatever, but that sounded kind of...."

"Will you be my friend again if I'm nice to your puppet?" Saïx sniffled.

"...Isa, I really cannot deal with this right now...."

"What's that thing under her tank top that he's trying to unhook?" Roxas was asking.

"They're called bras." Xion put her hands over his eyes. "Don't look. It's not nice."

"Demyx is looking."

"Well...."

Axel marched over, with Saïx dragging along behind him, and threw a spare tablecloth over the couch and its occupants.

"Axel?"

"Please, please, please don't ask...."

"You look like you need a flower!" Marluxia popped up, all sparkling-eyed and beaming from whatever had been in the cupcakes. "Turn that frown upside-down!" He tucked a dahlia behind Axel's left ear and a tulip behind his right, then went on sticking flowers into every pocket and empty button-hole he could find. There were a lot of them.

"Enough already!" It was a good thing Maruhana appeared to have fallen asleep, since the last thing Axel needed on top of everything else was a freaked-out plant.
Zexion, meanwhile, had come up and seized both of Roxas's hands in his. "I'm gonna say it! I don't care if you're not the real Ventus, I'm gonna say it anyway! Thank you!"

"Uh...what?"

"I thought Master would be so proud of me," Zexion lamented, sitting down and hugging Roxas to his chest like a sad little boy with a teddy bear. "Master wanted an Unversed of his very own to study, so I went out to catch one, but there were so many and they were really cute with the glowy eyes and they bit me and then you came along and hit them. Thank you."

"...You're welcome?" Roxas looked at Xion for help, but she just shrugged in confusion.

"All this time, I wanted to tell you something," Zexion went on pleadingly. "Thank you." He paused. "Did I say that already?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Thank you. You're nice."

Axel finally dark corridored away from both Saïx and the growing pile of flowers, causing both the berserker and the excess blossoms to drop to the floor. He firmly tugged Roxas out of Zexion's arms, made sure Bomb was in his pocket, clipped a leash on Destiny, and grabbed the kids' hands. "Roxas, Xion, get your coats. We are leaving this loony bin to its own devices and spending the rest of the afternoon in Christmas Town, where people actually know how to celebrate Christmas."

"What if they accidentally blow up the castle or something while we're gone?"

"Well, we're just gonna have to take our chances, then."

The three of them (five, if you counted the pets) passed the subsequent hours most pleasantly, playing in the snow and saying "Same to you!" every time someone wished them a Merry Christmas, and partaking of pies and candies and apple cider. At one point, Roxas and Xion even caught sight of a large figure in red coming out to the town square, hailed by a whole crowd of cheering elves.
"It's Santa!" Xion screamed. She and Roxas took off immediately, with Destiny yipping at their heels, before Axel could stop them. He sighed, found a bench, and took Bomb out to cuddle with as he waited.

Santa Claus had just finished his annual post-delivery Christmas Day speech when he caught sight of two older children (and a dog) amongst all the elves. Their names automatically came to his mind, though there was an odd lag, as if they had recently changed their birth names. "Ho ho ho!" he boomed in his jolly way. "Roxas and Xion, is it? Come, let's make way for our special guests." The elves parted good-naturedly, giving the young Nobodies room to make their way nervously up to the old man. He smiled at them. "Well, now. Have you been good children this year?"

"Um...."

"Can you check?" Xion asked breathlessly. "Can you look us up on your List?"

"Hm, let's see." He ran his finger down the names. "Oh dear," he murmured. "Roxas, it says here that there was a very small young lady in distress whom you failed to give aid to, even after she had granted you a precious gift."

Roxas dropped his head. "I knew I should've followed her to that ship...."

"And me?" Xion said anxiously.

Santa Claus found her name and smiled at her. "Here you are on the Nice List, my dear."

Xion gasped in delight, "Oh, I'm so happy!"

Santa frowned. "Now, why do I not recall leaving a gift for you this year? I know I didn't miss any of my usual stops...."

"We live in the World That Never Was," Xion explained. "Axel said that you don't go there because we're all heartless monsters."
"Oh," Santa realized. "No, it's because I can't visit a world that doesn't exist, you see." He chuckled. "And besides, since all the inhabitants of that world are always scheduled for coal, anyway, it's more cost-effective to pass over it altogether. You must be a new addition, my dear."

"Yes, I only joined recently."

"Ah, that explains it. Xion, it seems I owe you a Christmas gift. Why don't you reach into the bag here and pick one?"

Eagerly, Xion drew out a small wrapped box, which she opened as Roxas watched over her shoulder. Inside rested a pair of jingle bell earrings and the Decisive Pumpkin Keychain. "Ohhh, they're wonderful! Thank you, Santa!" She hugged him, then generously gave the Keychain to Roxas, who wondered for the first time if Xion was perhaps a nicer person than him.

Over on the bench, Axel smiled as the kids suddenly turned around and made a beeline for him. Xion in particular seemed to be glowing. "How was it?" he asked as they came panting up to him.

"Santa wants to meet you, Axel!"

Axel blinked. "What?" Xion snatched Bomb out of his hands, and then they seized his arms and hauled him to his feet. "Hey, let go!" He resisted every step of the way as they dragged him into the center of the square, but did not escape via a dark corridor because that would have been running away, and the Flurry of Dancing Flames was not a coward. He might be having sudden flashbacks to all the stupid, stupid, stupid things he had done as a kid, but he was not a coward.

"Hm... Lea, is it?"

"Yes, sir," Axel mumbled, shooting death glares at the kids.

"As I recall," Santa said sternly, "you're the young scamp from Radiant Garden who set out a mousetrap for me when you were five, drugged my cookies when you were six, rigged a booby trap in the chimney when you were seven, invented a reindeer snare when you were eight--"

"Yeah, fine, that's me. Isa helped with the last two." Roxas and Xion were staring at him as if they had suddenly discovered that he was the Organization's assassin. Humiliating as this was, it was ten times better than that alternative. He did not yet have the guts to be able to look into their
clear blue eyes and see the realization that he was even more of a monster than he pretended to be.

"Hm," Santa said doubtfully. "I must say, the chances are pretty low, but I ought to check all the same...."

"Trust me, my name's not gonna be on the Nice List. Ever."

The old man stared at his list for a long time. "Now, this is interesting," he murmured thoughtfully.

Axel tensed.

"There's a footnote here on the Naughty List that says you befriended a couple of lonely children and took care of them when no one else would." He looked back at the young man, who glanced away.

"A couple of lonely children?" Xion wondered. "You'd think we'd have met them by now...."

"So," Roxas asked, "does that mean that Axel gets a present, or not?"

"Lea." The patient old man waited until Axel reluctantly met his eyes again. "If you could have anything in the worlds, what would it be?"

"A bar of sea-salt ice cream."

"Come now, Lea."

"You're Santa Claus," he mumbled. "There's no way you wouldn't know."

Santa nodded. "Two children, two hours. That seems fair, wouldn't you say?"
Green eyes widened. "You can't mean...two hours of...?" His chest was already beginning to hurt, and he laid a hand over his own heart without thinking.

"Well, of course it's not the real thing, but the connection is still there. I can at least manage a reasonable imitation. Enjoy the rest of your stay in Christmas Town," the master elf told the children. Then he moved away towards his workshop with elves trailing in his wake, listening to their reports with his usual good humor.

Axel staggered, the pain in his chest becoming unbearable as he was overcome with the worst heartache he could ever remember experiencing in his life.

"Axel!" Roxas and Xion had hold of him, their eyes huge with panic. "Axel, are you okay? What's wrong?"

Grief for the father who had died protecting him, once-forgotten resentment toward the second man who had married his mother...the loss of his vibrant little brother and sisters and the horror of watching his homeworld fall to pieces, the agony of losing his heart to darkness; all the guilt and wretchedness and betrayal, the disgust and loneliness that had been missing from the long years afterward...it all came crashing down on Axel like a hundred heavy blows, and he thought, not for the first time, that they were absolute idiots for trying so desperately to regain these horrific burdens called hearts.

A little later, Axel would remember that there had been joy as well as sorrow. Soon, he would get up and be perfectly capable of bouncing around Christmas Town with the kids like the ridiculous fools they all were; soon, he would be able to rejoice in this precious gift that had been granted him, this brief time where he felt whole again.

Yet for now, it was a struggle to even remain conscious as he knelt there in the snow and cried his heart out.

To be concluded....

Author's Notes: This story was written long before Dream Drop Distance came out.

Erm...not a lot of thought went into Marly & Larxene's Evil Plan, even though I'd planned it right from the first chapter. But I needed their votes, and deliberate OOCness is fun to write, so I went with it.
People who've read the Rurouni Kenshin manga might have recognized a certain quote from the Misao vs. Kamatari battle that was rather in bad taste....

I belatedly noticed that Axel is the only member of Organization XIII who was never under the influence in this fic. *sweatdrop*

I never did find a place to include this except in Infamousplot's giftfic which I haven't posted yet, but Xion moved her stuff back to Axel's room before Larxene could kick her out. Speaking of Larxene...and, um, Demyx...as far as I'm concerned, they fell asleep before they could get too far, but I had to change the wording to sound more ambiguous. *sweatdrop*
Saïx woke up a little after midnight. He frowned, since he had the uncomfortable sense that something was wrong.

Sitting up in bed, he was greeted by an ecstatic Chi, who repeatedly jumped at his chest and licked his neck, since she was too small to reach his face.

"It's all right now, pretty girl," he crooned, stroking her fur a few times and then tucking her under his arm. He got up and studied his room. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, except that Chi's water needed to be changed and her food dispenser, though by no means empty, was much less full than he was in the habit of leaving it. "What is the date?" he asked one of his Berserkers uncertainly.

"December 26th," was the answer.

"Hm...." Yes, something was wrong here. What had happened to Christmas afternoon? The last thing he remembered, he had been forced to watch that wretched movie, then he had tried to get some paperwork done before Larxene had ruined things, and he had gone to get a drink after the battle, but...things were sort of fuzzy after that. He had the very uncomfortable feeling that he might have made a fool of himself in public with either Xemnas or Axel, or maybe even both of them. And he had no idea how he had gotten back to his room.

"Let's go for a walk, sweetie," he suggested. "Did the Berserkers take you out?" She yipped at him. "Well, we'll try again, just in case. Be a good girl and don't make any noise." He put Chi into his backpack and then ventured out into the Proof of Existence, which was dead silent.

The castle halls were cold and empty, and his footsteps echoed eerily. The dining room, when he got a chance to check, looked the same as it had on Christmas Eve. "Hm...." Via the Dusks, he discovered that everyone was asleep in their rooms except Axel, who seemed to be missing. "See if he's still onworld," Saïx commanded, then went to the Grey Area.

The sight of the heart-shaped moon relaxed him as it always did, giving renewed focus and clarity
to his thoughts. He took out Chi and showed her the present he had received from Number XIII.

She loved it. The little dog pounced happily on the chew toy, growling and snarling and trying to seize it in her teeth and yank it away from him as he dangled it invitingly before her face.

The playful snarls and violent squeaking were so loud that Saïx did not even detect the footsteps approaching behind him. He flinched at the unexpected sound of Axel's incredulous chuckle. "No wonder you didn't have a problem with the Christmas pets, you naughty rule-breaker."

"Where have you been?" Saïx grumped, picking up Chi and holding her protectively against his chest.

"Confiscating Marluxia and Larxene's pathetic takeover attempt."

Saïx looked over to find Axel proudly brandishing a couple of cameras.

"...What's on there?"

"Some really, really good stuff," Axel said with relish. "Hopefully no one will remember much, and I got the Dusks to clean up the dining room and put everyone to bed, but if anyone ever causes trouble in the future...."

"...Axel...."

"Yeah?"

"...Some of those recordings are of me, aren't they."

Axel smiled and twirled the cameras. Saïx knew that if he tried to grab them, they would be instantly out of his reach, dark corridored off to where he would never be able to find them again. "I hope you have not forgotten that we're partners," he said icily instead.

"If I were you, Sai," Axel said sweetly, "I'd be very nice to me."
Chi finally noticed Bomb's head sticking out of Axel's pocket, and began struggling to get to him. The kitten hissed, puffing up so that Axel had a hard time digging him out. "Oi, Bomb, calm down--" He paused. "Hey, what's your little friend's name?"

"...Chi."

Axel blinked. "Chi?" A smile began to spread over his face. "Because she's a Chihuahua? Oh, Sai, that is so lame!"

"Says the idiot who named his cat 'Bomb,'" Saïx snapped back.

"Good strong name." Axel held the agitated little ball of fluff out to Chi, who sniffed it curiously. Then she gave the kitten an enthusiastic lick, causing Bomb to stop hissing in surprise.

"Ironic, huh," Axel murmured. "Me with my kitty and you with your little dog...."

"You're a sentimental fool, Axel."

"Funny, isn't it? Seeing as how I don't have a heart to be sentimental with." He set Bomb on the floor, and Saïx released Chi. She yipped happily and settled down with Bomb between her front paws to lick his head in a motherly fashion. The kitten submitted with only perfunctory resistance, his cute little glare belied by a purr rumbling in his throat.

Saïx, watching them, blinked in surprise when Axel suddenly waved a package under his nose. "What's this?"

"It's Christmas. What do you think it is?"

"...I didn't get anything extra for you."

"I know. I don't care. Open it anyway."
Saïx slowly took the package. It turned out to contain a pair of earrings shaped like pale blue ice cream bars. "You're insane if you think I would ever wear these."

"Heh, I dare you to."

"What are you, ten years old?"

"What are you, forty?"

Saïx shook his head. "We've got a job to do. We shouldn't be wasting time on such foolishness."

"Man, you're so boring."

Saïx looked at Axel.

"You act just like our old history teacher sometimes."

"...Fukagawa-sensei."

Axel's eyes widened. "You do remember! That old fuddy-duddy who was always going on about 'Earning your diploma is your mission,' and--"

"--and 'Never take your eyes off the prize for anything."

Axel grinned. "Maybe my old friend is still somewhere in there after all."

"Since when have we still been friends?" Saïx muttered.

"...Since you took care of Roxas the other day, at least," Axel said softly. "You didn't have to do that."
"I didn't have to leave him ill, either."

"Still. Not everyone in this miserable castle would've been willing to pull off a total Florence Nightingale act. In fact, I thought I was the only one."

Saïx looked down at his Christmas gift for a long time. Then he slowly took the studs out of his ears and put on the ice cream jewelry. "Don't get used to it. This is the only time you'll ever see me wearing these ridiculous things, I'm going to throw them away."

"Heh, they look good on you."

"You're lying."

"Of course I am," Axel said affectionately. "You look silly. Best present you could have given me. Merry Christmas, Isa."

"...Merry Christmas, Lea."

o.o.o

Author's Notes: This was the first story I wrote where Axel gives Saïx earrings as a gift, though there's at least one fic including that idea which I happened to publish earlier. Christmas at the Castle was drafted back in late summer 2011.

With the exception of chapter 11, this fic was unbelievably fun to write. I'm happy with how Xion turned out, since I didn't get to do her justice in The Thirteenth Changeling. I loved writing the Roxas/Axel/Xion trio, though I think Axel's going to kill me for nannying him to death (and...for Axelbelle ^_^). Even though it was hard to do AkuSai bromance while keeping Saïx in character, and even though the "Zemyx" turned out pretty much the opposite of what I'd intended, those were fun, too.

I have both a platonic Lea/Isa multi-chapter prequel and a general multi-chapter sequel in the works, though it'll probably be a long time before I'm able to post them. I also have several much smaller stories set in this same universe, and many others which borrow elements from it. The
main sequel will have a different tone - I'm not planning for it to be a humor fic like this one is, it's just that it takes place in the same universe. (For example, what happened to all the Org's pets when their owners died? I started writing one of the sequel's subplots solely to address that issue.)

Writing this fic *finally* made me realize how much I enjoy ship-teasing, regardless of whether I actually like the pairing or not (which would explain a lot about some of my previous fics, even as far back as *The Same Shade of Yellow* seven years ago o.O). It's far more fun than actual romance. I have NO idea why it took me so long to realize this about myself....
No work today and lots of snacks and getting to play music and so many colorz, whoooo!

Demyx tipped another cupful of punch down his throat, gestured enthusiastically at the Dancer in charge of the playlist, then hit a chord on his sitar. "Raindrops keep fallin' on my head!" he belted out. "And just like the guy whose feet are--"

He squealed when Zexion suddenly lurched into him out of nowhere, knocking them both against the wall as they lost their footing.

"Demmyy," Zexion mumbled happily. "You're singing...a music...thing."

"Hey, do karak-- Coke-- Carrie--" Demyx tried, then gave up and resorted to, "Sing with me, Zexy!"

"I never singed before," Zexion confessed, which set them both off into peals of laughter. "How do I...move my feet again...?"

"Like this." They stumbled over to the sound equipment, where Zexion draped himself over the table and gazed lovingly at the mouse cord, while Demyx addressed the playlist Dancer. "Jenx, my honey!" he cried, even though he had no idea what the Nobody's human name had been. "Play
somethin' for us...somethin' happy!

The Dancer poked uncertainly at a few buttons until new music started blaring out of the speakers.

"Nice, nice! C'mon, Zexy!" Demyx pushed a microphone in Zexion's direction, accidentally almost bopping him in the face with it. It didn't occur to either of them to be surprised when Lexaeus's large hand reached between them to grasp a third microphone.

"Me, too," the Silent Hero said.

"Super! The more, the merrier," Demyx said happily, and all three of them took more generous swigs of punch before tumbling back onto the little stage.

"We've been waiting so long, just can't hold it back no more...!"

For Demyx, singing a Backstreet Boys song with Zexion and Lexaeus was the most beautiful thing ever - unless you counted pretty much every piece of music he had ever heard or performed when sober.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: In case you haven't read CatC and it was not otherwise obvious, that "punch" is not actually punch. ;) And if you have read CatC, this trio sang several songs together, so the "popular in Twilight Town" song was not the Backstreet one.

WHOO, I ACTUALLY MADE THE WORD LIMIT WITHOUT HAVING TO TRIM ANYTHING! :D ...In the initial draft. When I went back to edit it, it ended up 14 words over. *headdesk* Oh well!

Quotes were from "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" by B.J. Thomas and "We've Got It Goin' On" by the Backstreet Boys. I picked that Backstreet song half because it was the first one I saw, and half because once I read the lyrics, I couldn't resist referencing a song that contained the words "wet," "granite," and "special effects," considering who was singing it in this drabble.
Axel had only gotten a couple of hours of sleep on Christmas Eve, and hadn't slept at all since then. It was now nearly 1:00 in the morning, December 26th. Small wonder he had soon closed his eyes, leaned back against the side of the couch, and no longer seemed to be conscious.

Saïx watched him for a little while. Among the myriad emotions they had lost along with their hearts, boredom was one of them. Then, when he was sure that Axel was well and truly asleep, he turned back to the animals, pulled off his gloves, and picked up the kitten.

"Ah..." He wasn't sure how long he sat there, quite still, with that ball of heavenly soft fluff cupped in his bare palms. Long enough for Bomb to explore this new container, lick his fingers, bite his fingers, try unsuccessfully to both tumble out to the floor and climb up his arms, then finally give up on the escape attempts and curl up to go to sleep. That was best of all. So tiny, so warm, and so, so, so, so, so, so, so soft.

It was too much. "There has to be a rule about this," Saïx whispered. "It can't be legal."

Ugh, what was he doing? He was a Nobody, nothing should be having this much of an effect on him. He sighed, carefully laid the sleeping kitten on its sleeping owner's chest, then started to get up.
Chi was staring at him. She was too sweet and considerate a creature for any actual reproach to creep into her expression, but she still looked...lonely. "I will always love you most," Saïx told her firmly.

She yipped, quietly, as if out of respect for the other two's slumber, and her tiny narrow face somehow seemed to light up with delight. Saïx took Axel's stupid Christmas present out of his ears and replaced them with his usual stud earrings. Then he picked up Chi, gave her a kiss, and went off to find something useful to do until he got tired enough to go back to bed.

O.o.o

*Theme 26 was missing from the original challenge, so I made this one up.

Complete: 26/101
Roxas had not gotten much sleep the night before, but he was still too hyped up from Christmas to be able to stay in bed for long the next morning. It was not even quite 6:00 when he abruptly opened his eyes and sat up.

"Rarwf!" Delighted at the movement, Destiny tried and failed to lick his face, so settled for licking his hands instead.

"Oh yeah, I have a dog now." Roxas paused to happily scrub his hands through Destiny's so, so, so, so, so, so soft fur, then climbed out of bed. Destiny yipped urgently at him until he realized that the puppy could not get to the floor on his own. "Oh. Here you go, little guy." Heh. Xigbar and Demyx couldn't call him 'little guy' anymore, because now there was a littler one. "C'mon."

Since Larxene probably hated Xion forever now, Roxas and Axel had helped their friend move all her stuff back to Axel's room the previous night, before Larxene could wake up from "being drunk" (whatever that meant; Axel wouldn't explain it to them) and zap it all or something. Roxas walked in to find Xion still curled up under the covers, though Axel's bed was empty.
Roxas thought a moment. Then he picked up the dog and plopped Destiny right on top of Xion. The puppy slipped off her shoulder, climbed unsteadily over her neck, and started licking her cheek. Xion turned her face into the pillow and mumbled something.

"Wake up, Xion."

She finally rolled over and smiled, pulling Destiny away from her face and stroking the soft fur with both hands. "Hello, puppy," she crooned as Destiny happily tried to bite her fingers.

"Where's Axel?"

"I don't know. He wasn't here when I went to sleep."

"Let's go look for him."

"Okay."

They went to the Grey Area together. It was not very lively - just Xaldin buying something from the Moogle, and Saïx at the head of the room as usual, writing something as he waited for the rest of the Organization to show up. His eyes were red-rimmed and a little bloodshot, though, as if he'd gotten even less sleep than Roxas. "Are we still doing missions today?" Roxas asked.

"Of course we are. The festivities have been over for approximately eleven hours now."

"Saïx, you look like you need a Potion," Xion said, offering one.

"I have no interest in your assessment. Give the panel to Axel if you must."

The kids looked where he gestured and saw the Flurry of Dancing Flames sprawled on the floor behind a couch, fast asleep, with Bomb curled into a ball of fluff on his chest. Roxas took a few steps in that direction, but Xion caught his arm. "Let's not wake them up."
"But then we have to make our own breakfast."

"Well, I can crack eggs now...kind of."

"Yeah, I guess so."

They went to the kitchen and stared around for a while. "...Maybe we should just get Pop-Tarts and stuff like usual?"

"Axel will just make us eat again when he wakes up."

"Yeah. I don't feel like eggs, though."

"What about the kind we made like they do in Agrabah?"

"Oh yeah! You mean the one with all the sugar?"

"Yup."

"Let's do that."

"Okay."

It was harder than it looked, first just cracking the eggs, and then trying to pick all the pieces out of the released insides, then trying to separate the clearer stuff from the yellower yolk. It all ran together, and Roxas was pretty sure they had messed up. "Oh well."

"I bet it will still taste okay."

"Yeah."
"Especially if we put extra sugar in it."

"Yup. Everything's better with sugar."

"Yeah."

When they went back to the Grey Area, Xaldin was gone and Axel was still asleep, but the kitten was awake and mewing with irritated insistence up at Saïx. The Luna Diviner ignored Bomb in favor of finishing his instructions to Lexaeus, but as soon as the Silent Hero had vanished into a dark corridor, Saïx frowned down at the animal and drew his foot away.

Xion quickly dove to snatch up Bomb before Saïx could kick him or something. "Are you hungry?" she cooed. "You want breakfast, kitty?"

"Axel said we can't give him sugar," Roxas reminded her.

"Let's see if he'll eat a banana."

"...He'll drink milk," Saïx muttered, but the kids were already heading back to the kitchen and didn't hear.

Luxord was in there, putting a bagel into the toaster. He watched the Keybearers trying to offer Bomb a banana and then a popcorn ball and then a handful of chestnuts before he finally set down a saucer dish and poured some milk into it. "Try this," he suggested.

They watched with great interest as Bomb finally quit his raspy meowing and crouched down to start lapping up the milk.

"Hey, it worked."

"How did you know what he'd eat, Luxord?"
"One picks it up with experience...."

Back in the Grey Area, Axel was finally awake and arguing with Saïx. "It's the day after Christmas! I've barely gotten any sleep and everyone else is still hung over from whatever was in that punch! Seriously, Sai? Seriously?"

"We are not running a company with benefits and salaries, we're an Organization of Nobodies seeking to build Kingdom Hearts. It's a miracle the Superior even deigned to grant a single day off for the holidays, so for once in your life, will you please stop trying to push your luck?"

"Axel," Xion said, "we fed the kitty."

"He drank milk," Roxas said proudly. "He didn't like bananas, though."

Axel looked over at them and his face broke into a smile. "Oh, look, people who are nice to me." He turned his back on Saïx and came over to claim his Christmas present. "Hey there, monster," he cooed. "Uncle Roxy and Aunt Xi give you breakfast, huh? Huh?"

Bomb mewed at him in an unimpressed sort of way.

"You kids eat yet?"

"We ate eggs," Roxas and Xion declared at the same time.

"Well, good for you! I'm the only one who's allowed to eat unhealthy around here."

"Hey!"

"That's not fair!"

It took a lot longer than Roxas thought it would to teach his Samurai how to baby-sit Destiny. By that time, it was late in the morning and Saïx was looking grumpier than usual, so they all hurriedly got their assignments and set off to complete their missions for the day.
'Giant Heartless the day after Christmas. Thanks, Saix,' Roxas thought peevishly as he bashed away at the enormous spinning wheel that kept leaping all over the castle throne room and refusing to stay still long enough for him to hit it very often. 'Would be nice if I had some strong long range attacks so I wouldn't have to keep chasing after it....'

After work, he went to meet his friends at the clock tower as usual, but today was not one for relaxing.

"Finally," Axel said as soon as Roxas showed up. "Eat your ice cream on the way, we're going cell phone shopping."

"Huh?"

=o.o.o.o.o=

It was a small box thing with a screen and lots of buttons. Roxas stared at it.

"You okay with blue, Rox?" Axel asked. "Or do you want a green one or a black one or something?"

"Uhhhh...does it matter?"

"Not really."

"Okay...."

"How 'bout you, Xi?"

"Can I have purple?" she asked shyly.

"Sure thing." Axel plucked the orange phone out of her hand and handed over one of her chosen
"So that's it?" he confirmed with the salesgirl. "Anything else we need?"

"Um," she said, "no, you're done, but...do you think I could get a picture with you?" she asked, shyly enough to remind him of Xion, so that he didn't have the heart to refuse.

"Sure, whatever." He tried not to laugh as they walked out of the store and he watched the kids staring dubiously at their new communication devices as if the things were calculus problems.

"I don't get it," Roxas finally said.

"You will. But not yet. Put your hoods up."

The black-coated trio dark corridorred into a slightly messy bedroom where a dark-haired teenage boy was doing homework. He yelped in response to the invasion, but went abruptly silent when he found the point of a chakram poised close to his face.

"In the movies," the tallest hooded figure said, "it's always the uncool nerdy kid who figures out how to hack the government networks or crack the aliens' secret code or whatever. Rigging an interworld cell phone network should be a piece of cake for you. You've got seven days before I come back and decide whether I should do something unpleasant to you with this thing."

"Okay," Pence squeaked.

The hooded figure with girly boots poured a huge pile of munny over Pence's textbook, and the one with black tennis shoes laid three cell phones on top. Then all three figures vanished through a dark portal.

"Axel," Xion scolded as she pulled her hood down in a nearby alley, "that was mean."

"I wasn't really gonna hurt him," Axel said uncomfortably. Darn not having a heart, it really messed with his sense of judgment. Totally had not been a problem before he'd started collecting Cute Things.

"We could have tried just asking him," Roxas said sullenly.
‘...Oh yeah.’ “Well, this way he won't waste time. Come on, let's go grab a pizza or something.”

They were still staring at him a little accusingly. “I'll give him a box of ice cream and a three-day pass to Disney Town, too, okay? Stop looking at me like that!”

A week later, Numbers VIII, XIII, and XIV went to 'pick up their order,' as Axel called it. Pence had fallen asleep at his desk, surrounded by phone innards and tools. He sat up with a yelp when Axel tapped his shoulder. "I did it," he started babbling. "Still gets kind of staticky depending how far you are from the world's heart, and a lot of it had to be theoretical since it was so hard to test outside Twilight Town, but I really did my best, and I think you guys--"

"Sshhh," Xion said.

Roxas held out two flash cards on which he had written the options he was used to being presented with whenever he was given a task. "So," he said, as if reciting, "did you rig the three phones to connect across worlds?"

Staring, Pence finally reached out and cautiously tapped the Yes card.

"I see you've connected the phones," Roxas went on. "Well done. Take this for your hard work." He held out an item, happy to finally be the one on this side of the exchange for once.

Pence accepted the reward as if it might bite him.

"The hooded man has given you a Lightning Crystal," Xion announced. Transaction now complete, the kids faced each other in a moment of silent, gleeful pride.

"The taller hooded man," Axel said, sounding like he was trying very hard not to laugh as he set a box down on Pence's desk, "has given you another week's project. Eleven more phones, same thing. Now that you've figured out the trick, should be a piece of cake."

Pence stared in dismay.
"Here's the rest of your pay for the last job. Get this one done in time and you'll get two more Disney passes, all my old video games I don't play anymore, and what the heck, I'll throw in a free computer. Plus you'll still get to live, yay."

"Number VIII," Roxas grumped, "you're not supposed to tell them the reward before they do the job."

"Number XIII, you'll find that real life doesn't always quite work the way it does in the Organization," Axel laughed.

"It doesn't?"

"This is ice cream talk," Axel said meaningfully. "Let's get out of here."

They vanished again, leaving Pence to bury his face in his arms with a tired groan.

Seven days after that, Saïx frowned as Axel returned from a mission and dropped a cell phone and a sticky note on his clipboard. "What is this?"

"They're called cell phones, dude."

"Why is there one on my clipboard," Saïx asked flatly.

"I made sure yours was blue, since that's your favorite. Your number's on the sticky."

"Perhaps you've forgotten that such devices are completely useless to the Organization."

Axel winked. "Not if they can connect between worlds, too."

Saïx stared. "How?"
"I've got my sources," Axel said loftily. "Enjoy, bro." He walked off again to return to his Keybearing distractions.

Saïx looked back at the phone and finally picked it up. The wallpaper was a fanart of Sailor Moon cuddling a blue puppy, which he promptly changed to a much more generic one of a moon drifting in the night sky. Then he checked the contacts list.

There were thirteen numbers, labeled (respectively): ..., Blackbeard, Cheating DeLorean, Cryptkeeper, Emo McNerdface, Fruitmaster, LEA AKA AWESOME, Mullethead, Rox my socks, Sideburns of Doom, Witchwithab, Xi chan, and Zebra sama. LEA AKA AWESOME was the only one on speed dial. As Saïx took off the 'AKA AWESOME' part, renamed the rest of his contacts properly, and added a shortcut for the one that had originally been 'Zebra sama,' he realized that he was grinning.

Axel, however, was not, since his week had been a rather exasperating one. On Monday, he'd sent the kids off to work with a last reminder, "Now, call me if you can't make it to the clock tower. I want to know if you'll be kidnapped by idiots to make another horrendous excuse for a Christmas movie."

"Okay, Axel."

"Don't worry, we will."

THEY DIDN'T. Axel sat up there, waiting. Finished his ice cream. Waited some more. Checked his phone, even though he hadn't heard it ring. No messages. Called Roxas. No answer. Called Xion.

She answered on the fifth ring: "I can't talk, I'm fighting--!" There was a startled shriek, and the phone went dead.

"Xion!" Where was her mission again? Neverland? Axel rushed over there and found her flying leisurely around, collecting dropped munny orbs from the giant Heartless she'd just defeated. "Xion!"

"Oh, hi, Axel," she said casually.
"Don't 'Oh, hi, Axel' me when the last thing I heard was you screaming in pain!"

"Oh, that reminds me, I think I dropped my phone in the lagoon...."

They flew around longer until they found the (now ruined) phone, and called Roxas again. No answer. They finally trooped over to Beast's Castle, where they helped him chase down the last of the Deserters he was supposed to eliminate for his mission.

"Why weren't you answering your phone?" Axel demanded

"My phone?"

He had accidentally put it on silent mode.

"Argh!"

Back at the Castle That Never Was, they got Luxord to reverse time for Xion's phone so that it was good as new, then Axel let the kids make dinner as he dozed at the kitchen table. (Tried to doze. Bomb was playfully reducing the corner of his coat to shreds, and Destiny, feeling neglected, kept head-butting his knee and pawing at him for attention.) The fish sticks were a little burned, but turned out quite edible, and then they all fell asleep watching a movie in Axel and Xion's room.

Tuesday: "CALL ME."

"Okay, Axel."

"I promise."

Yet as he sat waiting on clock tower after work, not being called, he finally heard the sound of a dark corridor.

Roxas came strolling out. "Hey, Ax--" His eyes widened. "Wait!" He dove around the clock tower. There was a looooong pause, filled with beeping buttons and increasingly frustrated
sounds. At last, a phone call.

"Yo, Roxas," Axel chuckled.

"Hi. I'm coming."

"Okay."

The line disconnected, and Roxas came back around the corner. "I called you," he said proudly.

"Thanks, Rox."

The phone rang again. "Yo, Xi."

"Axel, I'm calling you," Xion said breathlessly.

"I'm being called by you."

"Umm...."

"You're, like, on the clock tower steps, aren't you."

"Yeah," she said sheepishly.

"Come on up, we're waiting."

RTC. Dinner. Another set of pants covered with puppy drool; fresh claw marks on his boots. Fell asleep with video games. And so it went....
On Wednesday, Axel showed the kids how to set the alarms on their phones "to remind you to call me when it'll still be, you know, useful." That was pretty much the only day where it went according to plan.

On Thursday, Axel was in the middle of a battle with a herd of Snowy Crystals when his phone rang. He cursed, because between Dodge Rolling, casting fire spells, and hurling chakrams, he wasn't able to dig the phone out of his pocket, answer it, or hold a conversation.

A few more of the Heartless exploded into prizes, and the phone eventually stopped ringing. 'Six more to go. I'll call you back later.'

The phone rang again. "Argh, I can't answer right now!"

Just when he had blown up the last of the stupid ice cubes, he heard the sound of two dark corridors opening. Unfortunately, he could not turn to look, because that last Heartless had caught him with an attack before exploding, so that he was now frozen fast in a block of ice.

"Axel!"

"Oh no!"

The kids ran around to face him, then just stood there, staring.

"Hi," he said. This was embarrassing. He couldn't move at all from the chest down.

"Kick your legs," Roxas suggested.

"Roxas, I'm frozen."

"I used up my Panacea already," Xion said helplessly.

"What are you two doing here, anyway?"
"You didn't answer your phone."

"We thought maybe you got eaten."

"Or melted."

"You guys watch too many movies."

The spell finally broke, sending Axel tumbling to the ground at their feet. It was a little annoying that they both helped him up like he was an invalid.

"I'm glad you're not frozen anymore, Axel."

"Did you two finish your missions?"

"Yeah."

"Yes. I was heading for the clock tower when I tried to call you."

"Good. Don't ever abort just because you can't reach me on the phone, okay?"

"Okay."

"Can we help you finish your mission, Axel?"

He smiled a little. "You're asking as if there's a chance I'd say no."

On Friday, Axel was quick to respond when his phone rang, which fortunately happened as he was ambling along rather than in dire peril. "Yo, Roxas."
"Hi, Axel."

"Hi."

"I'm bored."

"...Oh."

"I hate recon."

"Can't say I like it much, either."

"Okay, so, if I'm here in Wonderland, and there's a Three of Clubs and a Five of Clubs doing guard duty on the south end of the hedge maze, and a Ten of Hearts and Seven of Hearts doing duty on the north side, and I recorded their stupid patrol pattern, does that mean anything? Do I have to analyze that in the report, or can I just leave it as what I have?"

"Try to answer that question yourself after imagining Vexen's reaction to reading what you've got so far."

"...Darn. So what does it mean?"

"Man, you makin' me do your job for you?"

"Um...."

"Well, whatever; just record what you see, and we'll all try to analyze it together over ice cream."

"Okay. Hey, Axel?"
"Yeah?"

"I'm still bored."

"Hold on, Rox, bunch of Heartless just popped up; I'll get back to you in a sec."

"Okay."

After he had dispatched the gaggle of Skater Bombs, he took the phone out again. "You still there?"

"Yeah."

"You shouldn't be. Get to work."

"But I'm bored! I hate recon!"

"Yeah, you've mentioned that once or twice." Once he finally got off the phone with Roxas, Axel tried to concentrate on his mission again so he could finish quickly and head to Twilight Town, but the phone rang again ten minutes later. "Yo."

"Hi, Axel."

"Hi, Xi."

"What's your favorite color?"

"Uh...I dunno. Red?"

"Okay. I'll buy you a red one."
"What are you doing?"

"My mission was at these islands I really like coming to, and after I finished, I wanted to see what was on the mainland. So I Glided over and there's this cool gift shop on the beach where the lady explained 'souvenirs,' so I'm buying souvenirs for you and Roxas."

"Xi, you're not on vacation, and even if you were, we don't need souvenirs...."

"But the little shell ponies are so cute!"

"Shell ponies?"

Roxas called again shortly after he hung up with Xion. "Hi, Roxas."

"Hi, Axel. I'm not bored anymore, but this is kind of annoying."

"Okay."

"See, there were these weird guys at the garden in front of the house, and I'm having a tea party with them but they won't let me actually drink any tea, so, like, does tea taste good? Should I keep trying to drink some until they let me? Or does it not taste good and I should just leave? If they let me, because I dunno if they'll let me leave, either."

After that was Xion again. "Hi, Axel. So I decided not to get the ponies, but the shells are still really pretty so I wanted to know if you wanted a necklace more or a bracelet."

Maybe the cell phones had been a bad idea after all.
**Summary:** Like his best friend, Saïx also has a weakness against cute things.

**A/N:** Christmas at the Castle universe, **SPOILERS** for that fic. Takes place shortly after Christmas.

---

Saïx was eating supper, ignoring the trio laughing at the other end of the table, when he... *sensed* something. Looking down, he found the children's puppy standing right beside his chair, fixing him with an intense, moist brown gaze and wagging its tail hopefully.

Saïx stared.

The puppy stared back.

Saïx tried willing it to go away through the sheer force of his "I am a scary berserker" vibes.

Destiny simply cranked up the adorable a few notches.

*I'm immune, I'm immune, I'm immune,* Saïx tried to remind himself.

(Un?)fortunately, his immunity only worked against human beings.

Destiny was now quivering with anticipation, desperately licking his chops from time to time.
Saïx realized that he was not going to be able to resist much longer. He wanted very much (which was surprising in itself) to take that puppy in his arms and rub his face against its soft fur, but that much, at least, he was able to resist. Instead, he took off his gloves, picked some of his supper off the plate, and held it out on his flat palm.

Destiny practically inhaled the food, then rewarded him with a look of pure adoration.

'You are so cute.' Pause. 'Not as cute as Chi,' Saïx thought loyally, 'but still quite irresistible nonetheless.'

"Where's Destiny?" Xion suddenly asked from farther down the table.

Saïx immediately picked up his fork again, shoveled another bite of food in his mouth, and pretended the dog didn't exist.

"Oh - he's over there pestering Sai." Axel came over and scooped up the dog in his arms, exactly the way Saïx longed to do. "You bein'a bad boy," Axel cooed at the wriggling animal, deftly dodging its vigorous attempts to smear drool across his face. Then he grinned. "Destiny seems to like you."

"Does he," Saïx said, so flatly that the words didn't warrant a question mark.

"...Heh, I think you like him, too."

"Why would I?"

"Wellllll, I'd say why, but then I'd have to fork over five of my hard-earned Challenge Sigils."

Saïx glared.

"Oh, come on, you know it's true."
Unexpectedly, Axel held the puppy close to his friend's face. Saïx closed his eyes in defense against the dog's eagerly lapping tongue, and raised a hand to push his assailant away. He'd forgotten that his hands were ungloved. Bare flesh met soft fur and halted, lingering. "Oh..." he murmured without meaning to. Chi was very precious but, admittedly, not nearly as soft.

"Who loves the puppy?" Axel crooned. "Who loves the puppy? The puppy loves Saïx, so the one who loves the puppy is...?"

"Shut up."

**Theme 27 was missing from the original challenge, so I made this one up.**

**Author's Notes:** For anyone who doesn't care about spoilers and read this anyway without having read CatC, there was one part in that fic where Saïx got fed up and established a new rule: the price for each werewolf joke about him would now be five Challenge Sigils.

**Complete: 27/101**
Christmas at the Castle: Bound by Fire - Axel and Saïx

Bound by Fire
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

For Taliax, with much thanks (and some apologies XD). ^^

Summary: Axel has had three friendships in his life, and he wouldn't give up any of them for the worlds. Variations of AkuSaiRokuShi, all platonic; mostly AU.

Introduction: [Man, I've been working on this at least since May, if not longer.... It kinda ended up being a combination of everything I keep wanting to do for you and never get a chance to - not like it was a chore or anything, since these are pretty much my favorite things to write about. XD] Taliax was wonderful and wrote a fantastic AkuSai fic just for me. ^^ I was so incredibly blown away that I wanted to write her an AkuShi romance as a thank-you gift. Unfortunately, I badly overestimated my writing skills when it comes to tackling challenging material like AkuShi, and the only story that ended up working was a platonic one. By that time, I felt really, really, really bad (I'd been sending a string of horrible PMs and taking forever to get the story written...), and wanted to make it up to her, so I also threw in some platonic fluff for the rest of my OT4, since she likes them, too. This is also a combination of some other things, since all my other friends got giftfics from me and Tali's birthday is coming up soon, stuff like that. :) The title: because Axel seems to be the glue that holds these four together. (As opposed to AkuRokuShi, where Roxas holds them together.) He's also a star figure in five of the six stories, then took over the RokuShi story as well. *sweatdrop*

For some incredibly strange reason, AkuSai seemed to worm its way into almost every single one of these. ;) Though Saïx ended up OOC a lot, I kept getting carried away. DX

...Aaaand, because I have OCD, I'm working on Bound by Moonlight for SaiRoku, SaiShi, SaiRokuShi, etc. *eyeroll*

Part 1 of 6 - Axel and Saïx (rough draft)

Summary: "I never lose things. So where is it? Chi, go find it." Saïx needs his Disney Town ticket back.
Saïx stood in the middle of his room, as close to exasperation as a Nobody could get. "Where is it?"

Chi sat at his feet, looking up at him anxiously. The usually spotless room was full of strewn clothes and objects and open drawers, all set in disarray during Saïx's increasingly 'frustrated' search. "I never lose things, so where could it possibly be?"

"Bark," Chi offered.

"Hush, let me think...."

No time. He was going to be late if he didn't get out of here this instant. "I'll have to look again later. Chi, be good." She head-butted his ankle. He stooped briefly to scratch behind her ears, then headed out to meet with Lord Xemnas.

He did not notice the little Chihuahua trotting after him, slipping out of the portal at his heels. However, instead of accompanying him to the head of the Proof of Existence, she went sniffing her way along to the thirteenth portal.

She finally found what she was looking for in the eighth portal, after her master had gone down to breakfast. Watched by curious and somewhat perplexed Assassins, Chi moved through the dark room, sniffing through strewn boots and empty video game cases and at the sleeping flame-user's arm dangling over the edge of the bed. Then the other side of the room, through a pile of Keychain Gears and at a half-constructed stuffed animal.

It was in the pocket of one of the dirty coats heaped on the floor. Chi had a difficult time sticking her snout into the stiff garment's pocket, but she managed it, grasping the card in her teeth and tugging it free. Then she proudly trotted back out of the room and up into her master's portal, set down her prize, assumed a guarding stance, and waited.
Saïx returned to his room after work to find Chi drowsing on top of the very item he'd practically torn his room apart looking for that morning. "Chi!"

She jerked awake and yipped excitedly.

"What did you...?" He tucked her under one arm and studied the Disney Town pass in his other hand. "You found it," he finally acknowledged.

"Bark!"

He kissed the top of her head. "I know of a house full of Dalmatian puppies I'm sure you'll enjoy visiting. I will take you there soon - you've earned it."

The next morning, Axel stared at his mission brief for a while before finally remarking, "Luna Diviner's feeling a bit nostalgic, eh?"

"Difficult for Nobodies to 'feel' anything without hearts," Saïx returned. "We can't leave until I've sent off everyone else, so go waste time since I know you're not going to do anything useful."

"Why be useful when you can play with those instead?" Axel laughed, pointing across the room at the Keybearers (who were amiably arguing about panel arrangement efficiency).

"Don't you dare keep them late, I need a full day's worth of work out of both of them."

"Blah blah blah, whatever you say, boss."

It was later in the morning than Saïx would have liked when the last Organization member finally vanished through a dark corridor. He turned to Axel, who was napping on one of the couches. "Axel, we're leaving."
"Five more minutes, Mom," Axel muttered.

"Wake up, Axel."

"Blargh...."

Saïx went to get Chi, and came back into the Grey Area to find Axel still on the couch.

"Lea, you really need to stop playing video games so late."

Axel's eyes opened at that, and he stared. "Well, Isa," he said slowly, "between work and baby-sitting, when am I supposed to get my video game time in?"

"I would think that working to restore your ability to feel emotion should take precedence over how many alien-shaped groups of pixels you can successfully aim at."

"It's not just shooting games! My Virtu-Farm's been prospering spectacularly, and I'm this close to 100% completion on Sky Castle. Besides, I think your priorities are a bit out of whack, too, if you're taking the day off to go play in Disney Town."

"It's reconnaissance."

"In an amusement park."

"I can reassign you if you wish."

Axel grinned. "Nope, I'm good."

Saïx held out what looked like a handful of fluff.
"D'aww, I get to bring Bomb? Yay!"

"It's only fair," the Diviner muttered.

Armed with a kitten and a Chihuahua, the two Nobodies headed to Disney Town and presented their passes. "Oh!" the admission attendant exclaimed as she looked at Axel. "I remember you! You came here with that adorable little girl and boy, all in the black coats."

"Little girl?" Saïx asked in puzzlement as they continued on into the town.

"Yeah. Xion, duh. What other little girls do we have in this Organization?"

Saïx stopped dead. "You gave my Disney Town pass to Xion?"

"I lent your Disney Town pass to Xion, and so what? As if you were using it!"

"Do you have any idea how long I was searching for it?"

"You could have just asked."

"And had you guessing why I needed it and somehow finagling the Keybearers along, I don't think so."

"They would have loved to join us."

"And would then have gotten in the way, distracted you into uselessness, and--"

That was when Chi started barking shrilly, so that it was a little hard to think.

"Chi, be quiet," Saïx commanded. She backed away toward Axel and kept barking, now sounding a little desperate.
Axel scooped her up and cuddled her, cooing. "Your daddy's bein' meeeeeaaaan."

Saïx noticed that the little dog was trembling. "Give her to me."

"My puppy!"

"She's full-grown, and give her to me, she's mine."

"She's mad at you."

"I'm going to corridor that cat of yours somewhere unpleasant if you don't hand over my dog."

"Hey, do I threaten your fluffy?" Axel said indignantly. However, he was not unaware of the animal's distress, and passed her over readily enough. She seemed to calm down once the argument stopped. "See, Daddy and Uncle Axel are still friends," he cooed at her over Saïx's shoulder. "Humans only argue like old married couples when they looooove each other."

She watched him as she licked Saïx's glove. "Stop saying strange things," Saïx said with a frown. "Let's go, we're wasting time."

"I'll say. Let's catch all the popular rides first and save your boring ones for when everyone gets out of school and makes the lines really long."

"My boring ones?"

"Heh, one would think you'd be more of a thrill seeker now that you've got no heart to freak out with...."

"I never 'freaked out' on any rides--"

"Only 'cause you always REFUSED TO RIDE THEM--"
"--and I hope you don't intend to spend the entire day vainly attempting to stimulate the heart you don't have, since it's not going to work and there are more productive ways to pass the time here."

"Isa, you're talking as if visiting Disney Town is a chore."

"According to the mission brief, it should be."

"Well, better remember to investigate and analyze everything in between the Rumble Racing track and the ice cream shop and the Fruit Ball court and the performance stage, otherwise the higher-ups'll think we just came here to have fun," Axel laughed.

"We certainly can't have that," Saïx murmured, with what Axel could have sworn was a small twinkle in his eyes.

"Nope, can't have that at all."

They proceeded to enjoy their secret vacation to the full extent of their ability, which was rather more than any Nobody should have been capable of. Despite the fact that pretty much all the information in the report was falsified, Saïx counted that particular mission a success.
Summary: Saïx needs a better nickname. On second thought, the old one was preferable.

A/N: Christmas at the Castle universe, SPOILERS for that fic. Also, this takes place in the evening, and Christmas has already passed.

For goodness' sake, Axel had taken penmanship lessons just like everyone else in the Radiant Garden public school system. He had absolutely no excuse for this chicken scratch.

Saïx snapped upright upon realizing that he had been hunched over, squinting at the page from only a few inches away. Gripping the report tightly, he marched out of his room and headed directly for the eighth portal. "Axel!"

The room was empty. Saïx let out a quiet sigh, then moved on to the thirteenth portal.

Nothing. Which was odd. Usually, that trio could be found in either Axel's room or Roxas's, so where would they possibly...?

A more systematic search ended with a suggestion from Luxord. "You might try your luck with our Graceful Assassin."

"What business could Axel possibly have with Marluxia?"

"Not Marluxia. Rather, a certain other resident of that room, hmm?"
"...Oh." Saïx plodded back to the Proof of Existence and entered Marluxia's chamber. The place was about 30% bedroom and 70% greenhouse, complete with cloying humidity and several butterflies cavorting through the air. Sure enough, four Organization members were gathered around a drooping pink plant by the window.

"Do you feel better now, Maruhana?" the replica was asking anxiously.

"No."

Marluxia's tone was stern. "Stop pouting, we know it still hurts. There's no instant remedy. Does the problem remain, or will you be able to recover under current conditions?"

The sentient plant stirred restlessly.

"You're talking too human. You have to talk flower," Roxas said.

"Hana," Axel tried, "you're in a bigger pot now. I know your roots are sore, but you have room to grow out now, right?"

"Yes," the flower said sulkily.

"You'll be all right, Maruhana," the replica said soothingly, stroking one of its petals.

Saïx cleared his throat loudly to gain their attention. "Axel."

"Well, if it isn't the Luna Diviner! Come to pay your respects at our dear friend's sickbed?"

"Don't be ridiculous. We need to discuss your last mission report."

"Yay," Axel groaned. Excuse me while I leap for joy."
Maruhana was staring at Saïx. "It's Aphid Nymph."

"Maruhana, that's not a nice thing to call someone," Xion said reproachfully. "His name is Saïx. Sigh-axe. Can you say that?"

"No."

"How about 'Werewolf,' can you say that?" Axel asked, earning a glare from the berserker.

Just then, one of the butterflies, the patterns on its wings as bright as rubies, came to land directly on the bridge of Saïx's nose. He reached to brush it away, until Marluxia thundered, "DON'T. It will fly away on its own."

The insect leisurely flicked its wings open and closed again. Saïx heard the replica's stifled giggle, and realized how ridiculous he must look. Shaking his head to dislodge the creature would look even more ridiculous, so he raised his hand again to crush it, but Axel caught his arm, leaning forward to blow out a gentle breath.

The butterfly, startled by the sudden wind, quickly took to the air again and danced in agitated circles around Marluxia's head.

'What just happened?' Saïx thought helplessly. This kind of thing never seemed to happen to him except when Axel was around.

"That was funny," Roxas laughed.

"No, it wasn't," Xion said quickly, noticing Saïx's ominous expression.

"I will not call him Aphid Nymph anymore," Maruhana decided. "Unless I am mad at him."

"Oh?" Axel asked conversationally, though Saïx did not miss the gleeful note hidden in his tone. "What's your name for Saïx, then?"
"I will call him Butterfly, because there is one on his face," Maruhana declared.

Roxas laughed again, the little wretch.

"There's not a butterfly on his face anymore, Maruhana," Xion said quickly.

"Yes, there is."

Axel tapped the scars a couple of times before Saïx knocked his hand away. "I see exactly what you mean, Hana!"

"Axel, your mission tomorrow is in Atlantica," Saïx snarled, then stalked out of the room without a backward glance.

O.O.O

A/N: I imagine that Axel would loathe Atlantica, considering what his element is. ;)

This was the only one where I lost the original draft. I'll eventually try to reconstruct it as well as I can from memory, and post it later.

Complete: 2/101
"Hey, Saïx. You know how I've got that...weakness for cute things?"

"I am aware that Lea had such a weakness, yes."

Ignoring his usual Nobody obnoxiousness, I continue, "Well, see, I'm here in Castle Oblivion, obviously, and I...well, I found this cute thing. See?" I tug the girl near the crystal orb so that Saïx can see her. She looks terrified.

"What is that?" Saïx asks, in the same tone his mom once used to inquire about the actual, literal Roach Motel we'd tried to build when we were in fourth grade.

"It's a cute thing," I answer.

"What is it doing in Castle Oblivion?"

"Being cute."

It would truly touch my heart, if I still had one, to see Saïx taking the trouble to furrow his brow. In the past three or four years, I've had yet to see him fake any emotion for anyone except me. Granted, the emotion he almost always chooses to fake for me is annoyance, but I'll take what I can
get. "Stop being tiresome. I'll send Vexen and Zexion there tomorrow to investigate. Secure your find and then finish up today's mission. I will expect a detailed report upon your return."

"Seriously, Sai. The eyes, at least? The eyes are doing nothing for you? Desperate, adorable, enormous, blue?"

"My partiality is for a different color. If you will excuse me, I have work to do."

He cuts the connection, leaving me staring at the blank orb in our Nobody version of surprise. Dark eyes are very rare, most people have blue. Mine are green. Had he really meant what I thought he did?

"I'm not an 'it'."

I glance over at the girl. "What?"

"You were...talking about me like I'm not even a person, but I am." She stands clutching that sketchbook of hers to her chest like it's a life preserver in a storm, her shoulders hunched, still firing those humongous pleading eyes at me full blast. Roxas and Xion have never experienced suffering. Roxas and Xion have nothing on this girl.

Somewhere out in the darkness among the many worlds, I can sense my Heartless writhing. The connection between us has been growing stronger lately, and it's definitely not fun.

"No, you're not," I say. I sit down comfortably on the floor because there's nowhere else to sit. Interestingly, she settles down as well, folding her legs all properly as she keeps clutching that sketchbook for all she's worth.

"I'm gonna tell you a story," I continue. "Once upon a time, there was a newborn Nobody who tried to pretend he still had a heart. But over the years, he started having to do lots and lots of icky stuff, and he finally decided that it was easier to just quit acting like doing that stuff bothered him. Because when you've got a choice between being miserable and being nothing, it's kind of a no-brainer to pick nothing, right?"

"So the Nobody went on his way, free from guilt and shame and regret and despair, but then one day, he got a different kind of assignment. His bosses showed him a cute thing and ordered him to
teach it how to be useful. So he did. Then a second cute thing showed up, and the first cute thing made friends with it because he's an idiot, so then the Nobody was stuck with *two* cute things.

"That's when a funny thing happened. He couldn't feel *nothing* anymore. He started having nightmares again, about everything he'd lost and all the stuff he'd done and what a horrible person he'd become. He remembered again what it was like to feel guilt and shame and regret and despair. And it sucks. But the cute things pretty much make up for it, it's just that the more adorable they get, the more everything else *hurts*, so the last thing I need is yet another cute thing tormenting my Heartless out there, and that's why you can't be a person, because the mere fact of your existence is bad enough."

We stare at each other. I raise an eyebrow. She ducks her head miserably. "Okay," she whispers.

'Okay?!

"I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble."

WHY DO THEY DO THIS TO ME. WHYYYY. "What's your name?" I ask.

She looks surprised. "I...I thought only people have names."

"Yeah, and I changed my mind and decided that you qualify as a person, more than I do, actually, so come on. Out with it."

She hesitates, still adorably nervous. "N...Naminé."

"Naminé, huh. I'll get that memorized." I gesture at myself. "I'm Axel."

"It's nice to meet you," she says, still in a whisper.

Well, enough of this awkwardness. I clap my hands on my knees and stand up again. "Well, guess I'd better RTC. I'll let you keep roaming around this castle if you promise you'll be a good girl and still be here later, kay?"
Her eyes widen (yes, apparently it's actually possible...), and she scrambles to her feet. "You're leaving?"

Stop it stop it stop it stop *looking at me like that*... "Don't worry," I say darkly. "I'll be back."
And she'll hate my guts by the time we're through with her. At least the Puppy Eyes will stop then, but...it kind of defeats the purpose, doing it that way. Awful as those kids make me feel, it hurts even worse just thinking about them not liking me anymore. My heart's been missing for too long, my threshold for emotional pain has gotten abysmally low.

I hate cute things.

Apparently it doesn't matter that I don't have a heart, I still hate them.

"You...you will?" That look on her face. Trembling hope, with despair at the back of it. She knows better than to believe me. I might not technically be lying to her, but she still knows better than to believe me. Smart girl.

I open a dark corridor. "Yep." We hold each other's eyes for a moment longer.

Then, just when I'm about to turn away, she dashes forward and actually drops that sketchbook so she can seize my arm. "Don't go!"

Well, crap.

"P...Please." Her voice breaks as she begs, and tears start rolling down her face. Lucky, lucky, lucky girl, still able to shed tears. Theoretically, we'd all kill to regain the ability to cry (*have killed*, in my case). Though it also kind of makes you wonder why we're so set on regaining our hearts, if it means getting all this pain and turmoil back. Yippee.

"I'm sorry," she sobs, "it's just that...I've been so lonely, so terribly lonely, and this castle is so big and quiet, and you're the first person I've ever managed to see with my eyes and touch with my hands, and I'm sorry but I...feel like...I'll die if you...leave me alone again.... Please, if you have to leave, then take me with you! Please don't leave me all alone again."
Siiiiiiigh. I gingerly put my arm around her. She plants her face in the front of my coat and bawls.

She takes a while to finally pull herself together, and by that time I have both arms around her shoulders and am rocking her as if she's a baby. I study her face when she pulls back - still looks miserable, but now kind of resigned, too. Even so...just walking off and leaving her here...alone...in this creepy silent white castle....

"Do you like sea-salt ice cream?" I ask.

"What's ice cream?" she asks back, all sad-faced and polite.

WHY DO THEY DO THIS TO ME. "C'mon. I'll show you."

She puts her hand in mine and offers me the sweetest, shyest, most adorable little smile, and I realize with a sinking feeling that the list of Kids Who Own My Soul has just grown to three.

Author's Notes: This fic should actually be much, much longer - thanks to Kiryn's plunny-inspiring, I'm now very much wanting to write a "how CoM works in the CatC universe" fic. However, if I waited long enough to write that entire thing out, Ip's request would take ages to post. I figured that I'd better just publish it as is, even though it's in need of lots of backstory.

But whatever, I'll just let it stand as a placeholder for now. If I ever do get that CatC!CoM fic written (which will be as cute as I can get it, because c'mon, the CatC universe doesn't have much room for angst, and it will be a nice challenge to boot), I haven't decided yet whether I'm going to update this file and relocate the ficlet as a small scene in the whole, or leave Girl In White as it is and post the CatC!CoM separately. (CatC stands for Christmas at the Castle, a fic of mine where Axel hangs out with Roxas & Xion for about three or four months before having to leave, and the Castle Oblivion team is not dispatched until after Christmas.)

Anyway. So yeah. This ficlet is for Ip. :) She said she'd like some AkuNami fluff after reading my Roses & Kittens SaiShi, and I was instantly eager to try it out, since I've never done AkuNami before. I was kind of worried, since I'm so swamped with stuff to do and I have a bad track record with request fics, so I was very relieved when this ended up working out so quickly - I actually got a plot bunny and started writing it out that very same night, then finished the draft the next day. This is also my first successful response to a request, yay! I hope it's close enough to what you had
in mind to be entertaining, Ip! And sorry about the AkuSai in the beginning, but you know me.
XD Couldn't resist.

This fic was a lot more angsty than I'd intended it to be, I had to keep trying to haul it back into fluff levels. Gah, CoM, why are you so depressing? Most of my angst and/or romance efforts belong to other fandoms like RuroKen! The Kingdom Hearts fandom should be for happy sparkly rainbow pony friendship!
"Arrgghhhh! It's like a plague, I'm telling you!"

"A plague of Puppy Eyes?" Saïx said dryly from where he was lounging in the middle of his pillar with a book.

Axel stomped over and threw himself down next to his old friend with a sigh. "Yes. And no, I'm not kidding; that little stinker Ven's been getting in on it, too! Roxas and Xion are being a bad influence on him."

"Judging from the way he's got Terra and Aqua wrapped around his little finger," Saïx said dryly, "Ventus has no need of being taught how to utilize that particular trait of his."

Axel waved his hand impatiently. "Ven was born with Puppy Eyes just like the rest of those brats. I'm talking about the way Roxas and Xion are now doing it on purpose."

"It was nice when they were clueless, wasn't it," Saïx remarked absently, turning another page.

Axel frowned. "Where'd you get the book?"
"Zexion's pillar."

"Duh, of course you did, why did I ask that?"

"Do you really want me to answer that question?"

Axel grinned. "Only if you want me to tease you some more about how I'm the only other person in your stained glass."

Saïx glared and turned his back on him.

"Aw, don't pout, Sai. I think it's cute. Naminé does, too."

"I TOLD you to keep the children away from my pillar when I'm gone," Saïx growled.

"Kind of hard to do that when we have to pass through yours to get back to Roxas's from Zexion's! Naminé and Zex are pretty good friends, you know. I can't just tell her she can't visit him whenever you feel like being dumb."

Saïx propped himself back on his hands, glancing at Axel over his shoulder. "What you really mean is, you can't tell her No when she's shooting you with--"

"Don't say it!"

"--Puppy Eyes."

"Gah!"

o.o.o
Author's Notes: This fic is SO OLD. What's funny is that I wrote it long before finding out about ZekuNami. XD

Complete: 53/101
The Other Half Of My Heart
(rough draft) [censored version]
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: If they can stop trying to kill each other for five minutes, maybe they can finally accept the fact that they belong together. XiVenVan for Ventus/Vanitas Day; no slash.

A/N: Ended up being more like XiVenVan than VenVan, but whatever. (That trio's really starting to grow on me....) And it's SUPPOSED to be platonic except for a portion of Van's complicated feelings for Xi, but the VenVan might make some people squirm a little, I dunno. :/ It was hard to balance characterization with thematic material for this one, and I'm pretty sure some ICness got sacrificed. But anyway, I meant it to be platonic, since I don't like yaoi at all.

Ftr, this is in the CatC universe. ^_^;;;; There's some backstory that isn't explained, so just be aware that you're probably going to misunderstand the setting, but it doesn't matter for this fic. I'll try to start posting the CatC sequel/prequel series soon.

Tiny tiny dialogue exchange censored out because Van likes to troll me. -.-

0.0.0

All hanging out together on the clock tower as usual, having fun, doing just fine, and of course Vanitas had to ruin it again.

"Ven, Vani has something to tell you." Xion cocked her head a little, eyes shifting to her two best friends. "In private."

"Huh?" Roxas said, giving Vanitas a look of distaste. Vanitas, standing at Xion's side, made a face
at him.

Axel chuckled a little. "You still trying to turn them into BFFs, Xi?"

"What's BFFs?"

"Best Friends For-- Ah, I'll explain it later," he said wearily.

"I don't want to talk to that," Ven said, biting into his ice cream and scowling at the sunset.

There was a ringing sound and a flash of light as Void Gear was summoned, then a thunk as Xion hurled her whole body back to pin Vanitas to the wall before he could go for his twin's throat. "Ventus PLAY NICE," she thundered. "Axel and Roxas, go away."

Roxas was already on his feet and summoning his own Keyblade, expression determined, but then he yelped as Axel snagged him by the hood and started dragging him off. "Hey! Axel! Let go!"

"Good luck, Xi," Axel said, waving a hand in sympathy.

She gave him a tired little smile as he passed. "Thanks...."

"Let me go," Vanitas snarled.

"Not yet, Vani," she said. "I don't want to let you do something you'll regret."

He made a frustrated sound [. . .] and she elbowed him in the ribs, not gently at all.

"Ow, Xi!"

[. . .]
"It wasn't a mean one!"

"I told you, [. . .]. At all."

"Argh...."

Ven sat in stony silence.

Xion sighed and finally stepped away from the wall. "Come on, Vani."

"No...." But he didn't resist when she took his hands and led him over to the sulking boy sitting on the tower ledge.

"Ven...."

"I HATE him, Xion!" Ventus snarled, rounding on her without actually making eye contact. "I don't want to talk to him and I don't want to make friends with him and I don't want anything to DO with him and I wish he'd die."

"Don't make me kick you, Ventus," she stormed. "Vani is making an EFFORT, and you have to, too, or you just-- it's-- you're a bad person if you don't."

He glared.

And she couldn't help smiling. "You look just like him when you do that...."

"I don't have anything to do with him," Ven snarled.

"Don't say that! He's half of your heart, Ventus! You two mean everything to each other! Just listen to him for FIVE MINUTES, please Ven."
After a long silence, Ven finally looked up, started to say something, then frowned. "What's your problem?"

"I'm trying not to smirk and insult your ugly face," Vanitas managed, then suddenly burst into a howl of laughter. "Aw, Xi, I can't stand it, he's so hilarious, this loser cracks me up and I can't--"

"Vani." She took hold of him, her face serious. "Don't be nervous, it'll be okay. I'll be right over there if you need me."

"I don't need you! You're not my mom!" he yelled, blushing a little.

"Do your best, okay, Vani? Just say what's in your heart, and don't let anything else get in the way."

"I DON'T HAVE A HEART."

She kissed his cheek. "You can't cry without a heart, Kazé." Then she left.

"Kazé?" Ven said in disbelief.

Panicked fury surged up in Vanitas and Void Gear was in his hand before he realized what he was doing, so he threw it off the clock tower before he could reach his twin. Carried by momentum, he fell to his knees beside Ven and snarled in his face, "Don't say anything don't don't don't, it's mine."

Emotions fought across Ven's face as he struggled to respect Xion's wishes. "My name is Wind, why did you name yourself after--?" 'Can't be. Impossible.'

"I didn't! She named me! It's her fault I'm stuck with your name and I hate it!" Then he remembered why he was here. "No. I don't hate it. I love her name for me. Because I'm you." Having said what he'd come to say (almost), he spun away, crossing his legs and arms and waiting tensely.
"...You are not me," Ven said in a low, tight voice. "You're everything that made me a horrible person, everything I hated, and I'm glad I don't have to have anything to do with you anymore. I just wish you'd go away and leave me alone so I can live without having you constantly trying to drag me back and make me horrible again."

Vanitas was either going to split Ven's head open or run away, so he got to his feet and started marching off the clock tower. Xion immediately came around the corner and set her hands against his shoulders, forcing him backwards and then practically crushing him down to sit with Ven again. "Ventus," she growled, "you are not listening, and Vani, you still haven't told him."

"I told him!"

"No, you didn't! Tell him what you told me! Tell him why you feel the way you do every time he says something cruel to you! Tell him why you hate it so much every time he rejects you!"

"I don't care if I'm 'rejected' by a walking piece of crap like--!"

"You care, Van! You wouldn't hurt so much if you didn't!"

"Stop making things up like you think you know me!"

"Stop hurting me just because you can't get Ven to do what you want!"

Vanitas paused. "I'm not hurting you," he growled.

"Is that what you think?" she growled back. "Every time you have a fight and you come and lash out at me because you can't lash out at him, it hurts, Vani. I know you don't mean to, but it still hurts."

"...I can't sleep anymore, and I can't kill myself. I've tried. It doesn't work."

"Did I ask you to kill yourself?" she said in exasperation. "Vani, I asked you be brave and tell Ven how much you love him, not keeping running away."
"I don't love him!" Vanitas squeaked in horror. "And I'm not running away!"

"Xi," Ven said dryly, "I think there's this magical nice Vanitas you've built up in your head who isn't the real Vanitas at all."

"How would you know?" she shot back. "Have you ever talked to him other than to tell him how much you hate him? Have you ever done anything nice for him?"

"Has he ever done anything nice for me?"

Xion wordlessly set a Wayfinder on the ledge by Ven's hand.

"Hey! That's yours!" Vanitas shouted.

"No," she said quietly. "It's always been for Ven. I was just taking care of it for both of you until you could stop being so stubborn long enough to be honest with each other."

Ven was glaring at the Wayfinder. "What is that?"

"Vani gave it to you," Xion said shortly. "At least, he tried to. Please at least pretend you remember."

"Wait...you mean...?"

"You think you're so much better than me," Vanitas snarled. "You think you're so perfect now that you don't have me anymore. But all you are on your own is an idiot and a failure, Ventus--"

"Vani--" Xion tried to say.

"I'm the better half, without me you'll always be a loser--"
"Vani, this is NOT HELPING," Xion said firmly. "Ven! *Take* the Wayfinder!"

Ven held it dangling from two fingers, nose wrinkled in disgust.

"Ugh! Stop acting like KIDS!"

"Who wants to be a grown-up?" Vanitas yelled.

"At least Axel and Saïx and the others can admit when they're *wrong!*"

"I'm not wrong!"

"I wasn't even talking to you, anyway! And stop changing the subject!"

"I'm not changing the subject!"

"You're chasing rabbit trails because you're too much of a coward to tell Ven what you CAME HERE TO TELL HIM!"

"DON'T CALL ME A COWARD!"

"THEN STOP *RUNNING AWAY*****!"

"I'M NOT RUNNING!" Vanitas whirled to the other boy and shouted, "VEN, JOIN WITH ME!"

There was a pause.

Ven stopped licking his ice cream and said, "Oh, are you talking to me again?"
"YES I'M TALKING TO YOU."

"Yes, he's talking to you," Xion said in exasperation. "We're not yelling at each other anymore, now he's yelling at you."

Vanitas took a deep breath. "Ventus," he said more calmly. "I want to join with you."

"I told you, I am NOT gonna make the $\chi$-blade, never ever ever."

"I'm not talking about the freaking $\chi$-blade, you idiot! Xion, forget it, he's just too stupid!"

"Vani, you have the patience of a mosquito," Xion groaned. "Come on. If you weren't talking about the $\chi$-blade, what were you talking about?"

There was another pause.

"I don't actually care, you know," Ven remarked.

"Ven, shut up. Vani, talk."

"...." Vanitas finally released a long sigh. "V...Ventus."

Ven eyed him warily, not expecting the uncharacteristically soft tone.

"I...came here to tell you something." He drew in another deep breath. "I wanted...I've been wanting...to tell you...that you-- that I--" He winced. "That I'm jealous of you."

Ven twirled the ice cream stick and didn't say anything.
"I want to join with you because...I want to be you again."

Ven opened his mouth, but Xion clapped a sharp warning hand on his shoulder before he could speak.

Vanitas grimaced, but managed to continue. "Not the way it was last time, because back then - it was wrong. It felt wrong. Even though I had you back, it was like you were still gone. The old man lied, the $\chi$-blade isn't the answer. We have to do it right this time. You're...everything I liked about myself, everything that made me worth anything. I'm...." The more Vanitas spoke, the more difficult it seemed to be for him to get the words out. "I'm worthless without you, Ventus."

"...."

"And...I...miss you. That's what Xion's been trying to make me tell you. That's what...I wanted to tell you." Now that it was finally out, it seemed to get easier to speak again. Vanitas laid a hand over his own heart, fingers curling angrily into the fabric of his shirt. "I feel empty inside, just like the old man said. I know it's because I lost you. This huge part of me is missing, and it's you. I...I need you back, Ventus."

"...."

"...That's what I wanted to say." Then he waited, his other fist clenched, waiting to summon Void Gear. If Ventus said something dumb like he thought he was gonna say, he was going to kill him.

"I'm proud of you, Vani," Xion said softly.

Ven finally hissed through his teeth in frustration. "Yeah, well, hate to tell you, Van, but I don't miss you at all."

Vanitas's jaw tightened.

"I mean, what happens if I just let you take me again? Back to being miserable, back to hating myself, back to wishing I could just kill something, so that something else could hurt more than I was hurting, for a change..."
"Ven," Xion said softly. "That's how Vani feels like all the time. The part of your heart that was in so much pain...it didn't go away. He's sitting right here next to you. You just can't feel it anymore - but he's still here."

They were silent for a while.

"You're not mine anymore," Ven finally said, sounding resentful. "I don't have to worry about you anymore."

"Who said I wanted you to worry about me?" Vanitas said hotly. "I just want to feel, Ventus! I want to feel something besides this. I want to feel what you feel, when you're so happy and just spilling light like it's barely worth anything, like you have so much you don't even notice it's missing. All those times when people loved you and were nice to you, when Aqua would hug you or Terra would say he's proud of you - I could feel it, but it was never mine, and I envied you so freaking much. Why can't I have it, Ventus?! If you're me and I'm you, why are you allowed to be happy and I never, ever can be!"

The pause was very long this time. Xion sat down and made herself comfortable; Vanitas slouched against the tower, gazing off into the distance in a hopeless sort of way.

"Why should you be happy," Ven finally said in a low voice, "when you've made so many other people so miserable?"

After a moment, Vanitas started to march off again. Xion got up to wearily drag him back. "It's a reasonable question, Vani," she said, softening her voice in hopes that he could tell she wasn't judging him.

"I don't," he growled as he struggled with her, "want to...." Then he noticed Ven finally, finally looking at him, the other boy's hurt, resentful glare, and he went still. "Fine, Ventus," he finally whispered. "You're right. You should hate me. And I, I hate you, and I'm going to spend every waking moment trying to erase your sorry existence...." He trailed off. Swallowed, then said, "I know you don't friggin' care. But...I'm...sorry. Ventus." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" Ven burst out, now with a note of helpless bewilderment tingeing his anger.

"Geez, for everything, okay?! I'm sorry for everything!"
"Yeah! Sure!"

"I MEAN IT! I'm sorry for trying to kill you and sorry for trying to kill your stupid friends and sorry for the χ-blade and sorry-- for-- gah, I don't know!" Vanitas paused. "All the people my Unversed hurt. I'm...I'm sorry for them, too."

Ven eyed him warily.

"Stop looking at me like that!"

"Stop acting so--!"

"So what, Ven?" Xion groaned. "What do you want from him? And don't say you want him to stop existing, because then I'll break a Keyblade over your head."

Ven glared sullenly back at the sunset. "You always have to make things so complicated," he finally grumbled.

"I'm sorry for existing," Vanitas sulked, but Ven eyed him again, as if finally able to hear the pain behind the words.

"...You really are sorry for all that? You're not just saying it to get me to do what you want?"

Vanitas blew out a frustrated breath. "I can kill you, but I can't make you believe me."

Ven snorted. "As if you could kill me...."

"I can!"

"Yeah, and you've done an awesome job so far proving it."
Vanitas glared. "I hate you both."

"It's okay to be weak sometimes," Xion assured him.

"Shut up!"

"Don't tell her to shut up!"

"Don't tell me what to do!"

"Oh, so YOU'RE the only one who can tell people what to do!"

"I can't stand you!"

"Then go away!"

"Fine! I'm going back to my pillar and I'm locking you out so you'll never wake up--"

"You can't lock me out of my own heart!"

"It's not as if you've even BEEN there the last freaking decade!"

"Why would I want to go back if it means hanging out with YOU!"

"I don't even want you there, anyway!"

"Fine!"

"Fine!"
"Fine!"

"FINE!"

"I give up," Xion said. She threw her hands in the air and walked away.

After a long silence, Ven went back to glaring at the sunset, and Vanitas started pacing. Back and forth and back and forth, until Ven was about to whirl around and scream at him to knock it off, but before he could, Vanitas suddenly paused and sobbed out, "I don't want her to leave."

"Why do you like her so much, anyway?" Ven said in exasperation.

"...She's...the only one who...."

"...."

"...."

Ven finally sighed. "Come here."

"Why?" Vanitas said suspiciously.

"Just come here, will you? Or do you not want me to keep putting up with you?"

"Don't say it like that," Vanitas hissed, but edged toward him anyway.

"I'm not gonna promise anything," Ven warned, putting out a hand as if to guard himself, "I just--"

Vanitas knelt on the ledge beside him and took his hand.
The protest died on Ven's lips, and they were still for a long time.

When Xion came back, curious and a little apprehensive, she was surprised to see the boys poised close together, hands clasped, eyes nearly closed, both crying silently. "What's wrong?" she exclaimed.

It took a long time. Finally they started to blink, and Vanitas sat back on his heels, wincing at the shift in posture; Ven wiped his eyes, looking awed. "I didn't know we could do that...."

"What was that?" Vanitas murmured.

They gazed at each other for a while.

"Hey, fill me in?" Xion ventured.

"It was like," Ven said slowly, "I could feel what we were-- what he was feeling. I even saw bits and pieces of his memories."

"Definitely did not need an extra dose of 'Ven Has An Awesome Life And Yours Sucks,'" Vanitas grumbled.

"Van," Ventus said. Xion's eyes widened at the expression on his face, a compassionate one she had never seen him use for his twin before. "I know what you mean now."

Vanitas glared.

"It...it didn't feel like seeing someone else's thoughts...it felt like my own...all that pain was back again, but...now I see...I'm free from it, but you've never been, have you...."

"Don't feel sorry for me!"
Ven smiled. "I do, a little."

That helpless glare again.

"Van?"

"What do you freaking want?"

"I thought of something, when we were...when we were us again. I wanted to tell you."

"I already know what you're gonna say and I don't want to hear it," Vanitas growled, turning away.

Ven shrugged, and Xion said quickly, "Well, I want to hear it."

Vanitas put his hands over his ears. Ven took hold of his wrist and pulled it back as he spoke; Vanitas didn't resist. "What I saw in you wasn't pure darkness, you know. It's supposed to be, but we all know how accurate those old guys are."

Xion smiled a little despite the painful memories, laying a hand over her own heart without realizing.

"That feeling in there," Ven continued, "wanting to be good...Xion's right, Van. You have a heart."

"I don't."

"Stop being a kid," Ven said calmly. "If you really were pure darkness, you couldn't love. You have to have a heart for that."

"And who says I--"

"Don't sit here and tell me you don't love Xion and that you don't love me, because we both know"
it isn't true."

"
...."

"And you know, Van - that's your own heart. One that belongs just to you, that you can fill with your own light."

"Stop sounding like Xion," Vanitas whispered.

"See," she said triumphantly, "I'm not the only one telling you now. It's true."

Ven smiled again. "You don't need me, Van. Not to be you anymore, anyway."

Vanitas closed his eyes tightly. Then snapped them open again in astonishment when Ven's arms came around him.

"We can stay brothers."

"Oooohhhhh, Ven," Xion cried in excitement, "finally! Finally finally finally!" Ven laughed as she flung her arms around both of them.

"Get off me!" Vanitas shouted, "Get off!" But he was crying, and they both noted that he didn't try to fight them off very much at all.

o.o.o

Author's Notes: Urgh, this is the kind of fic I don't mind writing but am embarrassed to read. *wince* Sorry it ended up too sappy and OOC...this is one of the few fics where I put theme over characterization. :/ I was trying to articulate, in fiction form, the bond I love so much between Ven & Vanitas, and it's frustrating to me that no one else seems to see it except some yaoi fans.
The Wayfinder thing will make more sense if you've read *A Gift For The Sleeper*.

Anyway, platonic VenVan is one of my favorite pairings, and I'm...actually kind of surprised at how much people in this fandom seem to be against it. *sweatdrop* The only people who like it seem to be yaoi fans. But I really love VenVan for the same reason I love Xion/Vanitas and am mildly interested in Aqua/Vanitas and Kairi/Vanitas. The dynamic's always similar, it's just that it catches my interest most with Xion and with Ven. Which I assume is why I like the XiVenVan now, since it combines both pairings. XD

Okay, see, here's the deal - I see Ventus & Vanitas as *two halves of the same person*. The original Ven was hurt, broken, damaged when the darkness was forced out of his heart, and I see a reunion with Vanitas (a willing reunion, not the forced thing it was in canon) as a way for him to heal and become whole again. I mean, the idea of darkness in his heart isn't good, but that's another issue I won't go into. As far as this goes, I do think that Vanitas *needs* Ven very badly and longs to be reunited with him for more positive reasons than he admits to in canon, I believe strongly in the idea of Ven & Vani being two halves of a whole. However, ever since KH3D, I *have* been getting used to the idea of Vanitas growing a heart and developing into an individual. As long as his & Ven's shared past isn't denied or abused, I'm okay with that, too. And on top of all that, I've got the whole twins/brothers thing in my head, too, like a subconscious overlayering. Basically, the way I ship VenVan is complicated, but I'm...basically, what I think I'm trying to say is that I ship VenVan differently than a lot of people I've seen; definitely different than the yaoi fans who love semeVan (which I hate), but also others who are against VenVan for reasons other than yaoi. :/ There's some other issues, too, where I'm trying to hold onto my own opinions and views and not let myself get influenced by the opinions of others. If I change my opinions, I want it to be because *I* reasoned it out, not because I'm going with the flow.

Anyway. I love platonic VenVan, but I think that I and maybe SorasPrincesss are the only ones who ship them with similar interpretations.
Dear twenty-four-year-old Isa,

Our teacher has given us an assignment in which we each write a letter to ourselves ten years in the future. Of course, you already knew that. I suppose the object is to get us thinking about college - they've spent the last few months getting us acquainted with application essays and job resumes and the like, despite the fact that we barely started high school. Father would approve, though Lea is predictably sitting in the desk next to me grumbling about how "dumb" this is, and I'm rather inclined to agree with him. I think it would be far more useful to be studying actual literature in a literature class.

I notice that I'm rambling, which probably means that I'm procrastinating, so I will get to business now. For the record, my name is Isa Sirius Tsukino (do people still annoy you about that?), I'm fourteen years old, and am a freshman at Radiant Garden High School. My best friend - well, my only friend - is Lea Deucalion Hayes, I hope you remember him. In fact, I hope you are still friends with him...the two of us do everything together, as I'm sure you recall; we've been friends since we were seven years old, and the thought that you might have fallen out of touch with him is...dismaying, to say the least. If this is the case, will you do me a favor and call him today? Frankly, I can't even imagine a future with no Lea barging through it alongside me, but who knows what will have happened in ten years. It seems likely you will have taken different educational routes after high school, one or both of you might have gotten married.

Speaking of which, do you have a girlfriend? I am very curious about this. You know why, but I don't want to write it because Lea keeps trying to read over my shoulder.
I have a lot of other questions for you, too.... Rather foolish of me, considering how I will discover the answers. Oh, why not; this is a rough draft, anyway. First question: Did you and Lea ever find out what those monsters were, or confirmed whether or not they really were coming from the castle? Did you ever manage to infiltrate the castle? What did you find there (if so)? Did you ever find Lea's brother and sister, or at least find out what happened to them? That last one is the one I want to know the most. Lea is pretty much back to his old self now, but sometimes when he's in quieter moods, I can tell he still misses them a lot. I can only imagine how it must hurt, losing loved ones like that, especially when they were so young. I wish I knew what to say to him whenever I can see that he's thinking about it.

I am also wondering about Luna. I'm pretty sure she must be dead by now (in your time, I mean), but

Well, she is dead, isn't she. She wasn't a kitten when I found her, and it has been ten years, after all. Did you get another cat? What does she (or he) look like, what is his/her name, etc., etc..... Oh, this is silly, I'm going to stop asking you questions now, since you obviously can't answer in a way that would be at all useful.

Lea has already finished his letter, so he's going to start bothering me even more now. Here, I'll let him write something to you:

YO FUTURE ISA! What's up homie it's Lea YOUR BEST BUD EVER, if you ditched me Imma time travel and smack you with these frisbees, so go eat ice cream with the most awesome guy in Radiant Garden (aka ME, DUH) ok thanks bye.

This is Isa again. If you still have to put up with this ten years in the future, you have my full sympathies.

Well, let's see. I think we're supposed to record all these things like what the cost of movie tickets are and which celebrities are famous right now and who the mayor is...you can research all that, though, so I find that pointless. I still wish I could somehow get the answers to my questions early...who that mysterious boy is who never speaks, why the king has been so absent from the public eye lately, what exactly is that newcomer, Xehanort, up to....

Lea is also pestering me to ask you if you have a girlfriend who's willing to "put up with my nerdyness," even though I've told him I already wrote something similar. He wants to know if you have grown a "fro," whatever that is, and if you've gotten more piercings or a tattoo. Sometimes, I am honestly bewildered at why I am friends with this person. He doesn't care at all about, for example, which university you graduated from, even though that is something of great importance to me at the moment. The teachers are not the only ones pressuring us about college. Father has made his personal preference for me very clear, and that school is much more difficult to get into
than the one where Lea is probably going. I'm capable of earning my way through, certainly; the problem is that my interests lie elsewhere.

This castle project of ours, for example. I'm hesitant to commit too much to paper, but let's just say that Lea and I have been busy this past year. It's left us with little time for extracurricular activities or socializing; as it is, I have a difficult time even completing my usual homework assignments. I would not relish an added workload, yet this is so important to Father.... I wish I could truly ask you. Do you regret whatever decision I made?

What are you doing now? Where do you live? Where do you work, who do you work for, and what do you do for employment? Who are the new people you've met since you were me? Are you friends with any of them even half as much as I am with Lea? ...Do you still have the phobia? (I am begging you, please say no. Please.)

This really is a pointless assignment, and I'm looking around and realizing that my letter is much longer than everyone else's, they're already done. Lea is throwing various small objects at the girls in the row on the other side of me, he's always been exasperating when he's bored.

Well, I hope this was an interesting glimpse of your past life. I hope, with all my heart, that you are doing well and are happy. Tell your loved ones hello from me.

Best regards,

Isa S. Tsukino, age fourteen

Author's Notes: I actually got three plot bunnies for Saïx/Isa Day, but I completely and totally slacked off on devART instead of working on them. So I was typing up one of the partial drafts at three o'clock in the afternoon, thinking in a depressed way about how much of it there still was to write and that I'm not gonna make it, and it was stressing me out, so I quit and worked on Bon-Bon's screenshot meme instead. (XD Will post later tonight, sweetie. ^^)

Then I was taking a break from that - and Plunny #4 occurred to me. Much, MUCH shorter, yaaaayyyy! :D So Isa's letter to Saïx is going to serve as a series placeholder until I can get the other installments uploaded. (Oh, and for the record, they ALL ended up as really AkuSaï instead of Saïx/Isa, argh. Why am I surprised at this. *eyeroll*)
I am hesitant to call this fic a final draft, because it's really not, but I can pretend it is because it's supposed to be a rough draft for Isa, too. *smile/sweatdrop* There's no punctuation after "married" because he got distracted and forgot to finish his sentence. ^^; Let me know if it comes across that way or if it just looks dumb.... You people who know me well might be able to guess what he's curious/worried about. (And for you people who don't know me well, no, he is not gay.)

About the ages, those are just my guesstimations. Canon could eventually prove me wrong, but at the moment, I work off the assumption that Ven, Lea, & Isa are all fourteen in BBS.

"Fro" is short for "afro." XD (As in, the hairstyle.)

Hee, I wrote this with the CatC universe in mind. (Yay, I got to mention Isa's cat early! This, btw, is what he meant in the epilogue of Christmas at the Castle - his Somebody had a pet cat, and his Nobody has a pet dog. And Lea had a pet dog to contrast with Axel's kitty.) I totally have to write a scene where Saïx and/or Axel find this letter, and Lea's letter too. X3 Which, come to think of it, I should try write for Axel/Lea day on August 8th.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Lea's Letter
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

For Axel/Lea Day, 8 August 2012

Summary: Lea had the same school assignment his best friend did.

A/N: Companion fic to Isa's letter in Luna Diviner.

Ughhhh, I think this fic sucks (I had to add it onto Saïx/Isa's series because I couldn't bear to post it all by its horrible self), but then I think most of my writing sucks, so whatever. -.-

0.0.0
So hi future Lea! We're supposed to write these boring letters to our future selves for school

Holy friggin HEY YOU'RE OUT OF SCHOOL, AREN'T YOU! Luckyyyy, it's not fair! What'd you graduate in? Pyrotechnology LOL ok lame joke but DUDE that would be awesome if they gave out degrees for making stuff explode. Whatever.

This is so duuumb.... Isa's over there writing all studious like the goody two shoes he is, I wanna bug him. Hold on a sec.

LAME he's writing about college and applications, STOP BEING SO BORING DUDE. Now he's writing about me XD XD XD Awesome.

What are you guys up to in the future? You broke into the castle finally, right? Sometimes I feel like I'm gonna explode if we don't get in there soon. I keep telling myself over and over and over again they're not gonna be there they're not gonna be there they're friggin not gonna be there, but I have to see, you know? If there's bodies to find I have to find them. If there's clues, if there's anything, I HAVE TO FIND THEM.

This is friggin depressing, shut up Lea. (Me Lea, not you Lea duh nevermind.)

~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~

BORED What's Isa writing????

\\\\\\\\\\ ARGH same thing as me SHUT UP DUDE.

Ok I'm ignoring him now so he can write his stupid letter and maybe you guys have figured out how to time travel with super duper future technology and can tell us what happened to my brother and sister. Ha ha and I bet you married some rich hot chick and Isa's a rock star and it rains candy from the sky every weekend and those two kids aren't dead and we all live happily ever after.

ANYWAY. How much do movie tickets cost? That's one of the questions we're supposed to ask you. No, wait, that's one of the things we're supposed to tell you. So bored, whatever. It's 5 munny. Me and Isa don't go to the movies much cuz we're too busy working on Operation: Secret. We're so busy that my love life is non existent, so I'm never gonna find my hot rich wife and I'm never gonna see those two again, am I.
SHUT UP LEA ok you know what forget this crap hope you have a happy life bye.

Lea

P.S. I was gonna turn my letter in but I reread it and it's depressing and I wasn't being sarcastic. You have an awesome life, right?

Hey here's Isa, I want him to tell you something. Because he's too nerdy to be depressing.

Hello, future-Lea, this is Isa (teenage Isa, obviously). I have honorably refrained reading the previous contents of this letter, despite catching a glimpse of the term "nerdy" before Lea (teenage Lea) folded the page over.

He's looking at me expectantly like he thinks I'm going to write something that will set worlds alight, but all I feel like saying right now is the same thing I told my own future self: I hope you two are still friends. If you're not, please call him today. And if you still are, I am relieved, and call him anyway. You worry me, getting into so much trouble, so please listen to Isa, all right? If anything bad happens to you, I'd rather it be Isa's fault than because you were being your usual idiot self.

Hey it's Lea again DON'T LISTEN TO HIM you know it's your job to get the two of you in trouble nyah. Give future Isa a noogie from me, k?

Lea

Isa

LOL look at his girly cursive

If you haven't learned cursive by now, you're a lost cause.

Cursive sucks
You only say so because you're an uncultured ignoramus.

Oooooh Mr. Smarty Pants Tough Guy, shut up I can still beat you at video games

Yes, and this gaming talent of yours is *such* a fine contribution to society.

Buying lots of video games is good for the economy

You don't know the first thing about the economy.

Economy sucks too OH LOOK NO MORE ROOM ON THE PAGE HA HA HA I win loser!
[Let's Take the Road Before Us] (CatC): The Thirteenth Member {Saix, Axel, & Roxas}

[Let's Take the Road Before Us]

(Companion to Christmas at the Castle)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Summary: It's amazing how much can change when you give the Castle Oblivion team a Christmas party and a few extra months to live. Series of stories that take place in the CatC universe; no slash.

Introduction: Basically, this is the CatC sequel/prequel. It was acting like Stepsiblings, so I finally decided to just give up and treat it like Stepsiblings. *sweatdrop*

What happened with Stepsibs is that I wrote a collection of six drabbles and posted them as a one-shot, intending that to be the end of it. Well, thanks to Taliax, I started getting inspiration for more stories in that universe, then it kind of exploded and now Stepsibs is this huge sprawling universe that I will never finish because I keep getting inspiration for it - there will be new Stepsibs stories for as long as I write Kingdom Hearts fanfiction. XD

Well, see, CatC pretty much did the same thing. I wrote a multi-chapter fic, posted it, and that was supposed to be the end. But I kept getting ideas for sequels (and a prequel), and other random ideas that took place in the same universe, and I tried to combine them into one huge fic, but I've gotten too used to drabbles/one-shots and it's difficult for me to write multi-chapters for the time being. If I wait until I can sit down and write out the CatC sequel and prequel as two long chaptered stories...well, I'm very, very afraid that it is literally never going to get done. And in the meantime, there are these old unposted fragments that I keep referring to in posted stories, and I keep getting ideas for the universe and/or people want me to write more stuff in the universe. It was The Other Half Of My Heart that finally decided me: no CatC sequel, no CatC prequel.

Instead, I'mma write a series of one-shots! XD Anything taking place directly in the CatC universe or close enough to where it's only a minor AU will go here. It's all going to be out of order, I'm just going to update in the order I happen to finish them. The timeline starts when Lea & Isa are seven years old (though now that I'm doing this, I won't be surprised if I come up with some stuff from even earlier in their childhoods, too) and ends after KH2 (though, again, I might come up with some stuff even later, too. Vacation Notice in "AkuSaiRokuShi stories," for example, which was written with the CatC universe in mind. XD)

ANYWAY. So yeah. I can't write the CatC sequel/prequel as a long continuous story, it's got to be
in bits and pieces like this or else there is a great danger that you will never get to read it. So reading it like this is better than nothing, right...?

The tone is probably going to be different than CatC’s - there will often still be cute fluffy humor, but some parts are a lot more angsty.

There’s also most likely going to be some actual pairings involved, though I hesitate to specify what they are...incidents in the RuroKen fandom have biased me against specific pairing labels unless the fic was written for a particular pairing. (And I would still warn for pairings that some might find squicky.) Since this fic was NOT written with pairings in mind and romance is only vaguely on the side, I’m going to leave off the labels. (Anyone who knows me knows that I’m never going to write slash pairings as romance.)

Also, I’m kind of afraid that Vanitas will hog the spotlight and become the main character. XD He seems to be important in a lot of the subplots.

Since the CatC universe has gotten frustratingly sprawling, I’ve made a list on my LiveJournal of all the stories that take place in it, or even AUs that reference it, regardless of where they were published.

The Thirteenth Member (rough draft)

Summary: Roxas actually doesn’t remember his FIRST visit to Christmas Town.

"Saïx, just so you know, you are the most boring best friend ever."

"I told you to be quiet."

"Kick me out, then."
Saïx, doing paperwork at his desk, didn't answer or even bother to turn around. Therefore he could not see Axel stick his tongue out at him.

'Soooo bored.' Lounging on Saïx's bed with a PSP, Axel sighed and returned his attention to the game. 'Gotta stop by Twilight Town for something new, I've beat this one a million times already.'

The seventh portal shimmered, and upon seeing that it was Lord Xemnas, Saïx immediately stood at attention and Axel nearly dropped the video game.

"Number VII," Xemnas said, "Number VIII, there have been some new develop blah blah blah blah.

Axel's focus was totally shot as he noticed the kid standing next to Number I. 'Oh my gosh he's so tiny and cute.' And was standing there with his head hanging in this chastised puppy way that made Axel want to hug him and coo at him and feed him treats.

"Axel," Saïx said sharply.

"Huh?"

"You have been ordered to take charge of our newest member and look after him until he's more...functional," Saïx said, giving the blank-faced, silent kid a dubious look.

"I get to keep hi--!?" Axel cut himself off with a cough. "I mean, sigh, fine, if I have to." Then he frowned. "Wait, 'our newest member'? Don't tell me this kid's a Nobody!"

"He is, indeed," Xemnas said. "The Nobody of the Keybearer, in fact."

"Sora?" Saïx said sharply. "He's Sora's Nobody?"

"Oooohhh...." Axel bent to peer into the kid's face, wishing Xemnas would just get lost so the cuddling could commence. "Sora? Soooora?" He waved his hand in front of that blank
expression, but the kid didn't even blink. Axel shivered. This was getting a little creepy.

"He has cast off that name along with his old identity," Xemnas said. "You will never speak it in his presence again. Number XIII, tell us what your new name is."

At last, a reaction. Barely. The kid blinked, raised his head a little, and whispered, "Roxas."

"It spoke!" Axel cried. "Oooh, good boy! Hang on just a sec, I think I've got some candy you can have."

"Axel, shut up," Saïx growled.

Xemnas was now the one giving them both a dubious look. "...I trust I leave Roxas in good hands?"

"Only the best," Axel said confidently, slinging his arm across the kid's shoulders. He wasn't sure, but he thought Roxas might have tried to pull away a little.

"Very well. You will report to me regularly on his progress. If all goes well, he will be able to assume his duties soon and be of great use to us."

"Man, who cares how useful he is? He could be worse than Demyx and I swear those big blue eyes would totally make up for it."

"What?"

"Nothing," Saïx said quickly, trying to glare a hole through his old friend. Axel was completely preoccupied by the little Nobody and didn't even notice. "We will not fail you, Lord Xemnas."

As soon as Number I was gone, Axel twirled in a little dance of squee. "Yes! Just look at him, Saïx! And he's all ours!"

"Axel, I hope you realize that you sound entirely different when you act like this over a young boy
"But he's so cute! Look!" Axel swept behind Roxas, picked up the boy's hands, and curled them under Roxas's chin in a simpering pose, forcing the hanging head to be lifted at an endearing angle. "My name ish Woksas," Axel baby-talked. "Pwease be nice to me and take me home."

Saïx watched the boy's brow furrow a little in discontent, rendering the rest of the cutesy pose completely ridiculous. Not that it wasn't already. "Axel, stop that. He seems to have lost most of his brain as well as his heart, which means he can't defend himself from your antics." Saïx was well enough acquainted with the feeling, even with full mental capacities. "If you're going to treat him like a doll, at least do something with him that's of service to the Organization, don't just waste time."

"How can you call this a waste of time?!" Axel exclaimed, waving Roxas's hands in the air.

The boy's expression could now be described as an unfocused but definite frown. "...Stop."

They both stared at him. Then Axel wrapped both sets of arms around Roxas, shrieking, "He's so cute!"

"Axel," Saïx sighed, "stop playing with him and get serious. Lord Xemnas gave us orders - gave you orders. This is a golden opportunity, having such control over the Nobody of the Keybearer himself. If we play our cards right-- Are you listening to me?"

Of course he wasn't. "Aaaaxeeel," Axel was saying, staring intently into the boy's face. "C'mon, Roxas, you can say it! A-ku-se-ru! C'mon, boy!"

Roxas's fingers twitched. Then he slowly reached up and pressed both hands over Axel's mouth, pushing him away.

A few years ago, Saïx would have stifled a snort of laughter, but he had given up bothering to feign such useless emotions by now. "Sora must have been a lot more intelligent than we gave him credit for. He only has a few brain cells left, and he still can't stand you."

"Isa! You've come back to me!"
Saïx blinked. Come to think of it, it had been a while since he'd come out with one of those bantering insults.... Absently laying a hand over his chest, he said, "Stop getting so distracted, it's not like you." Not like Axel, he meant. Lea had often been a hyperactive mess. What was it about this blank young Nobody that suddenly got them acting like...? "We need to make some plans."

"No, we need to figure out what's wrong with Zombie Boy here." Axel pushed Roxas until he was sitting on the bed and then waved a hand in front of his face. "Yoo hoo, Roxas! Roxas!"

"Roxas," the boy repeated dully.


Roxas shut his eyes, as if it was the only way he could think of to escape.

"Saiiiiiiiix, what's wrong with him?" Axel whined.

Saïx came over and leaned to peer into the boy's face as well. "Keep in mind that he is a newborn Nobody. Though I don't recall ever being this...dysfunctional. Still, the process would have been traumatic enough, it's not surprising that he seems to have gone into shock."

Axel's expression changed, and he reached out to cup Roxas's face in one hand. "Poor kid," he said softly. "Doesn't look any older than we were back when we were changed. Wonder what could've happened for him to get consumed by darkness like this...."

"You would think the Hero of Light would naturally be able to avoid such a fate," Saïx mused. Then he frowned. "Why bring him here, though? And as a member, no less, rather than a captive?"

Axel laughed. "You think when he starts remembering stuff, he'll go all Keyblade Hero on our butts?"

"He'd never win," Saïx said flatly, "not against all twelve of us."
"I dunno, Sai, I've never seen a single story where the bad guys win...."

"Who says we're villains?" Saïx said sharply. "Just because this boy is a 'hero' doesn't mean that all who oppose him are automatically in the wrong. And anyway, we're beings of nothing, not darkness." Axel looked away, not answering. "In any case, Lord Xemnas must know what he's doing. It's fortunate that you've, he gave his friend a pointed look, "somehow managed to convince him that you're trustworthy enough for an assignment like this."

"Man, this isn't an assignment, this is fun. Come help me play dress-up."

"That's your job. I'm going to see if I can find out more about how the Keybearer ended up like this."

"It's your own fault you're missing out!" Axel called as Saïx disappeared into a dark corridor. Then he looked back at Roxas, who was still looking at nothing.

"So, buddy, I guess the first thing you need is a uniform, huh?"

In the kitchen, the Moogle was making a sandwich, pom-pom bobbing as it floated around fetching ingredients.

"Oi, Gloomex," Axel said. The creature had never told anyone its name, but they had to call it something, right? In any case, it had never objected. "Any chance you got a coat I can buy for my new buddy here?"

Gloomex surveyed the blank-faced boy with an inscrutable expression. "This child is a Nobody, kupo?"

"The Organization's newest," Axel confirmed. "Number XIII. Tell him your name, kid."

"...."
"Say 'Roxas,'" Axel prompted.

"...Roxas."

"Good boy!"

"Good." Roxas swayed uncertainly.

"Good. Yeah." Axel set a hand on Roxas's head to steady him, half-afraid he'd topple over otherwise. "Yeah, his name's Roxas. And he needs a coat, it looks like Xemnas might've dragged him through a corridor without one." First to have your heart ripped out of you and then have to endure the gnawing darkness with no protection...no wonder the kid was a zombie.

"I'm afraid I don't keep that sort of item in stock, kupo."

"Then where'd Larxene and Marluxia and everyone get their coats?" He and Saïx and the former apprentices had had theirs ready-made in the Garden's castle, with Vexen and Zexion doing alterations throughout the years.

"I'm afraid I don't know, kupo. I'm merely a synthesizer."

"Okay. Well, thanks." You useless Moogle. "Come on, Roxas."

They went back up to the Proof of Existence - on foot, since he couldn't take poor Roxas through a corridor yet - and into the twelfth portal. "Hey, Larxene, I was wondering--"

"GET OUT OF MY ROOM!"

Axel seized Roxas in his arms and dove to the floor as a handful of knives were unleashed at their faces. "Okay okay okay okay I'm going I'm going I'm going I'm going!" Axel climbed to his feet in the Proof of Existence, dragging up Roxas by one arm. "Sheesh."

He knocked politely at the eleventh portal this time. A couple of Marluxia's Nobody servants
showed up. "Hi! Don't kill us. We have a question for Mr. Graceful Assassin."

Marluxia's room was hot, humid, and verdant. "It looks like a greenhouse in here," Axel remarked, pulling his zipper down a bit and yanking the leather away from his neck.

"Only because our brilliant leader refused to let me grow living things in the Chamber Where Nothing Dwells," Marluxia grumbled from where he was feeding bits of bacon to a plant with spines like teeth. "What do you want?"

Axel gestured in an introductory sort of way. "Marluxia, this is Number XIII. Number XIII, this is Number XI, Marluxia. Number XIII, say your name, because you said it for Xemnas so I know you can say it for me."

The kid blinked uncertainly.

"His name is Roxas, but we like to call him Zombie," Axel told Marluxia. "Anyway, he needs a coat, and I've been instructed to give him one without being told where to find one. Where'd you and Larxene get your coats from when you joined? Is there a Wardrobe of Lightless Garments or something I never knew about?"

"How should I know? Zexion just handed me a stack of them when I was initiated."

"I'm sensing a theme here," Axel grumbled. "All right, fine, thanks. I'll go see who Zexion wants to pass us on to. C'mon, Zombie."

Zexion was in the library, curled up in a corner of one couch with whole stacks of books at his feet, on the floor, and on the coffee table nearby. Although there wasn't a trace of a smile in the Cloaked Schemer's expression, in fact he was frowning slightly, Axel still got the distinct impression of a small child wallowing in a toy store.

"Oi, Zexion."

The younger man glanced up wordlessly.
"Either tell me how to get an XXXS coat, or point me to the next clue in our treasure hunt."

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're babbling about."

"A coat, Zexion," Axel said in exasperation. "A small one, for my new friend here. He's Number XIII."

"Thirteen," Roxas burst out suddenly. Axel looked at him, but then the boy dropped his head and went undead again.

"...I see," Zexion murmured as he surveyed the boy. He closed his book and stood up. "The old coats I used when we first formed the Organization should still be around somewhere, let me see if I can find them."

"Oh yeah," Axel laughed, "I forgot that you used to be itty bitty, too." He paused. "Actually, you still are."

Zexion glared. "Do you want my help, or not?"

"Sorry! Lead on."

The old Ienzo-sized coats were roughly the right fit, but would definitely need altering before Roxas could wear them properly. With Zexion's help, Axel got Roxas's jacket off and his arms stuffed into the coat sleeves, pinning the front closed as best they could as Roxas shoved at them with more strength than would be expected from a zombie.

"Think he can make it to Halloween Town like that?" Axel asked.

"Why Halloween Town?"

"Christmas Town, actually. There's a shop there that does alterations - no offense, if you could even take offense, but I trust them for the job more than you and Dr. Cryptkeeper."
"Hmph. We did a good enough job with your uniforms when you started losing weight, didn't we?"

"As if I asked you to! Sai noticed, and it's been years now and he still won't leave me alone about the food thing, it's annoying."

"If you can even be annoyed," Zexion quipped dryly. "In any case, we would be interested to know how much damage a Nobody would sustain when passing through dark corridors with only partial protection." He dug up some sort of small device and pinned it to the front of Roxas's coat. "Don't remove that while in transition, it will be collecting data."

"Aye aye, captain."

Roxas didn't like the dark corridor. He wouldn't approach the portal and Axel had to literally drag him into it; then he clung to Axel and made distressed sounds once they were inside.

"Rox, come on. The sooner we get moving, the sooner we'll get to Christmas Town and you'll--"

Roxas, now silent, had fallen to his knees.

"Roxas!" Axel ended up having to carry him. "Yeah, I can tell you're gonna be a really productive addition to our ranks...."


Axel walked faster.

Well, Christmas Town was not the best place to take someone who was cold - Axel shivered in the frosty air and tried to call on some extra warmth from his powers. Still slumped on his back, Roxas made a faint "Mm" sound.

"Just hold on, buddy, let me find somewhere to take you where we can rest and warm up a bit...."
There was a restaurant near the town square which had a little lounge in addition to the regular seating for diners. It was a cozy area by a fireplace, lined with comfortable-looking easy chairs and sofas. "Perfect." Axel walked in, straight past the elf who greeted him at the front, and carefully laid Roxas down.

"What happened to him?" the elf exclaimed as she came hurrying up.

"He's...travelsick. He'll be all right in a minute."

"Oh, the poor thing! Here, let me bring him a peppermint drink, that should put some color back in his cheeks."

"Thanks. Hey, is that hat of yours for sale?" Axel knew from experience that Christmasers did not get along well with their Halloween neighbors. Shrouded neck to toe in black, and with his facial markings, he'd need at least a token of festive spirit in order to avoid being looked on with suspicion and hostility.

The elf surveyed him and his attire. "For you, yes."

After a few minutes of basking by the fire and idly coaxing peppermint down the kid's throat, Axel glanced back over and found Roxas's eyes open, gazing blankly at the ceiling. "Hey, Rox. You feeling better?"

"Thirteen," Roxas declared to the ceiling.

"Back to zombieing, I see. Good." He chuckled. "I guess."

There was only one bored-looking young elf on duty at Boughs of Holly. She immediately perked up when she saw two attractive males walking into the shop. "Whoo! Customers!"

"Customer," Axel corrected. "My Little Zombie here's the one you--"

"He's a zombie?!"
"Zombie thirteen," Roxas remarked.

"Not literally," Axel said hastily. "See, look, his ears don't fall off when you pull on them."

After the practical demonstration, Roxas frowned, covered his ears protectively, and kicked Axel's leg.

"Ow!"

The elf girl giggled. "Are you two brothers?"

"Uh...sure."

"Brothers," Roxas echoed.

"That's right. My brother here needs some alterations done."

"Alterations, I can do alterations," she said eagerly, coming over with a tape measure and her toolkit. "Heh, Mom would kill me for saying it, but your brother actually looks really good in black."

"He'd look better without the sleeves sagging and his zipper actually being able to zip and stuff...."

"Yup."

Roxas didn't like being undressed in Christmas Town any more than he'd liked it at the castle. It was a struggle to unpin the coat and get it off; Axel had to hold him down long enough for Berry (the elf) to take Roxas's measurements, and then the boy went off to sulk in a corner as soon as he was released.

"Isn't he cold in just his underthings?" she asked worriedly.
"He'll probably try to eat my brains if I go over there. Just leave him."

Roxas, seeming to be gazing outside, lifted his hand and touched a fingertip to the cold glass. It left a round imprint. He tried to touch it again, but was a little off. The combined marks now resembled a heart. He stared at them for a long time.

"How long is this gonna take?" Axel asked.

When the alterations on the first coat were done, getting Roxas to try it on was like trying to capture a suspicious cat. Axel and Berry chased him all around the shop, and finally caught him by coming at him from opposite sides and trapping him in a corner. "Quick! I'll hold him, you get the coat!"

Berry giggled as they threaded the protesting Roxas's arms through the long black sleeves. "He's so cute!"

"I know, right?" Axel laughed, his exasperated expression dissolving. "How come you're the only person who agrees with me?!"

"Don't like you," Roxas declared, struggling.

"Dislike all you want," Berry said, kissing his nose as she got the front zipped up. "You're still adorable."

"Much better," Axel said, surveying the coat in satisfaction. "He looks like a proper Nobody now instead of a bad cosplayer."

"I can't tell if you just insulted him, complimented me, did both at the same time, or vice versa," Berry said in confusion.

Axel laughed. "You did a great job, Miss Holly," he assured her.
After leaving the rest of the coats to be altered and picked up later, Axel fed Roxas hot chocolate until the kid forgot to keep sulking, then they headed back out to RTC. "Hood up, little buddy," Axel said as he covered Roxas's head and opened a dark portal. Roxas refused to get near it again and threw snow at him when Axel dragged him toward it, but once they were inside the corridor, Roxas, though shivering a little, displayed none of his previous theatrics.

"See? Not so bad when you've got a coat that fits."

Roxas grasped Axel's sleeve, rested his hooded forehead against Axel's arm, and mumbled, "Don't like it here."

"Well...me, neither, actually. But we gotta get back to the castle, you know? Can't exactly take up permanent residence in Christmas Town...." Though that would be a cool idea, now that he thought of it. "C'mon, kid. Let's go home."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I found out from TVtropes that "Gloomex" is apparently a fan name for the Days Moogle. I think it's hilarious, so I added it to my headcanon.

My Axel squee's over Roxas too much...channeling me, I think. *sweatdrop*

This story was originally meant to be chapter 1 of the CatC sequel. XD This whole thing was very easy to write (I actually drafted it a LONG time ago, like back at the beginning of 2012), but then as soon as I got to the penultimate line of this, the story flow stopped. It was kind of a relief when I was able to add on a conclusion line and post the thing as a one-shot. ^^;

So yeah, I'll be occasionally updating this series with various one-shots in the same universe, and it'll probably never be "completed" until I stop writing KH fanfiction altogether - there's storylines with the Days trio, with Sora, Donald, & Goofy, with Vanitas and Naminé, with the heroes post-KH2, etc.; there's a lot. I just didn't think I'd be able to write it all as a single continuous story without pretty much dedicating my entire life to it. *sweatdrop*
Summary: The mother of all thunderstorms descends upon the castle. Xion's scared to death. Platonic AkuRokuShi (mostly AkuShi) fluff.

0.0.0

He woke up because he sensed someone killing his Assassins. Axel shot upright, flaming chakram half-summoned in his hand before he realized that it was Xion, frantically trying to fend off his agitated servants in the doorway. "Oi, back off," he snapped. The lesser Nobodies hesitated, then sank into the floor and vanished.

Xion stared at him with the most humongous liquid puppy eyes he had ever seen, and that was saying something.

"What--?"

There was an incredible crash from outside, prompting a panicked scream from the girl. Axel finally registered the sound of pouring rain, and the fact that his room was flooded with light from the little Keybearer's powers. "Ugh," he finally realized. "Again?"

There was a shimmer, and Roxas appeared in the portal, that hair of his looking like a wreck in its sleep-tousled state. The boy blinked muzzily and shielded his eyes from the brightness.

Axel sighed and scooted over to make room. Needing no further encouragement, Xion dashed forward and did not so much climb onto the bed as hurl herself straight into Axel, nearly knocking him off on the other side. "Ow! Watch it, Xi."

Roxas shuffled over and crawled up to join them, pressing close until they were basically making a Xion sandwich. Even with the two of them on either side of her, she was still shaking like a leaf. It was not seeming to help the way it had last time, though granted, last time had only been an average storm. The thunder on this one was making the roof quake, and the rain was so fierce it
was practically roaring.

"Xion," Roxas realized groggily, "are you crying?"

The only answer was a series of repressed sniffling sounds.

"Favorite things, Xion," Axel reminded her.

Her voice was so wobbly that he could barely understand her. "I-Ice cream on the clock t-tower with you two, going to Ch-Christmas Town, playing with the p-puppies in Trav--"

CRASH!

Xion shrieked and dove for the sheet that had gotten kicked into a heap at the foot of the bed, yanking it up over her head. This meant that half of Axel's face was getting suffocated with fabric, while in her heedless scramble, she was now rather painfully squashing his arm.

"Xi, calm down--"

"SING THE SONG!" she screamed at him.

"Absolutely not," he shot back, yanking the sheet off his face with his unsquashed arm. "I told you that would be the only, only time."

She buried her face in his chest and burst into full-fledged tears.

"Xion, stop," he said in exasperation. "It's just a little rain, it's not hurting you."

CRASH!

She cried out again, flinching. When the cracking echoes had died away, she wriggled around to
face Roxas. Axel wondered, in all seriousness, if she had broken his poor arm in the process. "Roxas, why aren't you scared?" she demanded.

"I dunno," he mumbled. "It's not a Heartless. Can't get at us."

"I can't get at it, either," she sobbed. "I can't hit it with my Keyblade and make it STOP, it just keeps going!"

CRASH!

She let out a wail.

"Xion, get off my arm please," Axel sighed. Then, when there was no response, "Xi. Seriously. I can't move, you are crushing my arm."

Eventually, he managed to tug free. He got up and rummaged around until he found the CD he had made Zexion burn for him after the previous incident. On his way past, Axel glanced out the window and frowned, surveying the forecourt of Memory's Skyscraper. "What the-- I think Demyx has half the Dancers in existence out there. Non-existence, whatever. And please don't tell me that's Chester...."

Well, there was not exactly an abundance of friendly Shadows hanging around. "Demyx is performing a musical number in the rain with a million Dancers and Chester," Axel confirmed in disbelief. He also thought he could hear Larxene yelling happily from somewhere in the castle nearby. "Is anyone sleeping through this?"

At least one person was, apparently. Roxas had fallen asleep again by the time Axel put the CD in the music player and turned back. As soon as Axel's eyes met hers, Xion immediately reached out, a horrible desperate expression on her face. "It's okay, Xi." She did not answer.

The most soothing classical music in Zexion's collection filled the room as Axel climbed back into bed, trying not to mind when Xion latched onto him and started crying into his solar plexus. He also tried to ignore the somewhat disheartening sound of the music getting drowned out every few seconds by the ridiculously obnoxious thunder.

"Xi...."
"It's just the sound of an atmospheric electrostatic discharge," she sobbed. "Vexen explained everything to me. And maybe you were right, too, about the thunder saying hello back to the lightning. Why is it still so scary?! Why is it scary, Axel?"

'How should I know!' "Look, Xi...." CRASH! Her grip tightened convulsively. He was definitely going to have bruises later. "Everyone's scared of something or other. Zexion's scared of that Riku doll, Demyx is scared of Larxene, Roxas is...understandably...scared of Infernal Engines, and you're scared of thunder. It's normal."

"What are you scared of, Axel?" she whispered.

'Being forgotten. Seeing you two get hurt. Losing your trust.' "Spiders," he said.

She blinked those huge wet eyes at him. "Really?"

"Yeah," he lied easily. "Big eight-legged disgusting...insect-things...totally creep me out."

More thunder. She hid her face again. She was still trembling. This was not helping.

Axel took a deep breath. The other thing that was not helping was the music, throwing him off so that he sounded even more out-of-tune than usual. "Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens...bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens...."

Eventually, the thunder began to fade into the distance, and the rain softened. The light inside had gradually dimmed along with Number XIV's consciousness. Even though it was now completely dark, there was no lightning to jolt the shadows. It had danced away along with its noisy partner.

The music was still playing, now easily audible. Axel was just going to have to get up again in a couple of hours to prepare for work, but the music was peaceful, and he was tired. Xion's warm, limp body was pinning him down, and the kids' deep breathing was more persuasive than the music. He felt his eyes dragging closed.

By the time the CD whirred quietly to a stop, no one in the room was awake.
Author's Notes: Inspired when I woke up at 3:00 a.m. last night to a CRAZY rain/thunder/lightning storm. (It's now 6:00, and it's still raining.) I actually wrote half the fic in my head while I was still asleep, but forgot it all by the time I turned my computer on, so I had to start again from scratch. My dreamfics are terrible anyway, so this is surely a good thing. ^^;

Lol, Demyx's pet Shadow, Chester, is from JenxtheJinx's YouTube videos.

Oh, and please, please tell me you've seen *The Sound of Music!* Otherwise, some things about this fic probably make no sense.
Roses & Kittens {Axel, Saix, & Xion}

Roses & Kittens

(sequel to Raindrops & Whiskers)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Xion's scared of thunder. Neither Axel nor Roxas are around to comfort her. Looks like it's time to break out that blackmail. Attempted SaiShi, though it ended up really being AkuSai (both platonic). Spoilers for 358/2 Days.

A/N: And now, not only am I disregarding the canon timeline, but I'm mixing universes, too! Whee! This fic is apparently PARTIALLY in the Christmas at the Castle universe, but not entirely. *sweatdrop*

0.0.0

Most of the Organization members did not own personal computers, and Saïx was no exception. He had to use one of the public terminals in the castle library to communicate with Castle Oblivion, which he did at 6:00 in the evening when the other members were relaxing with a movie in the Grey Area and more likely to leave him alone.

Axel's face came onscreen, one cheek bulging with something. Probably the macaroni and cheese he was now dipping his spork into. "Yo."


Axel swallowed so that he could say indignantly, "What the heck, you're not even bothering with decent 'hello's now?"

"Tell me how the mission is progressing."

"Love you, too," Axel said sourly. "Anyway, yeah. Apparently, the Keybearer's wandering around in a field somewhere, so Marly went to go lure him here. Larxene's been...'brainstorming' with Naminé, who doesn't look too happy about our Brilliant Evil Plan, to tell the truth."
"You can skip the unnecessary details."

"Of course you wouldn't care that I can't walk into Namin's room anymore without her slaying me with miserable Puppy Eyes, why would you care? You don't, so I'm just not gonna bother saying anymore that I seem to have this Curse of the Puppy Eyes thing following me EVERYWHERE I GO-- Was that thunder? Like, on your end?"

Saïx blinked. Now that Axel mentioned it, there did indeed seem to be rain pouring down outside the library windows. The dark skies looked blacker and cloudier and angrier than usual, and even as Saïx watched, a jet of lightning came crashing down, seeming to stab the night with its spastic brilliance. "Yes. It is of no consequence. Carry on."

Axel put down his macaroni and cheese. Honestly, no wonder he looked so malnourished, if he was subsisting on that sort of processed junk. "Where are Xion and Roxas?" he demanded.

"That is not your concern. Continue with the report."

"I'm not giving you a thing 'til you tell me where the kids are!"

Saïx briefly closed his eyes. Axel's stubbornness could be so tiresome to have to deal with. "Roxas and Xaldin had shopping duty today, and have not yet returned. I neither know nor care where Number XIV is, except that RTC check-in was at--" He glanced at his clipboard. "--5:13 p.m."

"Find her," Axel growled. Then he sighed and shook his head. "Sorry, Sai. Didn't mean to be gruff. Just...please? As a favor to me? I need you to do this. Can you please find Xion and...and...."

Saïx stared. "Are you feverish?"

"Saïx! Listen to me! Look, Xi--" Axel took a deep breath. "I'm not exactly happy about having to tell you this, but it looks like there's no choice. Xion, for whatever freaking reason, is afraid of something - no, she's terrified of something, - and that something is thunder. And until now, I've been able to deal with it all on my own, no one else knows except me and Roxas, but apparently me and Roxas aren't there to take care of it this time, so I need you to...um...keep her company."
Saïx kept staring. Axel had to be joking, but he usually looked and sounded very different when he was joking. It was difficult for Saïx to speak, he was so caught off guard. "Are you. Honestly. Expecting me to. Find our newest member. And - and nanny it through a thunderstorm??"

"Um...yeah, that's basically what I'm asking you to do. Yeah."

Saïx's hands clenched. "Enough of this foolishness. You are wasting my time. Finish your report and then get back to work."

"Saïx! I'm not joking, I seriously need your help on this!"

"Your report, Number VIII."

"Don't you 'Number VIII' me," Axel growled. "This is Axel you're talking to, Axel who's been your best friend since we were seven freaking years old, Axel who's getting pretty fed up with your attitude."

"And you think I appreciate your attitude? Yes, I am talking to Axel. Axel, Number VIII in the Organization; Axel, who was sent to Castle Oblivion to help destroy the Keybearer's memories; Axel, whose bloodstained weapons must have been idle too long if you're letting yourself get sentimental over a memory-witch and a soulless replica."

"Saïx, please!" Axel shouted. "You want me to beg or something? It's not like what I'm asking you to do is difficult! Just find her and hug her and sing the stupid song to her for an hour or two, then you can ignore her forever, just please do this for me!"

"...If I had a heart, I would be astounded. My faith in you wavers," Saïx murmured.

Axel's eyes narrowed, and Saïx was not entirely sure that the fire lord was aware of the flames now flaring up around his own body. "Isa Sirius Tsukino, find that girl and sing 'My Favorite Things' to her, or SO HELP ME I will dig out a CERTAIN VIDEO DISC and see if the rest of the Organization gets as much of a kick out of your Christmas party antics as I do--"

"ENOUGH," Saïx found himself thundering. They glared at each other.
"I really will, Saïx. You know I will."

Yes. He would. "...You are dismissed. Like I said, get back to work...Lea Deucalion Hayes," Saïx growled, wincing.

Axel blinked. Then he smiled. "Thanks, Sai." The connection was cut.

Saïx stared at the static-filled communication window for a while without seeing it. Then he cursed, logged off the computer, and stormed down to the Grey Area.

Although the movie was still running, no one seemed to be interested in it. Luxord was playing solitaire on one of the coffee tables, as Xigbar stood at the window and laughed to himself, apparently watching something outside.

"Where is everyone?" Saïx asked.

Luxord shrugged. "There were only four of us here to begin with."

That's right. Half the Organization was at the other castle, Lord Xemnas almost never joined in evening recreational activities, Xaldin and Roxas had yet to RTC, and Demyx had undoubtedly gone out to enjoy the downpour as he usually did.

"If you come over here and listen closely," Xigbar said, "you can kind of hear the music. I think he's doing 'New York, New York' now."

Saïx had zero interest in Demyx's ridiculous performance. "Where did Xion go?"

"I'm not sure, actually," Luxord said. "She took off rather quickly when the rain started up."

"I see." Saïx turned and left again.
The next place to check would be her room. Saïx walked into the fourth portal, which was dark and empty. "Xion?" he called, just in case. There was no answer.

He sighed, then tried Axel's room next. It was the same, though the place's cold emptiness seemed to capture Saïx's attention in a way the previous room's had not.

He stood there for a long time, looking around and trying to figure out why he felt the need to linger. There was a stack of music discs on one shelf, a few non-uniform outfits hanging in the open closet, an alarm clock radio with a Bomb sticker on the snooze button, an ice cream coupon pinned to an otherwise empty bulletin board, and a note written on the closet mirror in dry erase marker: "Tell Rox Xi C.O."

"I have no business here," Saïx told himself. "There is no need to stay." So he forced himself to walk back out of the room and continue his search.

Roxas's room was crowded with restless Samurai, and brilliantly lit. Saïx stared for a while, then commanded the lesser Nobodies to leave. They did so reluctantly, but he was far higher in rank than they, and their master was not around to counter the order. Then he looked around appraisingly.

The boy's room was messier than Axel's, with dirty clothes strewn across the floor and ice cream wrappers lying half-crumpled next to a few empty Potion bottles. Some posters from Twilight Town had been pinned crookedly to the walls, and lying on the bedside table was a portable video game console and cartridge case.

'It's...Night Howler?' Saïx had completely forgotten that game. There was a little crescent moon drawn on a corner of the case. 'That's the same one I lent Axel eight years ago. He never gave it back,' Saïx realized. 'Now he's letting Roxas borrow it? ...Sacred moon, I can't believe it's still playable.'

Why in the worlds was he thinking about video games at a time like this? In fact, why was he bothering to think about video games at all?

Saïx turned his attention back to the matter at hand. The room was now empty, but the fact that it was inordinately lit was significant. 'If I was extremely frightened and had about three months of life experience, where would I go for comfort if my usual sources were not available?' Probably the same place where, as a child, he had spent every single Christmas Eve until Lea finally told him that Santa Claus was not real and there was no need to hide from a magical overweight stalker every year.
Saïx strode over to the closet and opened it.

A small figure was huddled on the floor, buried in a pile of Roxas's spare coats and visibly shivering. A thin, shaky voice drifted up. "R...Roxas? Is that you?"

From outside, thunder crashed, and Xion gave a little shriek.

Saïx sighed deeply, wishing that he had thought to bring some paperwork to help pass the time. Then, maneuvering himself to fit inside the closet, he managed to sit down with his legs stretched out over the threshold.

Xion immediately latched onto his arm. "I wish you'd been here! I needed you! I need you! I'm - so...I'm so...." Thunder roared again, prompting a long wail.

'Axel. You. Owe. Me.'

"...You're...too big...to be Roxas. ...Axel? Axel, you...came back?" The creature began to sob in earnest, its grip tightening.

Saïx sighed again. He also made a mental note to subject Vexen to some serious interrogation. This replica was acting far more human than a Nobody had any right to.

Xion suddenly went silent. Saïx glanced down, and quite unexpectedly found that it was no longer a faceless figure in a hooded black coat that was clinging to him. It was Roxas - no, not Roxas. Same face and hair, but the clothes were different....

'That boy from back then. I forgot his name. Wind, or something like that. ...Vexen, you certainly have a lot to answer for.'

"S...Saïx?" Xion whispered, looking utterly horrified.

"I have business to take care of," he said coldly, neglecting to add that he was currently taking care
"Your grip is immobilizing."

"I'm s-sor-ry...." Xion stared at its own arms, which had gotten wrapped around Saïx's chest by this time. "I can't let go," Xion finally whispered miserably.

Saïx glanced at the windows, discerning that the storm had let up. A little. He hoped. Xion was still flinching and gasping with every crack of thunder. 'Axel. You will never STOP owing me.' "Don't bother, then, if you're incapable of even that much."

"I'm sorry," Xion whispered again, hiding its face against his shoulder.

Seconds ticked by. Saïx could feel his time being wasted. And it was so quiet...just the rain, and the thunder, and Xion's muffled sniffling....

"I'm debating," he finally said, thinking to kill two birds with one stone, "whether or not I should send Demyx and Luxord together on tomorrow's mission. Their target is quite a difficult one to overcome, yet we are now so short-handed that there is no way we can accomplish everything that needs to be done unless we split up."

"Demyx is really strong when he has to be," Xion whispered.

Saïx blinked, having not at all expected the creature to make even an attempt at contribution. "Judging from his regular assessment scores, I am inclined to agree with you. Very well. Demyx will be given a solo mission to Agrabah, which will free up Luxord to conduct investigations in either Olympus Coliseum or Wonderland."

"L...Luxord's good at...at riddles and stuff...."

"I have made this observation as well. Xigbar could take the Coliseum assignment if I trusted him to keep focused and not tease that goat-creature who's so obsessed with tournaments over there...."

Roxas did not return home until late that night, and nearly got the shock of his life when he found Xion and Saïx sitting together in his closet, both fast asleep. Deciding that he really did not want to know the story behind that, he yanked off his shoes, crawled into bed, and hoped very much that Saïx would be gone when he woke up in the morning.
Author's Notes: I got Isa's middle name from the main character of Diana Wynne Jones's book *Dogsbody*. Isa also shares a surname with Sailor Moon, half because it amuses me and half because "Tsukino" means "moon field." (Tsukino Usagi is a verbal pun on "bunny in the moon," not a literal translation.) Deucalion is a fire-breathing character from Diana Wynne Jones's *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, and the main source of inspiration for the way I portray dragons. :) Hayes, as an Anglicized Irish surname (rather than English or Yiddish), means "fire," at least according to the "Behind the Name" Web site.

You can get away with not using pronouns in Japanese. Which can cause some translation issues in English.... Xion, for example. It's possible for those who see her as male and those who see her as female and those who see her as neither to have a conversation about her in Japanese and be able to conceal their various viewpoints on her gender. You can't do that in English, so just be aware of this issue if the pronoun usage in this fic seems odd.

For reasons I explained in the *Christmas at the Castle* author's notes, it's my theory that Xion lived in Vexen's room at first and then got it to herself once he left for Castle Oblivion.

This sequel was inspired when Taliax rhetorically wondered what Xion would do during a thunderstorm without Axel and Roxas around. Since I've been in a Sāiō and AkuSai phase lately, I took it literally. At first the plot bunny would not cooperate, because it's really hard to keep Sāiō IC when you're attempting SaiShi fluff - or any kind of Sāìō fluff, for that matter. It worked in the end, though. In my mind, all of Sāiō's fluffy interaction with Roxas and/or Xion is really either for Axel's sake or selfish reasons or both, otherwise it couldn't be believable.

It was really hard not getting to use my whole Org! Usually I totally throw canon chronology out the window and use the entire group anyway, but in this fic, for the sake of the plot, I had to at least recognize the fact that Vex, Lex, Zexy, Luxia, and Larxie weren't home. It was sad. Among other things, I had to delete my first Xig/Larx ship-tease moment because of that. I miss my Org. Stupid canon!

Oh, and that bit about little Isa being scared of Santa Claus? Sāiō just tossed that piece of backstory at me with no warning. So of course I repay him by actually writing it out in another one-shot, "No Need To Hide." XD Man, if I keep this up he's not gonna like me anymore....
Fire & Moonlight: In The Sky (theme 3) {Axel & Saïx}

Fire & Moonlight, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Drabble challenge by Wishing-Fire, written by Raberba girl

3. In The Sky

Summary: Axel must prove that he's not making up stuff on his mission report.

A/N: It was so cool when Axel took Xion to Never Land in Taliax's fic Whatever You Want To Do! :) I wanted to try it with Axel & Saïx.

0.0.0

"Number VIII, I will not tolerate falsification of information on mission reports."

Axel, playing a DS game with his head hanging over the edge of his bed, hit the pause button and gave Saïx an incredulous, upside-down look. "Since when have I ever fibbed on a report?! ...Pranks don't count."

Saïx brandished a form. "The claims you make here are outlandish. Do you honestly expect me to believe this pixie dust nonsense?" There was no expression on his face, his tone gave away nothing, Axel could not even read his friend's heart because that heart was long gone. Yet, somehow...he knew anyway.

Axel grinned. "Guess I gotta prove it, then."

That's how Axel ended up in Never Land with his boss, trying to convince a very sparkly tiny person to share the glitter. "Come on, Twinkle Toes! Just a little bit! Enough to get my friend's fat butt airborne."

"Axel, compared to you, everyone's fat," Saïx murmured.

"Shut up." Axel summoned a handful of fire. "Last chance, ladybug, before I stop asking nicely--"
"Shame on you, Axel."

Axel glanced at his companion and then nearly fell over in shock. He had not seen that much expression on Saïx's face in years.

Practically cooing, Saïx cupped his hands gently around the little pixie, and Axel cautiously released her into his grasp. Saïx offered a charming smile that Axel had last seen directed at Ginny Wade back at Radiant Garden High. "I apologize for my uncouth companion, Madam. Such a high-class person as yourself is not one to be bullied. Perhaps a fair trade would be more suitable."

The glow between Saïx's fingers intensified.

"I doubt you would be interested in anything I have at the moment. Would you like me to owe you a favor?"

Even when she was angry, the pixie's tinkling, bell-like language sounded lovely. Now, in her delight, it would have sent a sweet pang through Axel's heart if he still had one.

"Very well. Call on me when you are in need, and I will repay my debt."

The pixie seemed to drift out of his hands, then suddenly darted away with a triumphant ringing sound, leaving behind a shower of gold dust.

Saïx shook his head like an irritated dog, his expression now one of disgust as he wiped excess dust off his shoulders and tried to flick it off his face.

"What was THAT?" Axel demanded.

"Faster and more efficient than your strategy," Saïx grunted, inspecting his now-shimmering gloves.

"Why don't you do stuff like that more often?! Do you realize how much you creep me out these
days, Isa?"

Saïx gave him a cold look. "That is no longer my name."

"But--"

"I await your demonstration."

Axel sighed, wondering if he had read him wrong. After all, who was there to keep acting the part for? "Okay, look. Apparently you need two things to fly here: faith, trust, and pixie dust."

Saïx frowned. "That's three."

"Whatever, faith and trust are the same thing."

"And I've read the book. It's supposed to be happy thoughts."

"Do you even have happy thoughts anymore, ISA?" Axel asked obnoxiously.

"No. Which is another reason your report caught my attention."

Acting-the-part aside, perhaps Axel had guessed right after all. "Yeah, it basically boiled down to 'believing in your heeeeaart!' or some crap like that."

"And yet you claim that you and Roxas were able to fly."

Axel grinned and backed off the cliff until he was hovering in midair. "Not just an empty claim."

That look on Saïx's face, it was priceless. Astonishment, shock. Fear. Longing. Wonder.
"You gonna join me?" Axel invited aloud.

Saïx took a step. Froze, looked away, face hidden, fists clenched.

Something changed. Axel was not sure what it was, but suddenly he had no more interest in teasing. He moved forward, took his friend's hands. "Sai," he whispered. "Trust me."

Saïx's hands gripped his tightly. No words, no expression. Shifting back, step by soft step, until they both drifted far above the water.

After a long pause, they both moved, silent. Upward, cautiously testing the air currents. It had taken Axel so long to stop looking like a total dork in midair, but Saïx made it seem easy, as if moving among the wind with grace was instinctive for him.

They were up so high now. Axel shivered, trying to summon warmth from his powers, but Saïx merely lay comfortably in the sky as if it was water, gazing up at the stars. Axel would have been tempted to splash him, if there was anything to splash with. So instead he floated around in an arc, moving between Saïx and the stars, giving him another upside-down look. "Pretty cool, huh?" was all he could think to say.

"...Mm." Saïx did not shift to resume his contemplation. His eyes remained on Axel's, and deep within the chill gold, there seemed to flicker a hint of green.

\[\text{o.o.o}\]

\text{A/N: Fae in general seem to have a sort of bargaining system involving favors. It's not mentioned in any version of Peter Pan that I know about, but...hey, Tinker Bell's still fey, right?}

Also, the concept of Saïx being a reluctant lady-charmer was something I'd played with in The Thirteenth Changeling, so I liked being able to reuse the idea (especially now that my characterization of him has changed significantly because of writing Christmas at the Castle).

And in the manga, there's a similar "Trust me" moment when Roxas is teaching Axel how to fly.
Saïx's eyes are golden, but Isa's were green.

Complete: 3/101
"...And so, you see, it becomes quite obvious that these people make their living from running the trains," Vexen finished haughtily.

"I think your theory's flawed," Saïx said coolly.

"I think your face is flawed," Axel added for good measure.

The scientist glared. "You little upstarts! Is this what I get for sacrificing my valuable time to explain the basics of recon to you?"

"Yes," they answered in chorus.

"I wanted the kid to show us around," Axel sighed exaggeratedly. "His little face is so funny when you call him 'Sempai'...."

"Or when you prank him," Saïx added.

Axel laughed. "Yeah, that too."
"Zexion is my junior colleague, and outranks you," Vexen growled. "If I hear that you've been harassing him again, I'll have both of you punished!"

"Hey, we don't harass him!" Axel said indignantly. "We just...tease him a little...."

"Put Cola in his coffee mug...."

"See what his hair looks like dyed pink...."

"Quiz him extensively on the female anatomy sections of his textbooks--"

Both boys dodged out of the way of Vexen's Blizzard spell.

"Oooohh, you wanna play, old man?" Axel asked gleefully, summoning his chakrams (still could not get over how freaking cool they were).

"You have no idea what you're taking on," Vexen snarled, as his shield materialized and the air grew noticeably chillier.

"Oh, look, a local," Saïx said. The three Nobodies stepped prudently back into an alleyway as a teenage boy came around a corner. A second boy, about five or six years old, trotted along at his heels.

"...but I wasn't imagining it, Niisan!" the child was insisting. "I really did see a black monster with glowy eyes!"

"Hayner, next time I'm not gonna tell you to shut up, I'm just gonna hit ya."

"I'll tell Mom!"

One of the town's numerous courtesy skateboards was sitting in the alley near the wall. Saïx put his foot on it. The slight scuffing sound drew Axel's attention. Their eyes met. Saïx casually tossed-rolled the board to Axel's feet.
Vexen was fixated on the locals, watching almost gleefully as the older boy shoved his little brother against a wall and raised his fist. "Last warning, punk!"

"Don't hit me! Don't hit me! I'll tell Mom!"

"That's not what I wanna hear," the older boy snarled.

"Whoooooooono!"

Both brothers looked up in astonishment as a teenage redhead in a black coat came whizzing out of nowhere on a skateboard. "What the--?"

"Incoming!" Axel shrieked as he swiftly approached a wall, tried awkwardly to turn, and finally stumbled off at the last second. The empty board crashed against the wall and then drifted off in a different direction. "Stupid skateboard!" Axel pointed his finger. The board ignited. Then he turned to the local boys and grinned hugely, as the skateboard turned black behind him within its heap of impossible flames. "Hayner, my man! 'Sup!"

The child was staring at him with huge eyes. "Uhhhh...."

Saïx came up behind him and scooped him up. "How's our little buddy doing?" he asked calmly, his unsettling eyes resting squarely on the other boy's.

The guy backed off. "Hayner, you know these freaks?" he asked nervously.

"Sure he does," Axel said, so close that the guy jumped and hurriedly backed away even more. Axel grinned and came to pose beside Saïx, the two of them in their coats forming a sort of ominous black frame around the child. "We're best friends! Got a problem with that?"

"N-No.... No, man. Hayner can hang out with whoever the freak he wants." The guy turned and left quickly.
Hayner was staring up at them, still huge-eyed but now looking more curious than astonished. He raised a finger to point. "You have tattoos."

"Yup," Axel said, because it was easier than long explanations. "Like 'em?"

"They're cool. I want tattoos. Tough guys have tattoos."

"You don't need tattoos to be tough," Saïx said.

"You're just saying that 'cuz you don't have any," Axel teased.

"You guys are tough," Hayner said admiringly. "Next time Niisan's mean, I'll tell him you'll come beat him up."

"That was the idea," Saïx murmured, almost to himself. He set the boy down again. "Run along now. Stay away from the monsters."

"But I wanna hang out with you guys," Hayner said in dismay.

"Nah, we've got work to do." Axel pointed with his thumb. "See that geezer back there? He's gonna kill us for goofing off during a mission. Trust me, you don't wanna get in the way when that happens."

Hayner's eyes were wide again. "Okay. But...can I see you again? He won't kill you for real, right?"

"Nah."

"Hard to kill things that aren't really alive anyway," Saïx murmured, so that only Axel could hear.

Vexen stormed out as soon as the child was out of sight. "WHAT DID YOU THINK YOU WERE DOING?" he thundered.
"Just having a little fun."

"Yeah, this mission's boring."

"LET'S SEE HOW MUCH FUN YOU'LL HAVE IN THE DUNGEON FOR THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON!"

It was boring, they got hungry from having missed both lunch and dinner, and the confinement was grating. Both them agreed that it had not been worth it.

Yet somehow, the memories of that mission still made them smile, even years afterward.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I could NOT get the (much darker) original story for this to have anything to do with "Flawed," so I finally assigned it to "No" (and later "Laugh") and re-started this one from scratch. ^^;

Complete: 5/101
It had been two weeks now, and this new job had not gotten any easier. Saïx did not realize how closely he was hunched over his desk as he tried to figure out if he should send Vexen and Zexion to Wonderland together, or pair Zexion with Marluxia instead, and how much of Demyx's "It's too haaaaaard when I'm on my own!" was the usual faking and how much was genuine.

A commotion alerted him to someone entering the room. He could tell it was Axel from the scent, and from the way his Berserkers huddled together in protective clumps. "Yo, Saïx!"

"I'm busy," he snapped.

Axel paused by his desk. "You look like you need a break."

"No, I look like I need to be left alone."

"Aw, come on, Sai," Axel crooned persuasively. "Your brain's gonna explode if you keep this up. Just like it did back when you were studying for high school entrance exams."

"This and that are entirely different!" Saïx found himself bursting out, then frowned at the lapse in control.
Swiftly, Axel seized the pile of paperwork and flung it into the air.

"AXEL."

"Come with me," Axel said brightly amidst a rain of fluttering paper. "That new world I did recon in last week was awesome. Trust me, you'll love it." He grabbed Saïx's arm and yanked him to his feet.

"I said no."

Listening to authority figures was not exactly Axel's strong suit, and Saïx inevitably found himself dragged against his will into a bright world filled with music and color and merriment. And lots of fruit.

"Hello, sweetie!" Axel laughed as a woman with a zebra body below the waist seized his hands and spun him around in delight. "Sai, come play with the horsies!"

"...They're centaurs." Saïx shivered as a chubby naked child with wings came fluttering curiously up to him, soon joined by two of its fellows and a baby pegasus. "Axel...have you ever heard of something we call a Non-Interference Rule?"

"They don't even talk, it'll be fine."

Saïx tried in vain to stop the cupids from twining his hair into long blue braids. Even he could not quite bring himself to smash a claymore into creatures who looked like infants. At least they weren't Heartless. And besides, Axel was the only one around, there was no reason the rest of the Organization had to find out....

A fat, jolly man with grapes in his hair came riding up, merrily waving a cup of dark liquid in the Nobodies' direction.

"Dude!" Axel exclaimed. "Just the guy I was looking for!"
That night, a disheveled and tired-looking Axel emerged from a dark corridor with the Luna Diviner on his back. "Sai, we're home."

"You smell like charcoal and apples," Saïx giggled into his neck, the words barely distinguishable.

"And you smell like alcohol and vomit," Axel returned conversationally. "Which was kinda the point, so I won't hold it against you." He dumped the berserker into bed and then rubbed at his own shoulders in relief. "So, how does it feel to be legal now, birthday boy?"

"I'm drunk!"

"Yep."

"Ha ha, you made me drunk!"

"I also filmed it," Axel said with relish.

"Is it yummy?"

"Go to sleep, Sai."

"Okay. 'Night."

"Night."

"Love you."

"...Saïx, I am going to turn the video camera back on, and then I want you to say that again."

"*snore*"
"Dang it!"

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** Saïx turns 21, in case that wasn't clear. The world they went to was the Greek mythology segment with Dionysus in *Fantasia*. (I was like, "Hm, what Disney movie can someone get raving drunk in...? Oh yeah, the one with the god of partying. XD")

I'd accidentally already done some "Trust me"s for other themes, so it took some digging to think of this one. It's fine, though; I prefer the interpretations to be less traditional.

ROUGH DRAFT WAS UNDER THE 600 WORD LIMIT, W00T! Second draft to do so; the first was for a later theme.

Complete: 6/101
It took a while to adjust to the fact that they now had a female living in the castle.

For example, Axel and Demyx seemed to be pretty dense about the concept of Flirting With Larxene Is A Bad Idea. Poor Lexaeus and Zexion were the ones on shopping duty the first time certain feminine products were on the grocery list. And although Xaldin was pretty good about remembering to be dressed before leaving his room these days, Xemnas still tended to take a dagger or two to the head whenever Larxene came across him without attire.

Saïx was, ordinarily, a responsible and detail-oriented young man. Unfortunately, he was not a morning person, a trait which had only intensified after he became the Luna Diviner. This fact led to his forgetting that it was now important to notice which bathroom he was entering at 7:00 a.m. when he was still half-asleep.

A piercing scream echoed through the halls, drawing several Organization members into the corridor where it had originated.

"Did you hear that?"

"What's going on?"

"That was Larxene, wasn't it?"
Saïx came out of the bathroom again and leaned back against the door, his face completely blank except for a red slash that was startling to dribble down his cheek.

Axel came over, chewed and swallowed the last bite of his bagel, then pressed the napkin to Saïx’s face, soaking up the blood. "Sai," he said gravely, though his eyes were twinkling. "That one's the ladies' room."

"There's a girl in there," Saïx said faintly.

"Yeah, we figured. Really, though - you should've known better, after last time."

"Last time?" Demyx piped up inquisitively.

Axel glanced over his shoulder. "Yeah, back in high school when someone switched the signs as a prank, and Isa--"

Saïx swiftly reached out to cover his mouth - too late, of course.

"This is the second time you've walked into a girls' bathroom?" Demyx exclaimed in delight.

"Nice," Xigbar laughed. "Whaddaya say about Number VII's Reputation Meter, Dem? Couple of notches up, or down?"

Demyx put on a decent imitation of Vexen's sciencey drone. "Well, considering the circumstances, likely intent, and comedic factor, as well as the subject's usual attitudes and behavior, I propose we award him a score of...."

Saïx had left long before they decided on the outcome.

O.O.O
Author's Notes: YAY, I remembered to hold off on posting this one until after the original CatC reference was up, for once! *proud of self*

Complete: 7/101
Saïx sat at the dining room table with a pen in his right hand and a breakfast taco in his left, gritting his teeth while unsuccessfully trying to drown out the children's voices.

"There's only two cookies left, though."

"I wish there'd been more for me to bring back...."

"Look," Axel spoke up, "honestly, I don't need a cookie. You two can take them."

"No!"

"I brought the cookies back for both of you!"

Saïx took another bite of taco and then tried to press his palm against his left ear, struggling to concentrate on the mission report in front of him. 'Numbers V and VI in Wonderland for recon, except this was the one where Lexaeus got reassigned from the Coliseum....'

"Hey, I have an idea!"

"What is it?"
"Maybe we can break the cookies."

"Oh! That's great, Roxas! I'm sure that will work."

There was a faint snapping sound.

"Oops...."

"Oh no!"

"Um, Axel...."

"This side is huge, and this side is tiny! We can't split the cookie like that, it's not fair!"

"For crying out loud." That was Axel again. "Guys, I'm serious, this is not a big deal. I'm a big boy, I can live without getting a cookie."

"But all three of us are supposed to share!"

"Axel, I just - I just don't feel right. I want you to have a cookie."

Saïx pressed his hand harder against his ear. It did not help. 'Just ignore them, just ignore them, just ignore them....' If only more members were in the room, making chatter and white noise to help distract from the trio's idiocy - unfortunately, Saïx was alone with those three. 'Maybe I should start eating breakfast in my room from now on.'

"Here, Axel, you break this cookie. You can probably do it better than me."

"Roxas, it's impossible to make a perfectly broken cookie, one side's always going to be a least a tiny bit bigger than the other. And, yet again, I DON'T NEED ONE."
"For the love of Kingdom Hearts, stop making Puppy Eyes at me! Ugh, just hand it over."

There was a second snapping sound.

"Ohhhh! That's perfect, Axel!"

"I thought you said you couldn't make a perfect broken cookie."

Saïx finished his taco. He was still hungry. Well - not hungry, exactly. But he still had an annoyingly inexplicable craving for...something else to eat.

"You wanna take it to Vexen and ask him to measure it for you?"

"...No."

"Okay, whatever, it's not perfect. Still better than anything we could do."

There were happy crunching sounds. Saïx firmly fixed his eyes on the report. 'Six returned with Five to the Coliseum upon completion of the Wonderland mission. I suppose I ought to adjust the mission rewards once I've fixed my records.‘

"Axel, what are we gonna do with the extra piece?"

The Luna Diviner did not headdesk. He was, however, sorely tempted to do so at this moment.

"Hmmm...that's a puzzle, isn't it. Maybe we should find someone else to give it to."
"Like who?"

Saïx deliberately relaxed his jaw when he realized he was gritting his teeth again.

"Well..." Axell got up. Though Saïx could not see him at all, he was very aware of Number VIII's approaching presence. The footsteps stopped directly behind his chair. "Saïx," Axel remarked, "your pen hasn't moved at all in the last five minutes."

"It's difficult to concentrate with the three of you yapping away like that," Saïx ground out.

"Hey, Saïx. There's this magic word I know," Axel continued, his voice laced with amusement. "Sometimes it works pretty well to get something you want."

Seconds ticked by. Saïx could practically feel the children's puzzled, curious gazes boring into him. Finally, he resumed annotating the report in cursive, except for a select few letters.

**Progress of Lexaeus was exceptional and shall be excellently rewarded.**

He flinched at Axel's burst of laughter. "Heh heh...whatever, good enough. Come on Roxas, Xion, let's go." A piece of cookie was dropped onto the report, and then the idiotic trio were leaving, babbling more of their nonsense at each other.

Saïx picked up the cookie, glaring at the grease stain it left behind. He forgot to keep glaring when the taste of sugar hit his tongue.

**o.o.o**

**Author's Notes:** Once again, apparently I deal with writer's block on these drabbles by trying to cram Axel and Saïx into the first thing that comes to mind when I look at the prompt. In this case, broken cookies. *sweatdrop*

**Complete:** 10/101
"If you say 'I hate Wonderland' one more time, I'm gonna smack you."

"And the next time you waste more of our Elixir supply on the talking flowers, I'm going to smack you."

The two young Nobodies glared at each other in the middle of the garden.

"Come on," Saïx finally grumbled. "Let's find the target and get this mission over with."

"Then can we please go for ice cream on the clock tower after work today? Seriously. The fact that you've been ditching me for The Cryptkeeper hurts, Sai, it really does."

"Cut it out with the theatrics." They both knew perfectly well that nothing could cause emotional pain until they got their hearts back. "Vexen hates organizing missions, he would rather devote his time to research and experimentation. And whenever he does get to work on what he actually wants to do, then half the time he's tearing his hair out because Zexion's swamped with the backlog of mission reports and can't help. If I can convince Lord Xemnas that I'm responsible and trustworthy enough to take on their jobs and free them up for the more scientific work, it'll give me more leverage to-- Are you listening?"

"Heh heh...nope. Too distracted imagining Vexy all bald, except with little tufts of torn-out hair."
"...If I had a heart, the mental imagery of that would be making me sick. You're disgusting."

"All part of my charm."

"Apparently, you're delusional, as well."

They had reached the Hedge Maze by this time. Axel summoned his chakrams, grinning. "You ready for this, bro?"

Saïx gritted his teeth, his claymore appearing in his hand. "As ready as I'll ever be. Sacred moon, I hate puzzles."

"I really will burn down the Maze for you, if you want."

"No. I'm not going to be your excuse for breaking the Non-Interference Rule again."

"Then don't blame me when you get frustrated and go berserker on the walking cards, I'm just gonna sit there and laugh."

"One needs a heart to get frustrated, Axel."

"So last time when you went on a rampage during what was supposed to be a stealth mission, it was totally on purpose, right?"

Saïx glared. "Last time, we were here after dark. The sun is out now, it's different."

"The sun was shining on the sea, shining with all his might," Axel sang. "And this was odd, because it was the middle of the--"

"Shut up."
"Aw, not a Carroll fan?"

"Let's just get this over with so we can go to Twilight Town. We're not even in the Maze yet, and already I need ice cream...."

"W00t! Flurry of Dancing Flames: 1. Vexen: 0. Thanks, Wonderland!"

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I tweaked the quote a little to make it fit better. It's from Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter," which appeared in Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There.

FTR, this is not the same universe as "Trust Me," in case you were wondering about the discrepancy.

Complete: 11/101
Okay, so maybe it was a bad idea to go through the door just because he was curious about what was on the other side. But, hey, Sora was gallivanting around the Coliseum where Demyx was, which meant that Axel couldn't risk showing his face there yet. He also did not relish the thought of hanging out at their little campout in Agrabah, where Naminé was bored and was just going to Puppy Eyes him into posing for her sketches again. He needed a way to kill time until Demyx RTC'd, so why not spend it investigating this random door in Hollow Bastion that had popped out of nowhere?

BECAUSE SAÏX MIGHT BE WANDERING AROUND IN THERE, that's why.

"Holy flying cheese puffs, what are you doing here?!"

Number VII and ex-Number-VIII stared at each other.

"I could ask you the same question," Saïx finally said.

"Well, you could also ask a different question," Axel offered. "Like, 'Hey, should I call you Axel or Lea now that you look like you're fourteen years old again?' I think that's a good question."

"Sometimes I can't tell whether you really are stupid, or if you're just pretending to be," Saïx said in disgust. "This world is obviously located in the past."
"Which would explain why everything's in black and white. So, Isa - you don't mind me calling you that, right? - do you think we've really got our hearts back, or do we just look like we do?"

"This would be far too easy a solution," Saïx grumbled.

"True that. You wanna test it, just to make sure? Call me a loser, or lame or laughable or something, and I'll see if I've got feelings to be hurt."

"Axel, surely you're aware that you've betrayed the Organization and I'm now obligated to destroy you?"

"Heh. With what, exactly?" Axel held out his arms. "Chakrams, I choose you!" Nothing happened. "See? No powers. Couldn't even light a birthday candle. I'll bet you 5,000 munny you couldn't go berserker on me here even if you stripped naked, killed a rabbit with your teeth and howled at the moon."

Saïx closed his eyes and tiredly pinched the bridge of his unscarred nose. "Leave it to you to complicate what was supposed to be a simple recon mission...."

"Always happy to oblige. So, Isa. There's something we need to talk about."

"No, we're not going to let you turn Sora back into a Nobody just so you can have your little pedo-bait back."

"Hey!"

"He's much more easy to manipulate as he is now."

"Think he'll still be that way when I tell him that you sinister black-coated villains are actually cheering on his valiant Heartless-slaying?"

"Axel," Saïx growled.
"Heh, drop that Don't-you-dare face, you can't pull rank on me anymore. I left the Organization, I can do what I want now. And you don't even have an assassin to send after me, hah!"

"As soon as you set foot outside this world, you had best be watching your back."

"Love you too, Isa. So, up for some ice cream before we have to grow up and be jerks to each other again?"

"...Why is it always ice cream with you?"

"You'd prefer raw rabbit?"

"I'd prefer you to cease making unimaginative werewolf jokes."

"Can't help it, Mr. Berserker!"

"Not in this world."

"True. Here, I'll buy your ice cream to make it up to you."

"No, you'll buy my ice cream because you still owe me 5 munny."

"Flaming pants, that was from, like, six years ago! How do you still remember that!?"

---

Author's Notes: Although they had temporarily regained their BBS appearances in Timeless River (though, technically, they probably should have been little kids...), they had their adult selves' memories and were still missing their hearts.
If you're not familiar with KH2 Final Mix, there's a scene where Axel, Riku, and Naminé are watching Sora, Donald, and Goofy take the train to Mysterious Tower from Twilight Town. At the end of it, Riku ends up letting the other two escape together, so presumably, Naminé's been hanging out with Axel during most of the game.

Heh, my research for this drabble involved skim-watching most of the KH2 cutscenes again, and of course I got deliciously distracted. I love Demyx so, SO MUCH in both languages, and Saïx has a lovely voice in Japanese, I wish I could find more than just the Final Mix additions for him. AXEL, YOU NEED TO EAT MORE. It is just not healthy for a 25-year-old man to be that skinny.

Complete: 13/101
"Why didn't you report in?"

Axel turned away from his bedroom window. "You just interrupted my angsty moon-gazing, jerk."

"My heart bleeds for you," Saïx deadpanned. "Or it would, if I still had one, but I don't. Looks like you're out of luck."

"The ones out of luck are the rest of the C.O. team," Axel mused. "Toast, all of them."

"Yes, I know."

"Of course you know," Axel said darkly. "You set us all up to get killed, didn't you."

"Had to find some way of getting rid of everyone in my way, didn't I?"

"Oh, so I'm in your way now, is that it?" Axel growled.

"Trust me, if you were truly in my way, you would never have made it out of that castle alive."
Axel shook his head. "Man, only someone like you could send his best friend off to a hero-infested slaughterhouse and act like you're doing him a favor...."

"Just keep in mind that anyone else who tried half the things with me that you can get away with would get their heads ripped off," Saïx grumbled.

"Oh, like that really makes us even," Axel pouted.

"I would say so, yes."

"Good grief, Saïx, I'm not *that* annoying, am I?!"

"Hmmm, must I answer that...?"

"Oh, forget it. Thanks for making sure I came back from C.O. You happy now?"

"If I had a heart--"

"Blah, blah, blah."

"--then, yes, I would be quite pleased that you returned safely."

"...Oh. Well. I guess that's cool, then."

"Remember why we seek to build Kingdom Hearts," Saïx said softly.

"Or we could just hang around Roxas and Xion long enough, I'm starting to think that might eventually do the trick," Axel muttered under his breath.

"What did you say?"
"Nothing. Whoo, Kingdom Hearts for the win."

"Now, about that report...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I had writer's block on this one for the longest time. Finally I decided to write *something* just so I could get closer to all the other themes I've already drafted, so I ended up simply re-writing this scene from *358/2 Days*.

Complete: 15/101
"How come we always end up on shopping duty together?" Axel complained as he tossed a cart in Saïx's direction and tugged free a second one for himself.

"That is simply how the rotation schedule works out."

"Roxas doesn't always go with Marluxia. And Xion's gone with Xaldin and Demyx and Lex--"

"You make next year's rotation list, then," Saïx snapped.

"Come on, I was joking."

"I wasn't. I've got enough work to do without having to arrange shopping trips on top of it."

"Get Vexen to do it, then."

"I should."
They were inside the store by now, ignoring the other shoppers' strange looks. Since they regularly wandered around the universe wearing suspicious long black coats, they were quite used to being on the receiving end of strange looks. "You got the list?"

"Yes." Saïx handed it over.

"Lessee, bananas, fish crackers, noodles, spaghetti sauce, chocolate pie, party-sized box of ice cream bars...whatever; I'll just take this half of the list, and meet back up with you in a bit."

"Larxene added something, too," Saïx said tightly.

Axel paused. Then scanned down the list and smiled. The item in question was actually in Xion's handwriting, but he and Saïx had established the code phrase long ago, before Number XIV's initiation. "Yup, I see it. Looks like it's on your side of the list, though, so you can go ahead and take care of that."

"Axel," the berserker growled through gritted teeth.

"Heh heh, c'mon, Sai, it's not like you have a heart to actually get embarrassed with."

"I don't care about buying them. It's the--"

"Choices, I know." Axel glanced over at the wall of feminine hygiene products. It seemed like the selection had grown vaster and more colorful since the last time they'd had to do this. "Hm...on second thought, maybe I don't blame you for needing help...."

They went over to inspect the array more closely. "We should probably get even more sizes than usual. Because if Larxene's also running low and forgot to put them on the list, she'll kill us for not reading her mind," Axel reasoned.

"Well, then," Saïx said in the sarcastic branch of his usual monotone, "shall we purchase the pink ones, the yellow ones, the scented ones, the unscented ones, or the ones with biodegradable applicators? And will this brand even do for our Organization's newest addition, or will she be requiring an entirely different product line?"
Axel groaned. It had taken long enough to memorize every single one of Larxene's specifications and preferences; adding Xion's on top of all that was going to be a pain. "At least Xion won't throw knives at us if we guess wrong...you know what, let's just buy one of everything."

"Two carts won't be big enough for that."

"Argh, you're right. Dang it, why do girls have to be so complicated!?"

"And why do they have to...?" Saïx muttered, but then trailed off.

Axel grinned. "Not gonna finish that sentence, Sai?"

"No, I'm not. Get to work," Saïx grumbled, reaching for the closest package.

"Yeah, yeah." Axel started tossing colorful boxes into the carts. "Why do they call 'em Pearls, anyway? Is it really like sticking a pearl in--?"

"Are you seriously intending to finish that sentence, Axel?"

"Nope, just wondering how far I'd get before you stopped me...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: This was originally one of my failed ideas for Theme 1. I'm pretty glad that it didn't work out, what a horrible introduction to the rest of the fic that would have been.... I used to think this drabble was squicky, but later on I wrote another fic (not in this challenge) that kind of out-squicked me about this subject for life. -.-

I guess this is a universe where Saïx acknowledges Xion as a girl? And obviously it's a CatCish one where the Castle Oblivion team is dispatched at a later point in time than they are in canon.

Complete: 16/101
Fire & Moonlight: In the Way (theme 18)

Fire & Moonlight, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Drabble challenge by Wishing-Fire, written by Raberba girl

18. In the Way

Summary: Not a good idea to procrastinate when the boss gives orders.

A/N: This is during their second week in the Organization.

O.o.o

Saïx stepped through the eighth portal. Of course Axel was playing a video game. "Lea, we've been summoned. I think we're supposed to be in the Round Room right now."

"Yeah, I know. Just a minute, I'm about to beat this boss," Axel said distractedly.

Saïx counted. Then he went and placed himself directly in front of the screen.

"ISA!" Axel shrieked. "Move! You're in the way!"

"It's been at least sixty seconds," Saïx informed him, a little smugly. "Now you have to pay attention to me."

"Argh! Get out of the way get out of the way get out of--!"

There was a sudden ripple in the fabric of the world, startling Axel into dropping the controller. A "GAME OVER" message appeared on the screen, but Axel's attention was now entirely fixed on the Sorcerers drifting toward him.

"Um," he said nervously, "yeah, a meeting, I'll be right there--" He yelped as row after row of red-
tinged cubes suddenly assumed ominous formations.

"DON'T," Saïx thundered. He swept forward, raising an arm as if to strike the translucent red walls, but then uncurled his fist and laid his black-gloved palm against the wall instead. Axel's anxious face was visible, slightly distorted, through the barrier between them. "Trust me with my task," Saïx said, more calmly. "I'll get him to the Round Room."

For a few tense seconds, nothing happened. Then the Sorcerers withdrew a little, their translucent weapons re-forming behind them.

Axel gulped and scrambled to his feet. "Thanks, Isa," he whispered as he hurried for the door.

"Axel." Saïx caught him by the hood before he could get too far.

"What?!" Axel cried frantically, eyeing the waiting Sorcerers.

Saïx raised an eyebrow and then his hand. A black portal appeared.

"Oh yeah. I forgot we can do that now."

"These corridors are the only way to get to the Round Room, dope," Saïx reminded him.

Axel facepalmed. "I'm never gonna get used to being a Nobody...."

"Yes, you will. Come on." Saïx tugged his friend into the corridor, glaring at the Sorcerers over his shoulder until they vanished from sight.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: They haven't been Nobodies for very long, so they still think of themselves and each other by their human names. They only use their Nobody names when they're in public, at least until they get used to their new identities.
Summary: They did try, especially in the beginning.

A/N: They're both 15 here, at least as far as I can tell from the vague canon timeline.

o.o.o

His arms were being crushed as the Heartless held him suspended in the air, and he could feel blood running down his side. Yet all that filled his thoughts was the sound of Lea's screams from whatever was happening on the other side where he couldn't see, drowning out even his preoccupation with the pain.

Nothing. Nothing. There was a blank where there should be panic, calm where there should be desperation. Yet he did not think of himself as Saïx, he was determined to be Isa, and he still knew exactly how Isa would feel, what Isa would do. "Let me go! Lea! LEA!"

"ISA!"

That did it. The terror and agony in his friend's voice, feigned though it may be, was enough. Isa felt his eyes growing hot, his body starting to writhe with a surge of energy. "Haaaaahhhhh!!!!"

The next few minutes were hazy. He knew he had broken free, was vaguely aware that he was fighting, dimly registered the screeching of the Heartless. Yet he could not have said what his moves were, where anything was, why he was fighting, even his own name. What he heard, what he saw and felt, was the moonlight, filling his veins and infecting his brain with its intoxicating sweetness. This frenzy was the only time he could feel. The only, only precious thing he had now, no matter how much he tried to pretend otherwise.

Fatigue swept over him; he slumped there, unable to react even when the Heartless retaliated,
knocking him back with its claws. He fell to the ground, thinking vaguely that he ought to get up, realizing dimly that he was hurting, but it was so hard to think, he just wanted to kneel here in this stupor forever....

The moonlight began to tug at him, drawing him back to his feet. Energy returned, building through him. He swept up his weapon instinctively, blocking the monster's next blow. 'Ah...I'm not...finished...I need to...fight....' The frenzied tide rose steadily within him. 'Kill it.' He would surrender himself to pure destruction until there was nothing left.

When he came to, he was slumped against a wall, feeling too sore to move. Every inch of his body hurt, but as he idly watched a large wisp of darkness fade into nothing, the Isa part of him noted that he should be very satisfied that this was all that remained of the Heartless he had been fighting.

The Isa part of him was also freaking out about something that it thought was far more important than the Heartless.

'What could be more important than the fact that I triumphed over my enemy?' Saïx mused. Then he remembered. "Oh yes. Lea." No, that wasn't right. Saïx frowned, then made himself gasp and widen his eyes. "Lea! Lea!" That was better. "Lea, where are you?!!"

"Here...."

Saïx crawled over, forcing himself to make it all the way there rather than stopping to try to recover first. 'If I'm concerned for my best friend, I should put him before anything else.' It was annoying that he had to remind himself of what had once been instinctive.

Lea lay in a pool of blood, watching him with eyes that had gone filmy with pain. "I...Isa...."

"I have a Potion left. Here." Saïx - Isa - found the healing draught, having to lift Lea in his arms to let him drink it. He watched as the blood stopped flowing, as Lea sighed and his face, tight with pain, began to relax. "Better?"

"Still feel like crap," Lea mumbled. "Think I can stand up, though." He smiled a little. "Help me."

They managed to get to their feet, leaning on each other, too battered to stand on their own.
"Think we can make it back to the castle?" Lea asked weakly.

"Together, we can."

"We have to keep together," Lea murmured. "Always, Isa. Got that memorized?"

"Of course I do."

"Mm. It's just...sometimes you worry me...."

"Lea." Their eyes met. "We made a promise. I'm not going to be the one to break it."

"Heh, you think I am?"

"If you do, you'll regret it." Isa raised his hand to open a corridor of darkness, to the castle he would never think of as home.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I had a hard time with this one...the basic premise came to me pretty quickly, but then it refused to solidify. Finally, I just started typing and hoped that inspiration would come to me on the way. The real version of this actually turned out to be "Laugh."

Btw, they're Nobodies here, it's just that they've been turned so recently that they still think of themselves as "Isa" and "Lea."

This was supposed to be Theme 5, dang it! But then I couldn't figure out how to connect it to "Flawed," so finally I hunted through the other themes and turned it into "No" instead. DX

Complete: 20/101
Axel came marching into the Grey Area that evening with a glass of water in his hands, trailed, as usual, by the Organization's two youngest members. "Here, I'll show you," he was saying over his shoulder. He stopped in front of Saïx and thrust the glass of water at him. "Saïx" he asked grandly, "is this glass half-full, or half-empty?"

Saïx looked at the glass. Then he looked at the curious Keybearers. "It's half-full," he said defiantly.

Axel looked taken aback. "What?"

"Are you kidding?" Demyx yelled from across the room. "That thing's practically empty!" He pointed his finger, and the glass's contents suddenly bubbled with increasing volume until Axel had water slopping over his hands. "There," Demyx said in satisfaction.

There was a long pause. "I don't get it," Roxas said.

"Yeah," Xion added, "I thought you said Saïx was gonna be the half-empty one, and Demyx was gonna be the half-full one."

"Argh!" Axel threw his hands up in the air, tossing the glass as he did so. "I give up. Consider this particular life lesson a fail." He stalked off in a huff.

Saïx, now dripping wet as the empty glass rolled to a stop by his foot, repressed a sigh and
summoned his claymore.

"Axel," Roxas called, "you'd better check your panel arrangement, it looks like you're about to have a boss battle...."

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** Yay, super-short and therefore free of stress.

**Complete:** 21/101
Summary: As long as we're breaking into the place for food, we might as well try out some of the games while we're at it. Of course the games aren't the real reason I suggested going there, why would you say that?

A/N: They might be 22 or 23 here, I'm not sure.

0.0.0

Saïx was still sitting up in bed, trying to muster the energy to blink the sleep out of his eyes and stand up, when someone came into his room.

"Ugghh, I hate waking up early...how do you do this every single day?!"

Saïx stared. "...Axel?"

"Mornin'."

"What...in the worlds are you doing conscious at 5:05 a.m.???

"Got the memo." Axel threw himself across the bed and grabbed a pillow, burying his face in it. "Wanna go back to sleeeeepppp...."

Saïx sighed and finally managed to get to his feet. "You need to go back to sleep. You're being even less coherent than usual."
Axel rolled over onto his back. "I am not," he grumbled. "We're having a meeting today, right?"

"Yes, in a couple of hours."

"Exactly. So, seeing as how you're saddling us with a ludicrously early meeting on top of the usual work day--"

"Lord Xemnas set the time, not me."

"--I say you have to make it up to us somehow."

Saïx frowned. "You had better not have anything ridiculous in mind," he warned as he pulled a fresh coat out of his closet.


Saïx paused. "You don't mean like...." After a moment, he chuckled softly. "How long has it been since the last taco run?"

"WAY TOO LONG. And since I did bother to wake up this early and we are taking the trouble to go offworld, might as well have some extra fun while we're at it, huh?"

"Axel--"

"Pizza run this time. You know where."

Saïx closed his eyes, knowing that he should be irritated but that Isa would have been amused. Since he had no actual emotions himself, he was free to pick either option. "Axel, I need to prepare for the meeting. We are not going to waste two hours breaking into Pizza Planet outside of business hours just to play games designed for children and bring back pizza for the rest of the Organization--"

"Isa, shut up and put your boots on, we're leaving in three minutes."
'Free to pick,' hah. As if he ever had a choice about this kind of thing when Axel was around.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: A "taco run," at least the way my high school classmates defined it, was when one or two people would volunteer to go buy tacos (or other munchies) for the rest of the group at lunch, the morning before a major exam, student-led meetings or study groups, etc. I feel the need to explain this, since Google apparently defines it differently. *sweatdrop*

Complete: 22/101
OF COURSE she'd have to call in her favor with horrible timing. As soon as Saïx realized what was happening, he stumbled out of the shower and seized a towel, managing to wrap it around his waist just before he vanished out of the Bathroom That Never Was.

He rematerialized in Never Land, still soaking wet, mostly naked, and kind of wishing that he was still capable of getting ticked off.

He was in some sort of cave, and two pixies were tinkling wildly in their bell-like language, Tinker Bell and an alarmed-looking male companion. As Tinker Bell appeared to argue with or explain something to her friend, Saïx looked around to assess his situation more thoroughly. The cave was pitch-dark except for the distant entrance, the pixies' bright golden glow, and a tiny green beam emanating from a firefly. There was also a cluster of tiny illuminated blue shards below the firefly's perch, lying beside a set of fairy-sized tools, as well as something that looked like a scepter.

Tinker Bell suddenly zipped in front of his face, demanding something. "I am, of course, existing here solely to serve you," he said very dryly. "However, I'm afraid I have no idea what you're saying or what you want of me."

That made her angry. More tinkling and gesticulating; then she rushed to seize one of the glowing blue shards and presented it as if he was supposed to know what it meant. "Sorry. Still drawing a blank."
Several failed attempts at communication later, when she looked frustrated enough to peck his eyes out, the sparrowman finally tried drawing pictures with charcoal.

"You want me to produce artificial moonlight for you?" Saïx realized.

They flew in ecstatic circles around his head.

"Very well."

Axel came yawning into the Grey Area to find most of the Organization gathered together, conversing with each other in puzzled voices. Which was odd for two reasons - first of all, the Organization was pretty much never all together except during meetings. Second of all, the Organization members didn't talk together. Axel and the kids were the only ones with close relationships, and castle gossip tended to pass along from one to another rather than in group sessions.

"Hey, here's someone who might know," Xigbar was saying when he saw Axel come in.

"What's up?" Axel asked.

"Axel!" Roxas and Xion hurried over to him at once. "No one knows where Saïx is! We don't know what to do for our missions."

"That's fantastic," he said sincerely. "I'm going back to bed."

"Axel!"

"It's not a vacation day!"
"Sign probably fell off the wall and got lost in the shuffle somewhere."

"Axellllll...!"

o.o.o.o.o

He was freezing cold and his backside hurt from sitting in a cave all day wearing nothing but a bath towel; all he’d had to eat were the nuts and berries the sparrowman had brought him for lunch an hour ago, his arm ached from having to hold it up for so long; and worst of all, an entire day. Losing an entire day's work, without even getting to notify Lord Xemnas... argh.

'Was it worth it?' Saïx thought. ‘One magical flight among the stars can't have been worth this.’

...He could not convince himself of that, for some reason.

He was startled at a sudden flash of light. His arm wavered, and Tinker Bell raged at him. The sparrowman hurriedly fluttered up to steady Saïx's palm and the shining ball of moonlight resting within it.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself down, Tinker Bell lifted the scepter once again. She and her friend had been doing that all day, working furiously by fireflylight, adjusting the blue shards on the scepter and holding it up in the moonlight, making frustrated sounds, then going back for more adjustments. Over and over and over. And over. And over.

This was the first time there had been a reaction.

As the fairies' apprehension filled the atmosphere, Tinker Bell carefully maneuvered the scepter's shards back into the moonlight, carefully positioning it.

The cave seemed to flood with beams of blue light. The sparrowman zoomed wildly about in a dance of joy; Tinker Bell, as soon as she had very, very carefully set the scepter in its stand, flew up to join him.

"May I lower my arm now?" Saïx asked pointedly. He almost, almost, remembered what it was
like to be shocked when Tinker Bell rushed straight at his face and kissed him.

O.O.O.O.O

Lesser Nobodies could be so stupid. Stranded in Never Land, Saix had been forced to summon some Berserkers and order them to fetch a coat. They had brought him one of Axel's, for some reason. As soon as he realized that the zipper teeth refused to come within inches of each other, Saix claymored the Berserkers for their incompetence, having zero patience left after everything else that had happened. Then he decided that he had better not risk trusting the lesser Nobodies again and having something worse go wrong, so he opened a dark portal, hoping that the coat's protection would be enough even though he couldn't fully enclose himself in it.

A group of Dusks and Sorcerers seized him as soon as he set foot in the castle, dragging him straight into another dark corridor and depositing him on his throne in the Round Room. Where apparently a full meeting was in session.

"...because I'll probably be best at finding him, so yeah, I volunteer." Axel had been the one speaking, but now everyone was, understandably, staring at the new arrival. Saix crossed his arms and dared anyone to comment on the bath towel and undersized coat.

"Saix, why in the worlds are you wearing that?" Roxas wondered.

"Hey, look!" Axel said brightly before a claymore could be summoned, "I found Saix! So, Sai, do my mission rewards get quadrupled since I finished it so quickly?"

'...And yet somehow,' Saix thought, 'somehow, it was still worth it. I do not understand.'

O.O.O

Author's Notes: The only thing that makes the second Tinker Bell movie worth watching is Jesse McCartney, but I saw how the plot could be useful for this drabble.

*spoiler alert* In lost Treasure, Tink is entrusted with the honor of crafting this year's scepter for an annual autumn festival in Pixie Hollow. The scepter is supposed to hold a treasured moonstone that will refresh the fairies' supply of pixie dust when used under certain conditions. While in the process of constructing the scepter, Tink accidentally shatters the irreplaceable moonstone. In the
end, she and her friend Terence (a sparrowman [male pixie] who has the same voice as Roxas and the same face as Peter Pan XD) figure out that they can use the shattered pieces to actually greatly enhance the moonstone's power, so that it's much more effective than it was when it was whole.

The AU bits are that the movie actually takes place before Tink meets Peter, and also that Tink and Terence fixed the staff en route to the festival before making a dramatic last-second entrance, rather than working on it in a cave closer to home and having the means to test it before the festival.

Complete: 23/101
The Grey Area was fairly lively most evenings between 6:00 and 8:00, since everyone was usually home by that time, were finishing dinner, and the more social members congregating together so they'd have something better to do with their time than go straight to bed.

A dark portal materialized near the head of the room.

"Hey, it's the vice-Superior!" Xigbar called from where he was playing cards with Luxord and Marluxia. "Are you seriously just now RTCing? You do realize we don't get paid for overtime, right?"

"We don't get paid at all," Marluxia pointed out.

Ignoring them, Saïx made his way over to where Axel was pulling a munny orb out from behind Xion's ear. "Girl, you need to wash behind your ears more."

"How are you doing that?!" Xion shrieked in mystified delight, rubbing her fingers over her ears as if she expected to find more munny there.

Saïx came to a stop behind the couch Number VIII was lounging on. "Axel," he said in a low voice. "I need to talk to you."

Axel glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, hey, Saïx. Where's Roxas?"
Saïx folded his arms and looked away. "That's what I need to talk to you about," he said through gritted teeth.

Xion's eyes widened. Axel turned all the way around so that he was kneeling backwards on the couch, eyes narrowed in a glare. "You and Roxas were partners on today's mission, right? Where is he?"

"I'll discuss this matter with you once we're in private," Saïx ground out.

The rest of the Organization was starting to look a little too interested in their conversation, so Axel grabbed Xion's hand, shoved Saïx into a dark corridor, and sent the three of them to his room. Where he poised a chakram at the Luna Diviner's throat and growled, "TALK."

Saïx sighed heavily. "We went to Atlantica for recon, but were caught off guard by that octopus-woman. At some point during the boss battle, my partner fell into a shelf right over the return point and broke half the bottles. I think the potions must have sullied the portal, since the corridor seemed distorted afterwards, and I lost track of Roxas on the way home. Not to mention that I ended up on the ceiling of a cottage in Wonderland at the end, rather than at the castle."

"So what happened to him?" Axel and Xion demanded in unison.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. I've searched. For hours." The I don't know part was unspoken but clear.

"Nice to know you care," Axel growled, dismissing his weapon and opening another corridor.

"Lord Xemnas will be quite displeased to hear that we're missing a valuable Keybearer," Number VII said in his haughtiest tone.

"Saïx, shut up."

Roxas was in none of the known worlds. So then they pressed on and discovered new ones. Saïx dutifully took out his clipboard, but didn't say a word when Axel ripped it out of his hands and tossed it off the side of Notre Dame cathedral.
By what must have been nearly eleven o'clock in the evening back home, though this world was full of bright afternoon sunshine, they found a clue: some excited teenagers talking about "that cute new freshman with spiky hair and blue eyes."

Axel swerved mid-step and made a beeline for the speakers, a group of girls eating lunch at a table in the courtyard, but Saïx quickly caught his arm. "I told you, you're too old to be pouncing on random cute things," he growled.

"You think I care about new ones when one of my favorites is in trouble?!"

"I'm telling you," Saïx said in an exasperated tone, "there are certain appearances to keep up." He nodded at their younger companion. "Number XIV is small. There's a much better chance of people assuming Xion belongs here."

"Oh." Axel stooped so he could gaze into his young friend's eyes. "Xi," he said anxiously, "hey, can you go over to those girls and ask them if they've seen Roxas?"

"Of course!" She only hadn't earlier because their talk about 'cute things' confused her.

Xion went over to the girls, wishing she was wearing something more like what they were, instead of this ominous black coat that seemed to stick out more than usual here. "Hi."

The girls all gave her dubious looks.

"Um...I'm looking for a friend of mine, his name is Roxas. I think you might have been talking about him earlier."

A few minutes later, the trio was heading purposely for the school auditorium. "This really takes me back," Axel murmured as they moved down the halls.

"All well and good for you," Saïx grumbled. "I do not have overly fond memories of high school...."
"What's high school?" Xion asked curiously.

Roxas was onstage, singing a duet with a pretty blonde girl, sounding surprisingly good despite the fact that he seemed alarmed by her aggressively flirty dance moves.

"He's okay!" Xion cried gladly. Then, "Axel? That looks fun, can I sing and dance, too?"

"Um...sure, go ahead."

"No," Saïx said firmly. "We are retrieving our thirteenth member and returning home at once."

"No," Axel countered, "we are staying until the kids finish enjoying themselves, or I'll tell that lady in charge about you placing first in the Garden's last vocal competition."

Xion looked from one to the other. "What's a vocal competition?"

Saïx silently stalked into an aisle and sat down, crossing his arms in a clear "I am sulking" pose.

"Sorry, Xi, looks like I can't tell you," Axel grinned. "Go on and give Roxas a hand." She smiled back and scampered off. Axel sat down beside Saïx, resting his arms behind his head. "You know, when I first realized you'd lost Roxas, I was ready to kill you. Be glad he's okay and I can forgive you, because otherwise I'd be down to one friend, and that would stink."

"I've done well enough with one friend my whole life," Saïx said in a low voice. "Lately, I've been wondering if it's gone down to zero."

"Be nice to my cute things, and it never will."

"Hmph. Easier said than done."

"Eh! What's not to like about them!?"
"Ugh...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: For those of you who haven't read Girl In White, "cute things" is how my version of Axel now refers to kids he likes, especially Roxas & Xion.

I had a hard time figuring out where to end this. Saïx wouldn't stop talking. o.O Therefore it ended on a slightly lower note than I'd intended, but...gah, my headcanon's all fluff. I don't know how I'm gonna be able to pull off broken AkuSai in other fics like the CatC sequel. ;;

Thanks to Taliax, I'm convinced that Saïx is a good singer, a secret which he now guards with his life. XD

I had a few choices for worlds that Saïx could have lost Roxas in, but I ultimately ended up going with High School Musical. I really enjoy those movies *unashamed fan*, and I've always loved the idea of a character voiced by Jesse McCartney getting to sing along with the Wildcats in Kingdom Hearts. The chance to toss canon Saïx into a high school for this fic was just icing on the cake.

Complete: 24/101
Fire & Moonlight: Bee (theme 25)

Fire & Moonlight, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Drabble challenge by Wishing-Fire, written by Raberba girl

25. Bee

Summary: Round Room meetings are boring. Doesn't help that Axel was probably up late playing video games the night before.

A/N: They're 15 or 16 years old here.

0.0.0

"Our top priority at the moment should be to find new members. Though we have been doing well enough with our current numbers, we must step up recruitment if we are to achieve our goal of creating Kingdom Hearts...."

As Xemnas droned on, Saïx gave the impression of paying close attention, but was, in fact, discreetly surveying the other members gathered in the Round Room. Xigbar was lounging haphazardly in his seat, but undoubtedly not missing a thing; Xaldin was looming ominously, as if ready to tear off the head of anyone who annoyed him; Vexen was either taking vigorous notes or working out his next project and totally ignoring the meeting; Lexaeus was...being Lexaeus; Zexion was leaning back in a relaxed manner but listening closely; and Axel was....

Saïx frowned.

"...hearts lurking in the dark, grieving and wailing, all that glorious dark power just waiting to be harnessed...."

Xigbar was beginning to grin. Xaldin's eyes narrowed in growing suspicion. Both of them were staring at the same thing.

"...and then we shall merge with the Void and be indwelt with the great Nil--"
Saïx summoned his weapon and hurled it with all his berserker strength. "Haaaahhhh!"

The claymore's impact with the head of Axel's chair was explosive, causing bits of shattered white marble and clouds of dust to rain down. The young red-haired Nobody shrieked and nearly toppled off the throne-like structure, catching himself with both hands just in time.

"S...Saïx! Did you just try to kill me?!

"Number VII, explain yourself," Xemnas demanded.

Saïx sat almost demurely, legs crossed, both hands resting on one knee. "There was a bee," he murmured.

Everyone stared at him for a long moment.

"W...Well, Saïx, thanks for killing that bee for me," Axel finally said weakly, which made Xigbar laugh.

"If I may, Lord Xemnas," Zexion finally said, apparently choosing to ignore the interruption, "I would greatly appreciate it if you could explain your last statement in more detail, since...in my ignorance...I did not quite understand it."

"You didn't understand it because it made no sense," Xigbar said bluntly. "Look, Xem-sama, seeing as how the rest of us are Void-challenged and all, let's maybe stick to more practical business, like trying to figure out how to collect hearts without a Keyblade."

After the meeting, as soon as they had corridored to Twilight Town together, Saïx turned to Axel and smacked him upside the head.

"Ow!"

"Moron."
"Why are you picking on me all of a sudden!?"

"You're getting off easy. You should have seen the look Xaldin was giving you."

Axel gulped. "Oh."

"Lea, don't ever fall asleep during a meeting again."

"Yessir."

---

**Author's Notes**: Inspired by a scene from the movie *Ever After*.

Ftr, Xigbar was using the "-sama" honorific teasingly here.

**Complete**: 25/101
Fire & Moonlight: Chocolate (substitute for theme 31)

Fire & Moonlight, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Drabble challenge by Wishing-Fire, written by Raberba girl

31. Chocolate*

**ROUGH DRAFT

Summary: Valentine's Day is coming up at the Castle That Never Was.

0.0.0

The Assassins and Samurai were not allowing him into the kitchen. Saïx frowned and was about to annihilate them, when Axel suddenly appeared out of a dark corridor. "Do you still like cake better, or would you rather have candy this year?"

Saïx frowned. "What?"

"Just answer the question. I need to get back in there before the kids make something explode."

"I thought that making things explode was your job," Saïx said dryly. "Axel, please tell me you three aren't doing what I think you're doing."

"Okay, I won't," Axel grinned.

Saïx sighed.

"Xion's doing it the Japanese way and Roxas and me are doing it the American way so that no one gets jealous."

"...."
"I promise it won't interfere with our missions," Axel teased in a goody-two-shoes voice.

"...Just make it clear that I've never in my life given a White Day gift to anyone, and I'm not about to start now."

"Duly noted. Jerk."

"You also have no right to block access to the kitchen during suppertime."

"I do if you still get fed." Axel handed Saïx a thermos full of soup and corridored away again.

The next day, Saïx opened his bathroom locker to find a giri chocolate cake from Xion and a Valentine's card from Roxas inscribed with the following poem: "Axel's hair is red, yours is blue. If you give us the day off, I will like you."

Actually, it was not until later that he noticed these. At the time, all his attention was occupied in watching two dozen roses cascading out onto the floor. "AXEL."

0.0.0

*Theme 31 was missing from the original challenge, so I made this one up.*

**Author's Notes:** You can look up Valentine's Day in Japan; basically, girls give boys chocolate, and a month later on White Day, boys give the girls gifts in return. Giri-choko ("obligation chocolate") are Valentines given to people out of social politeness. There's other kinds of chocolate that you'd give to people you're closer to or the one you're in love with.

I purposely did not specify the color of the roses....

Complete: 31/101
Saïx walked into the kitchen at 6:30 in the morning to find Number XIV splattering eggs all over the counter. "What are you doing?"

The replica yelped, jumping back and whirling to face him at the same time. "Oh, Saïx! Um, uh, g-good morning. I...I just...."

Saïx came over to inspect the devastation more closely. He could practically sense XIV cringing beside him. "You've made a complete mess."

"I know," the creature said miserably. "I was trying to make a waffle for Axel, because he said he wanted one yesterday but we were out of flour, and I bought some on the way home from my last mission but I'm really bad at cooking, and when I messed up the waffle I tried to make a pancake instead, but...I'm really bad at cooking."

"That is obvious." Saïx sighed, buying time to think. He really shouldn't. It was stupid. But, well....

Pushing XIV out of the way, he expertly cracked some eggs into the mixing bowl, added flour, added milk, and ten minutes later he was scooping a second set of perfect pastries from the waffle iron onto a plate.

XIV, though hooded as always, still gave the impression of staring at him in astonishment. "S-Saïx! Your waffles are so beautiful!"
"Hush." He stepped away from the stove and glared down at the replica. "I will be most displeased if I ever catch you wasting food again."

"Y-Yes, sir."

Saïx stalked back out of the kitchen, only realizing later that he had forgotten to make breakfast for himself.

That evening, he entered his room and found a plate of blueberry waffles on his bedside table that he most certainly had not put there. His Berserkers would have only allowed one person into his chamber without bothering to alert him.

The waffles were drizzled with honey rather than syrup, exactly the way he had eaten them when he was a child. Honey had also been poured around the edges of the plate to spell out a message. *Thanks, Sai!*

"...Hmph." Saïx sat down on the edge of his bed, picked up the plate, and began to eat the first waffles he had tasted in almost ten years. When he had finished, not even a crumb was left.

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** W00t, first time I didn't have to trim it down! Btw, I wrote this before I'd finished Theme 4, so it strikes me as being a bit...old-fashioned, as far as the development of my AkuSai writing goes? Something like that.

Complete: 33/101
Summary: Axel & Saïx meet their servants for the first time.

A/N: They're very new to the Organization here.

Losing his heart as his homeworld and family were destroyed, being recruited by mysterious guys in black, shrouded in this heavy coat, standing now in the center of this blindingly white room with these shadowed people staring down at them from their lofty thrones.... Lea knew he should be freaked out. Or angry. Or at least annoyed. Something.

But there was nothing, like all these horrible things had happened to someone else, someone he didn't care about, someone who didn't exist. *Why can't I at least feel something?* That didn't even bother him, but it should. *If things were the way they're supposed to be, I'd be upset.* He shifted closer to Isa until their shoulders touched. Isa glanced over at him, and Lea started to grin before realizing he needed a more appropriate expression. "I'm scared," Lea whispered.

Isa smiled a little and took his hand. "I'm scared, too."

Lea looked down at their clasped hands. Still nothing, even though he should be amused. "You're such a girl."

"Save me, Lea," Isa murmured in a playfully squeaky tone.

Lea sighed and let go, stepping back again. "Man, this bites."

Isa sighed also as he dropped the pretense, laying a hand regretfully over his empty chest.
"Agreed."

"Oi," someone called from above, "are you two paying attention?"

"Yessir," Lea and Isa chorused together.

Number VII, Saïx, the Luna Diviner; Number VIII, Axel, the Flurry of Dancing Flames. Strange names that didn't belong to them. Names too colorful to suit the total blank their personalities felt like now.

"You'll have a day to get accustomed to the change, and then your training will begin."

"Yessir."

The huge silent guy showed them to their new rooms afterward. Lea watched his best friend disappear through a blue portal, then was ushered into his own cold bare room, completely empty except for some basic furniture. All white. With the black eternal night of the World That Never Was yawning through the large window in the middle of it.

"Very cheerful," Lea remarked dryly. The big guy simply walked out again without answering. Lea sighed and flopped onto the bed. "Laaame. Lame. Just...all of it."

He wasn't sure how long he'd been lying there - apparently he could no longer get bored, either, which might be the first advantage he'd discovered about this whole lousy situation - when something happened. A whirling sound, kind of like whenever one of those black portals opened. Lea looked up and stared.

A bunch of strange creatures had appeared out of nowhere. It belatedly occurred to him that he should be surprised and alarmed. After debating about it for a minute, he decided to go with what he should be feeling rather than what he actually felt. "Whoa!" He leaped to his feet. "What the heck are these things!?"

They were kind of like the creepy Dusk creatures, as white as the castle and vaguely humanoid, but they were also different. Much larger feet, drifting instead of wriggling, wings with long spines all down their lengths....
The creatures advanced, some floating, some diving straight into the ground and gliding closer like sharks through water.

"Hey. Hey now." Too late, Lea realized that he was surrounded. "Argh, go away!" He scrambled up to stand on the bed. The things hesitated, gazing at him with an almost wary air. Then one of those in the floor slooshed into the bed and swiped at his feet with its wings.

"GAH!"

Lea made a break for it, bounding down and shoving his way between two of the things, wincing as their wing blades tore through his sleeves. "Leave me alone!" He burst out into the room with all the portal doors, where he was not the only one making a commotion. "Isa!"

"Lea!"

"These creepy things--!"

"They're following me!"

"Wait, you too?!" Lea's mouth dropped open as a hulking creature came stumbling out of Isa's portal, dragging a huge weapon. "What are they?"

"A pain in the--" Isa suddenly dove at Lea, tackling him out of the way right before the club came swinging at him.

Lea realized that the weapon was actually dragging its wielder, not the other way around. "That is messed up!" Then he saw his own harriers tumbling out of his portal, surging forward. He instinctively rolled on top of Isa and cried out in pain as the blades came slashing across his back rather than at their intended target. The creatures recoiled uneasily.

"Lea," Isa whispered. Then his eyes widened. "Get down!" His turn this time to roll Lea out of the way again; the club came crashing down into the floor just shy of a few crimson locks of hair. Isa scrambled to his feet, gripping Lea's arm to haul him up as well, then they ran. Geez, it was just like the shadow monsters' attack on the Garden a few days ago...the only difference being a
total lack of that day's panic and horror.

"Why are they after us?!"

"How should I know!?"

"This is stupid!"

"Shouldn't someone in this castle have noticed by now?"

"AAAHHHH!"

"Aahhhhh."

"AAAHHHH."

"Aahhh."

"Scared yet?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"I can't decide if that's a good or a bad thing, considering that we're running for our lives...."

They skidded around a corner and smacked straight into the guy with the eye patch.  "Whoa! Where are you lads headed off to in such a hurry?"
"Those things!"

"They're dangerous."

"Came out of nowhere!"

"Chasing us--"

"They're trying to kill us!"

Xigbar looked up as the whole swarm of creatures came barreling around the corner. "What the...."

"There they are!"

"It's like they've got it in for us."

Xigbar raised his hands. There was a swirling sound, and weapons like crossbows appeared in them. These he pointed at the advancing creatures and fired a whole line of purple beams at them. "Oi! You punks back off."

Interestingly, the creatures obeyed.

"Hmph." Xigbar adopted a lecturing pose. "I know you hooligans are all new at the Nobody thing, but here's Rule #1: Trying to hurt your masters is a huge no-no."

"They're Nobodies?" Lea realized.

Isa frowned thoughtfully. "Like you said we are now?"

"They're not just any Nobodies, they're your Nobodies," Xigbar laughed.
"Ours?!"

"Each of us has a whole posse of lesser Nobody servants," Xigbar explained. "They can come in handy, but you gotta show 'em who's boss." After he had explained a few things, made them look like idiots, then traipsed off and left them to 'play,' Lea and Isa turned dubiously back to their new little private armies.

"Okay," Lea tried, "so, listen up, you...things."

"Berserkers," Isa muttered. "That's what mine are, rampaging all over the place like mindless beasts...."

"Yeah, and you freaking Assassins need to stop creeping around like obsessed stalkers."

Isa raised an eyebrow.

Ignoring him, Lea went on, "This is the first thing we need to get straight: no attacking my friend Isa here. EVER."

"Your orders are the same," Isa warned his Berserkers. "If you even think of harming Lea, I will beat your heads off your shoulders."

"With your bare hands?" Lea teased.

"If necessary," Isa stated with a straight face.

"Aw, I feel so loved."

"Nice trick, considering you're missing anything to feel with."

"Whatever, it's the thought that counts. And you!" Lea pointed at the horde of miserably hunched
Assassins. "If you try to hurt Isa again, I will seriously set you on fire and-- Whoa!"

Both boys stared as a jet of flame burst from Lea's stabbing finger.

"Wh...What was...?"

Warily, Lea waved his hand in the air. A small banner of fire trailed almost shyly in its wake.

"...."

"...."

"...So where's my superpower?" Isa wondered.

"Luna Diviner," Lea mused. Then he grinned. "Hey, Isa, let's figure out how to work those dark corridor things and see if we can find a world with a moon...."

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**Author's Notes:** I guess they can't talk to their servants like they can in CatC. Or else that's something that doesn't happen instantaneously.

Axel & Saïx talk way too much. I have trouble figuring out where to end stories sometimes, I have to wait until they say something that won't make a 'The end' sound weird coming right afterwards.

Complete: 34/101
Fire & Moonlight: Never Again (theme 35)

Fire & Moonlight, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Drabble challenge by Wishing-Fire, written by Raberba girl

35. Never Again (rough draft)

Summary: Saïx officially hates this world.

A/N: They're maybe 19 or 20 here.

O.o.o

"...but first, let me introduce our guests: Mr. Flamehead and Miss Blue!" Bo Peep gushed. "Everyone say hi."

"Hi~!" Barbie, Woody, and Buzz said.

Mr. Flamehead waved back and Miss Blue gave a shy smile. "Nice to meet you!"

"Now, you two can sit together here by the boys. Would you like sugar in your tea, Mr. Flamehead?"

"Wait a minute, it's supposed to be ladies first," Mr. Flamehead pointed out.

"Oh yeah! I'm sorry, Miss Blue. Would you like sugar in your tea?"

"Oh, yes, thank you ever so much," Miss Blue said happily. "*slurp* Mm, this is delicious!"

"I'm so glad you like it, Miss Blue. And you, Mr. Flamehead?"
"No thanks, please, I want coffee, um, ma'am," Mr. Flamehead said.

"Well, okay. Here you are!"

"*slurp* Mmm, yummy!"

"Wait, that's hot coffee," someone large and unspecified mumbled to herself.

"I mean," Mr. Flamehead gasped, "Ouch! That's hot!"

"Oh, poor thing," Miss Blue said in concern. "Did you burn your mouth, dear?"

"Just a little. I'm fine."

"Oh, good!"

"Well then," Barbie said briskly, "why don't you two tell us about yourselves? I've never seen you in Andy's room before."

"Well," Mr. Flamehead explained, "we just moved into town, but all the boxes with our clothes fell out of the moving van and that's why we're wearing these weird black coats."

"We're really not bad guys," Miss Blue whimpered, "but everyone thinks we are. You people are the first ones here who've been nice to us."

"Well, we like you a lot," Woody assured her. "In fact, we're going to offer you a big warm welcome by singing--!"

"Molly!"
A rather sweaty-looking boy with a basketball under one arm was standing in the doorway, looking disapprovingly at their tormentor.

"Oh, hi, Andy."

"Molly, I told you to stay out of my room."

"I was just playing," the girl said nonchalantly. "I wanted to see your new toys."

"New toys?" Andy came over and crouched down to peer at the two black-coated action figures sitting at the tea table with Woody and Buzz. "Where did these come from?" he murmured, picking them up in one hand to inspect them more closely.

"They're yours, aren't they?"

"I've never seen 'em before in my life. Not a big deal, though; this happens to me a lot," Andy laughed. He set the figures back down again and stood up. "I'm gonna go take a shower. Stay out of my room, Molly, okay?"

"But I wanna play with your toys," she protested. "It's not like you ever play with them anymore."

"Well...you can borrow Buzz and the new ones, but leave Woody alone." 

"I'm not gonna ruin him, Andy, I'm not a baby. You're the dummy who ripped his arm off."

"Molly," he said warningly. "Do you wanna use Buzz or don't you?"

"*sigh* FINE," she said dramatically.

Andy turned back and stooped to pick up Woody, then frowned. "Hey, where'd those two new figures go?"
After the kids had left, Woody climbed off the dresser and found that the newcomers had come out of hiding. Mr. Flame-- That is, Axel was laughing and simultaneously using language that Woody was glad the preschool toys weren't around to hear, as Saïx hefted an enormous club-like accessory and used it to vengefully smash the basketball more than halfway across the room. It was pretty impressive.

"Never again," Saïx snarled. "We are never accepting a mission in this world ever again."

"You mean you didn't have fun at all, Miss Blue?" Axel teased.

"Call me that again and you'll get a claymore to the face."

"Oh, come on, that wasn't too bad, was it?" Woody interjected anxiously. "You should've seen Buzz's Mrs. Nesbitt act a few years ago."

Saïx shuddered.

"Oh, whatever," Axel sighed. "It's not like we could hate it even if we'd wanted to."

"Speak for yourself. You didn't have to play a female."

Axel smirked. "Maybe you should consider getting a haircut."

Saïx glared.

Woody went on eagerly, "Really, considering how little we've been played with lately, that was great! And it's ten times better when Andy does it, too; you guys should really stick around."

"NO."
"No, thanks," Axel said quickly. "Like we said, mission and all. So hey, about those creepy animal figures you were telling us about before we got interrupted, did they happen to have a symbol on them...?"

After some thought, Axel continued, "Well, I don't know if it's the right time or place to ask, but it's something that might be important. Did those symbols have any significance or meaning?"

Author's Notes: This one was hard, and I'm relieved that I eventually managed to come up with a plot bunny. I like the concept (Toy Story needs more love in the KHverse), but not the execution, especially the beginning. *wince*

Complete: 35/101
Summary: "It's necessary, fine, I get it. But do you have to act like you're enjoying it so much?"

A/N: This is their first week or two in the Organization. Also slightly AU to my other stuff as far as mechanics.

"You know," Lea coughed, feeling like some of his ribs had been broken, "I seriously don't mind you torturing us For Science - because I CAN'T - but can you at least not make that creepy pedo laugh while you're doing it?"

"I thought I already explained to you the purpose of these exercises, stupid boy," Vexen huffed through the speakers. He himself was sitting smug and safe at the control panel on the other side of the transparent wall. "If you're going to be a useful member of this Organization, you're going to need a far more efficient way to store and keep track of the physical damage that befalls you. I should note that our restorative items will have no effect on you otherwise."

"I get the whole 'LOL we're gonna give you HP bars!' thing," Lea wheezed resentfully, climbing to his feet with difficulty.

"Then you understand the purpose behind this," Vexen sniffed. "I'm not doing it for my own enjoyment."

"Could've fooled me," Lea growled. He glanced over into the other room where Isa was trapped, the two of them separated by another transparent partition. His best friend was slumped in the middle of the floor, eyes closed, breathing labored. "Vexen, it's been hours. Why the freak do we need to get this done in one sitting? Isa can't take much more of this."

"Number VII's name is Saïx, and he'll be fine once I open the window again," Vexen said.
dismissively, reaching for the controls.

"You IDIOT!" Lea shouted, causing the scientist to pause and stare at him in outrage. "The moonlight's not energizing him, it's *draining* him! It makes him go Berserk and then he comes out of it even more exhausted than before! His recovery time's taking forever now, are you *blind*? You're gonna turn him into a frickin' zombie if you keep this up!"

"Don't you dare speak to me that way, Number VIII," Vexen thundered, and slammed his hand against a lever.

More ice monsters. Lea gritted his teeth and hefted the chakrams again, which seemed to be getting heavier and heavier the longer this nightmare went on. He glimpsed Isa struggling to his feet, but then the place was flooded with moonlight, and the berserker's wordless roar drowned out all thought.

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The cold seemed to fill him until he *became* it. Unable to move or scream, he wondered if maybe Vexen had killed him and this was hell, but then the ice that encased him finally shattered.

Lea was flung to the floor, and his head knocked against the partition alongside which Isa had also ended up sprawled. Two sets of agonized green eyes met and held. "Vexen," Lea heard himself whimpering distantly, "please...." He had no strength left. If another monster appeared, he'd have to just lie here and let it finish him off.

"You know," Vexen lectured mercilessly, "you both could make this a lot easier on yourselves if you put some effort into figuring out how to summon your lesser Nobody servants."

"Please...."

Isa slowly reached up and touched his fingertips to the barrier. Lea pressed his palm against it as well, as if they could somehow break through to each other.

"Oh, stop whining, we're nearly there. HP installation is 87% complete, so pull yourselves together and keep it up for just a little longer...."
Author's Notes: Because if you think about it, KH characters can be down to 1 HP and still run around and fight like normal. Outside of cutscenes, they only show pain when they're in the actual act of taking damage.

Long complicated boring origin story: Okay, so you know how the "No" story was originally written for the "Flawed" theme? This story, "Laugh," was what I was actually aiming for (Vexen experimenting on young Axel and Saïx), so I'm glad I finally managed to write that plot bunny properly. The HP bar stuff occurred to me last-minute, though. My original plunny for "Laugh" was actually a cute (and platonic) Saïx/Olette story, which meant I obviously couldn't post it as part of F&M. (Coming up with an AkuSai version was much harder.) Now that Taliax inadvertently helped me figure out how to flesh out the SaiLette, I'll be able to write and post it separately.

Complete: 38/101
Summary: Sometimes, even shielding every bit of flesh from neck to toe isn't enough. Thanks a lot, Belle.

Axel knew it was going to be a bad day when a herd of Berserkers showed up during his Wonderland mission, seized him, and dragged him into a dark corridor. (Sometimes the lesser Nobodies' stupidity could get really irritating. Seriously, was "Put me down, you morons, I can walk by myself!" that hard to understand?) By the time they reached their destination and Axel had been dumped unceremoniously on the ground, he had pretty much figured it out.

They were in the courtyard of Beast's Castle, which was empty. Axel climbed to his feet, shooed away the Berserkers, took off his coat and boots in case his hunch was right, then went tip-toeing up to the castle doors. The secret side-entrance would have been better, but he would have to avoid using those noisy dark corridors whenever possible.

Inside, Saïx blended well with the shadows beneath the stairs, and it took Axel a minute to spot him. The redhead left the front doors cracked open - even if the castle servants came and closed them later, it would at least buy Saïx some time. Axel crept as quietly as possible across the front hall and then crouched down before his old friend.

Saïx, kneeling as still as a statue with his hands over his ears and his eyes shut, nevertheless could obviously sense him. He would have caught Axel's scent from the moment he set foot in this world; he could hear the fabric of Axel's clothes creasing with each movement. His lips parted slightly, though no sound came out. An large, angry red mark stood out vividly on his pale cheek. The silver candlestick that had caused it was still lying on the floor nearby.

After a long pause, Axel reached out and gently touched a lock of the other's hair. "Sai. *Look at me.*" 'So I can talk to you, moron,' he added in his thoughts.
Very slowly, those golden eyes cracked open.

It had been ages since Axel had needed to use sign language, so he was a bit rusty; some of the words he would have to spell out in letters. Luckily, the first question was easy. "T.L.?

The answer was a long time coming. 

"...10."

'Well, wonderful,' Axel thought. 'There goes the rest of my day, and my evening, and probably some of the night, too. Tomorrow'd better be a Vacation Day, or so help me...'. What he actually asked with his hands was, "G-U-A-R-D?"

Saïx gave an infinitesimal, affirmative nod. "Yes."


Agonized as they were, those golden eyes could still narrow in a glare.

Axel shook his head. "All right, all right." Then he signed, "L-A-T-E-R." When Saïx was a little more functional.

Saïx bared his teeth a little. "I hate you."

Axel blew a soundless kiss. "You know you love me." Then he sighed silently and very carefully positioned himself so he could keep an eye on both the hall and his friend, ready to chase off any Heartless or distract any castle inhabitants who might wander by.

There wasn't really much Axel could do at Level 10 besides stand guard and tell stories, both to try to distract Saïx from the pain and to prevent Axel from going out of his mind with boredom. He made the wavy motion that had come to mean "Once upon a time. Boy, D-E-S-E-R-T," pause, "S-T-R-T-R-A-T, princess...." Having to spell out half of those forgotten words took longer, but at least he could see the tension in Saïx's face relax just slightly, as the Diviner concentrated on trying to puzzle out the letters that were running together. "Once upon a time, there lived a boy, a street orphan, who lived in a far-off desert place and fell in love with a princess...."
By the time Axel ran out of the cooler stories and had resorted to princesses, Saïx was shifting around a little, he was able to press his hands harder over his ears, and he kept wincing instead of his face being frozen in that permanent expression of agony.

"C-O-A-T?" Axel asked when he had finished "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

Saïx nodded, and Axel helped him take it off, watching in vague sympathy as the berserker reacted strongly to the sound of the zipper being unfastened. At last, Axel was able to set the coat aside, its stiff material no longer able to crinkle with every tiny movement. Saïx, exhausted from maintaining the same position for so long, gingerly lay down, and Axel helped move his hair aside so that he wouldn't have to feel as much of it being crushed.

"No ice cream C-U-Z-O-F you," Axel pouted. Those poor kids were probably wondering where the heck he was. 'Sorry, Rox, Xi,' he thought. 'I'm not gonna be able to make it to the clock tower today.'

Saiïx opened his eyes again and stared at him for a long time. Then his hands slowly came away from his hyper-sensitive ears to sign, "Sorry."

Axel blinked. Then feigned great astonishment. "SORRY? You?"

Another glare. "Shut up." The eyes slid away, no longer meeting Axel's. Hands rose again. "...Thank you."

Axel posed theatrically. "I'm about to die of shock!"

"Shut UP."

When he finished "Sleeping Beauty," Axel knew it was dinnertime because he could smell stuff that made his mouth water (and was making Saïx grimace). He had never gotten to eat lunch and was starving by now. "T.L.?" he asked.

"5."
Axel nodded. "You can eat, then," he spoke in the barest of whispers.

Saïx flinched at the mere suggestion. "NONONONONO."

"You need to eat. Trust me. I'll be back." Saïx was reaching out insistently, but Axel ignored him and got up, gliding away as quietly as possible.

He came back (after stuffing his face behind the cooks' backs) with some dry bread and water he had stolen from the kitchen. Saïx's eyes were fixed apprehensively on the bread. "Trust me," Axel whispered again. "Driest, most tasteless thing I could find." Saïx's gaze slid, almost pleadingly, to the water. Axel rolled his eyes. "Fine...water first, but then bread." Stupid nanny instincts. Even as a Nobody, he couldn't seem to get rid of them.

After he had gotten Saïx to eat, he told more stories until he had run out and it was late in the evening. Roxas and Xion were probably wandering around like lost kittens, as Xigbar said they did whenever they didn't have Axel to entertain them. "Torture Level?"

"2."

"You think you can make it back?"

Saïx opened his mouth in a silent sigh, closed his eyes, and nodded.

"Okay. I'm gonna open a corridor now."

Saïx turned away, crushing his hands harder over his ears in preparation.

The castle was quiet when they returned. Axel made sure Saïx was settled, got him to sign a Vacation Day note with less bullying than he anticipated, posted it in the Grey Area, then headed off to Roxas's room.

The kids were drowsing on the bed, discarded video game controllers strewed across the sheets as a racing game's victory sequence looped endlessly on the TV screen. As soon as Axel entered the room, Roxas and Xion leaped to their feet, sleepiness forgotten.
"It's Axel!"

"Axel's back!"

They ran to him before he had even taken two steps.

"You didn't come to the clock tower!"

"Where were you, Axel?!"

He couldn't very well say that he'd been nursing their boss through an extreme allergic reaction. "Ah, just out and about...."

The next morning (late the next morning - though it would have been even later if he had remembered to turn off his stupid alarm clock), Axel came into the dining room to find Saïx alone, nursing a cup of coffee and sluggishly going through mission reports. The red mark on his cheek had faded significantly, though it was still noticeable.

"How'd it happen, anyway?" Axel asked, sitting down with a plate of waffles.

"The girl," Saïx mumbled. "Belle. Thought I was a Heartless in the shadows. Threw that candlestick at me and ran." He gulped down more coffee, eyes firmly fixed on his reports.

Axel laughed. "I should write her a thank-you note. Got us a nice vacation."

"Shut up."

"Aw, don't be mad, Sai. Wasn't that bad, was it?"

"YOU try having all your senses ludicrously inflated," Saïx snarled. "And losing a work day, and dealing with two aborted missions, and having to explain to Lord Xemnas why--" He shivered a
"You know what I hear, Sai?" Axel sing-songed. "A looooot of ingratitude. What happened to 'Thank you so much for waiting on me hand and foot yesterday, my dear Axel!' or 'I don't know what I would have done without your company, Axel!' or something sugary like that?"

Saïx crushed a hand through his hair, seeming more fixated on his reports than ever. "...Thank you," he mumbled. "You...really...helped me out."

"Sorry, what did you say? Coooouldn't quite catch that."

A golden-eyed glare emerged from the strands of blue hair. "Don't push your luck."

Axel grinned. "You're welcome, Sai."

o.o.o

Author's Notes: Hey, Taliax, I finally figured out what Saïx is allergic to in the CatC universe! :D

I know nothing about sign language, urgh.... They're not using American Sign Language here (it's Radiant Garden Sign Language, lol), but still. :/ Sorry....

Silver makes all of Saïx's senses hyper-sensitive, in case I didn't make it clear enough. And apparently Axel is quite used to having to deal with Sai's allergic reactions. :p

This story, along with "Gleam," is one of my favorites in this series so far.

Complete: 39/101
"Why does she even have that lever?" Saïx snarled as he stormed back inside, giving the crocodile behind him a brutal kick. It scampered away with an injured whimper, and Saïx irritably shook himself to get rid of all the water. Not that he, in his heartless state, could actually get angry about all this, but the sheer levels of indignity warranted SOME kind of reaction, even if it exceeded what he was usually inclined to display.

Axel was laughing too hard to do more than bring up his hands as a feeble shield against the brief shower. "Saïx, the only thing funnier than watching you walk around as an actual dog is seeing you stroll in with a crocodile attached to your butt."

The blue-furred animal's eyes began to cloud over with an ominous yellow haze.

"Whoa! Hold on, I didn't mean it, I'm not laughing anymore," Axel burst out, even though he was still trying to hold back giggles. "C'mon, I'll let you pick the lever this time."

Their first mission together in six months, and of course it would be one where Saïx ended up on the wrong end of a bottle of maroon potion. He was starting to remember now why he usually scheduled himself for solo assignments. "That one."

"All-righty, then! As Luxord says, let us see what fate has in store for us this time!" He yanked on the lever.

Which in turn yanked the world out from under them.
At least, that's how it felt as the two Nobodies were flung into a roller coaster car. They were too busy trying to catch their breaths to really pay attention to the recorded message now playing: "Please remain seated, and keep your arms and legs in at all times."

"What did it say?" Saïx panted faintly.

"I dunno, I'm still--"

The car dropped.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!" ...is what they both would have been screaming if they still had hearts, seeing as how they were now hurtling down an insanely steep and twisting track at absolutely ludicrous speeds. As it was, Saïx merely closed his eyes and started an experiment to see how creative he could get with swear phrases before being censored, and Axel whooped like a little kid.

"Faster, faster! Saïx! Put your hands in the air! I mean, your paws! Whatever!"

"You are a moron."

"Ha ha, I haven't heard that juvenile an insult from you in almost four years. Good for you, Sai!"

Saïx tried to make a furious retort, but then wished he hadn't, since what actually came out was a canine bark. "I mean...stay focused, we're on a mission!"

"Does that mean this is all gonna end up in the mission report?"

"NO."

Then they were dumped out quite abruptly, where it took them a few seconds to realize that they were somehow now wearing lab coats over their Organization uniforms. Extremely ill-fitting lab coats. Saïx was practically drowning in mounds of white fabric, and the coat Axel was squeezed into looked like it was made by Jack Skellington's tailor.
"Help," Axel gasped, searching frantically for a belt to untie or a zipper to undo or *something*.

"Bark! I mean...gah!" Saïx tore into the coat and began ripping at it with his teeth.

Finally managing to discard the outfits, they crept around the lab until they found what they were looking for: a shelf filled with row after row of small maroon bottles.

"Find the human one, hurry," Saïx said urgently.

"Whaddaya think I'm *trying* to do? Though I would like to try you out with this bunny one...."

"AXEL."

0.0.0

*Author's Notes:* This probably makes no sense if you haven't seen *The Emperor's New Groove.* Funniest Disney movie ever, I can't wait 'til it makes its KH debut!

Complete: 40/101
Summary: The castle's youngsters celebrate Christmas.

A/N: I think this takes place during their first or second year as Nobodies.

---

"Okay, Saïx, your voice is a little better than Axel's, so you should do the 'Merry Christmas' parts. Axel, you're, like, bouncier, so you do the 'Ding dong's."

"Dem, that sounds wrong...and whaddaya mean I'm bouncier?"

"Zexy, since you can actually, yanno, sing, you can just make random pretty 'ahhh' noises behind the rest of us."

"But...I don't--"

"Dude, it's not a science experiment, just go with the flow. You'll be fine."

The Organization's four youngest members were gathered in Demyx's room on Christmas Eve, in quiet defiance of the older members' 'No holiday celebrations' pronouncement at the last meeting. Zexion had not come willingly, and Xigbar might have joined them if they'd made the offer, but, hey, the castle's teenagers had to stick together.

"Okay, you guys ready? One, two, three, go!"
The song fell apart about thirty seconds into it, when Axel broke into laughter at Zexion's uncertain 'ahh's and Saïx's deadpan 'Merry, Merry, Merry, Merry Christmas'es, and could not stop.

"Dude! Axel! Professionals do not keel over in hysterics in the middle of a performance!"

"Demyx, the day I become a professional singer is the day Xemnas will announce his engagement to Kingdom Hearts."

Both of them sniggered, though Saïx said dryly, "Axel, remember the time we found a pair of bunny slippers in Lexaeus's room? I'm starting to think you have a disturbing magical ability to make your jokes come true."

"Lex has fluffy bunny slippers?" Demyx said interestedly.

Zexion had turned away and covered his eyes with one hand. "I'm not hearing this, I'm not hearing this, I'm not hearing this...."

"Zexion, eat a cookie," Axel ordered, seizing one off the plate and waving it in front of the boy's face. He was pleased to note that the younger Nobody ate it on his own this time, without Axel having to shove it into his mouth as Saïx held his arms behind his back like they'd done last time. "See? I told you that sugar's worth breaking the rules for."

Zexion did not look convinced, but neither did he protest.

An hour or two passed as they lounged around, talking about anything but work, and occasionally fiddling with the gifts they'd exchanged - just little things, knick-knacks picked up from other worlds and synthesis items and such. Axel wondered if he could get away with attaching a Fire Shard to the zipper of one of his coats without one of the higher-ups having a problem with it (Zexion assured him that he could not).

Eventually, a quiet lull fell over the conversation. Demyx, who had been quietly strumming on his sitar the whole time, now struck a low but decisive chord. "Hark! how the bells, sweet silver bells...."

One by one, they lifted their voices without being prompted. "Christmas is here, bringing good cheer...."
"One seems to hear words of good cheer...."

"Gaily they ring while people sing songs of good cheer...."

This time, no one laughed. Not all the voices were clear or polished, but they were steady and tuneful enough, and it did not take long before the four of them reached a perfect harmony.

"...their joyful tone to ev'ry home...."

Axel brought the song to a close. For a moment, they all sat without speaking, listening to the ringing silence.

Then Axel sighed and flopped back, resting his hands behind his head. "Of course we non-existent people would sing the most depressing Christmas song ever."

"It's not depressing, it's haunting," Demyx said, though his voice seemed strangely flat. "There's a difference."

Saïx leaned back as well, so that the two of them lay side by side. "At least it's not the creepiest Christmas song ever," he remarked. Axel burst into laughter.

"What? What's the creepiest Christmas song ever?" Demyx demanded, his voice lighting up with interest.

Axel and Saïx turned their heads to face each other at the same time, sharing a grin as they began to sing in unison. "You better watch out, you better not cry...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Man, this is an old one, back from the notebook where I was still working on HetaOni stuff and K's "gender-bending" fic. Also written before I decided Sai was a good singer.
In case you don't know, the creepy Christmas song is "Santa Claus Is Comin' To Town." The lyrics are online.

Complete: 41/101
Fire & Moonlight: Eat (theme 45) [Real edition]

Fire & Moonlight, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Drabble challenge by Wishing-Fire, written by Raberba girl

Eat (Theme 45) [Real edition] (rough draft)

Summary: Axel was never the same after that.

A/N: Let's just assume for this that most of the Organization joined up within the first couple of years or so, and there was a looooong gap between Larxene's and Roxas's initiations, 'kay? Btw, this is a more serious one - at least, it would be if it wasn't so freaking narmy....

0.0.0

Saïx noticed it almost from the beginning, as soon as Axel came back battered and subdued from that first assassination assignment. It took him quite a while longer, however, to realize that it was more than just a temporary condition.

He frowned at the reflection in the bathroom mirror and set down his hair gel bottle. "Have you lost weight?"

Axel, getting dressed after his shower, gave him a mildly annoyed look. "I dunno. Why?"

"...Oh, nothing, it's just that I never used to be able to see your full rib cage before. And you've still got circles under your eyes, by the way."

"Yeah," Axel muttered, turning away and reaching for a clean tank top. "Staying up late playing video games every night will do that to a guy."

"You stayed up late with video games long before--" He did not miss the way Axel's shoulders tensed. "...Long before your promotion. It never made you look like someone punched you in the face."
"Saïx, lay off."

Their conversation was starting to attract mild curiosity from the others. "...Whatever."

After that, he paid more attention. Axel had used to eat like the teenager he was, wolfing down mounds of tacos for breakfast, packing lunches that barely fit into his backpack, whining and complaining over the stove in the evenings just so he could have steak or roast beef or whatever for dinner. His metabolism was fast and they all tended to get enough exercise just from the demands of the job, so Axel had never been overweight; but his calorie intake was substantial.

Now Saïx watched as Axel first stopped putting together quite such big piles of food for his meals. Then just made do with a couple of tacos for breakfast, brown-bagging lunch, warming up pizza for dinner. Pouring a bowl of cereal every morning and maybe taking off for work with a couple of granola bars in his pockets. Nibbling at a muffin. Walking off empty-handed, claiming he'd just buy lunch in whatever world he was assigned to that day. Coming home to toss something in the microwave and then wandering off again without spending a moment more than he had to in the kitchen.

"Axel. You need to eat."

Axel gave him an indignant glare from where he was lounging in front of a movie with a bag of popcorn. "I am eating, moron."

Saïx picked the bag out of his hands before he could tighten his grip on it. "This is not food. This is fluff, packed with sodium and congealing in something that falsely claims to be butter."

"It's tasty fluff. Give it back."

Saïx corridored the popcorn into a trash can on the floor below. "I'm making dinner. Come help me."

Axel hesitated. Then he shook his head. "Geez, you're acting like my mommy. For the record, you're way too creepy to be anyone's mom."

"Axel, Larxene weighs more than you."
"Oh, for crying out--"

"Literally."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Last week's physical assessments. Zexion let me the records. Vexen's debating whether to pronounce you unfit to continue in your duties."

Axel surged up at that. They both knew what it meant. The Organization had no room for dead weight, but they had plenty of room left in their ranks of Dusks. "Just let that old fart try and shelve me, I can kick his butt any day--"

"Come help me make dinner, first."

Axel paused, then narrowed his eyes. "Saïx."

"I don't have to lie in order to get you to do what I want."

Axel sighed. "Whatever. I'll help you do your stupid cooking."

He ended up eating one. *One*. Out of the whole batch. Saïx said nothing, but he still remembered very well what frustration felt like.

It got better, eventually. At the price of some of Axel's personality...his eyes no longer sparkled the way they used to, much of that youthful energy was gone. His face took on that hard edge the older members had, the edge that Saïx knew had long ago taken over his own expression. Yet at least Axel could come home from those "special missions" in his usual spirits, rather than with that unsettling quietness; even though it was usually processed junk, at least he *ate* enough to pass every single fitness and mobility assessment.

It was better than nothing. Still, Saïx couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't good enough.
Author's Notes: Wah, so much narm.... DX This is the first chance I've had to write something like this, though, and I found it interesting. I didn't feel like trying to come up with a different idea. Again, most of these are just the first thing I think about when I see the prompt. And ftr, no, Axel was never actually anorexic or bulimic.

Complete: 42/101
No Need To Hide {Lea & Isa}

No Need To Hide

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Eight-year-old Isa has always hated Christmas Eve. Thanks to Lea, that's about to change.

A/N: I'm not sure how odd Isa's mother's nickname for him might sound to a native Japanese speaker.... *wince*

0.0.0

"NO! Why did you do that?! I don't want Lea to spend the night!"

His mother stared at him in astonishment. "Saa-chan, what in the world are you talking about? Lea is your best friend! You love having him come over."

"But it's Christmas Eve!" Isa yelled back.

She blinked. "Then this should be even more fun than usual, right?"

"No! No! He'll make fun of me! And I can't, anyway! Call his mom and tell him he can't come."

"Isa! I'm not going to do that," she exclaimed reproachfully.

He shifted restlessly in agitation. "I'm sick. If Lea comes over, he'll catch all my germs, so he can't come." Isa coughed violently for good measure.

His mother rolled her eyes. "Saa-chan, you're being ridiculous." Seeing how upset he looked, her face softened, and she crouched down to take his hands. "Sweetheart, you're going to have a wonderful time together like you always do. We're going to play games and make cookies and
watch movies, and tomorrow morning you'll get to open all the presents that Santa will leave for yo--"

The doorbell rang.

"Oh! Look, that must be Lea."

"Tell him he has to go away!" Isa cried frantically.

"Isa! That's enough!"

He broke away from her and ran upstairs. Sighing, Mrs. Tsukino went to answer the door. "Lea! Hello, darling. Did your mother drop you off?"

"Nah," the red-haired boy said nonchalantly, sauntering into the house with his hands in his pockets. "I'm not a baby, I walked over by myself."

"I see. Well, come in, dear, and take off your coat and shoes. Saa-chan is...well, he's upstairs," she said, fumbling a little.

Lea gave her a curious look, then shrugged and headed for his friend's room.

The door was stuck. "Isa?" Lea called, yanking at the knob and then shoving hard at the door. It felt like there was something heavy blocking it.

"Go away!" came a muffled voice from inside.

Lea blinked. "What?" He kicked at the door. "Seriously, Isa, open up."

"No! I don't want you here! Go back home, I'll see you tomorrow."
"Isa, are you crazy? It's me! Lea! Remember, your best friend? I came over for Christmas."

There was a clattering sound. "You didn't come for CHRISTMAS," Isa's voice snarled through the door. "I wanted you for CHRISTMAS. Not Christmas EVE. Go a-way! I hate you!"

Lea gaped at the door for a minute. Then he kicked it again and yelled, "Fine! I hate you, too!" He stormed downstairs with the vague intention of stomping back home again, but Isa's mom quickly intercepted him.

"Lea, honey? Sweetheart, I'm so sorry, Saa-chan, ah, told me he was feeling sick earlier, I should have listened.... Come on, sweetie, do you want to help me bake some cookies?"

"I'm not a girl! Girls bake cookies!"

"Hmmmm, well, what if I said that the only cookies you can eat are the cookies you actually make yourself?"

Lea paused. Well, it wasn't like Kadaj and the other guys from school could see. And if he stayed to make cookies, then he wouldn't have to walk back out into the cold and trudge home and deal with his mother's nosiness and his sisters' teasing or the fact that his best friend hated him.... "You better have a LOT of cookie dough, then," he said. "Cuz I'm gonna eat a ton."

It was a lot more fun than he expected, baking cookies with Isa's mom as Christmas music played in the background and they both got smeared with flour and icing. To his delight, she had watched enough Power Rangers episodes with Isa to be able to discuss the subject intelligently, which the two of them did with great enthusiasm for the next hour or two.

Lea, in a much better mood after putting the cookies in the oven, washed up and then went to see if Isa was still being dumb. "Isa?" No answer. "Hey...we made a bunch of cookies without you. You can only eat the ones you made, so OOPS, guess you don't get any, heh."

Still nothing. Lea tried the door again, but whatever Isa had pulled in front of it will still there. "Man, Isa! Stop being stupid! I didn't come all the way over here just to play with your mom!"

Unfortunately, that was exactly what he ended up doing. They played Disney Monopoly until it got too pointless to continue, then Scrabble until he declared it boring after realizing how much
better at it she was than him. Then they put together a couple of puzzles, and by the time Lea went up to pound on Isa's door again and returned to the living room with unsatisfactory results, Isa's mom had started a Christmas movie which caught his interest.

Eleven o'clock in the evening, and both of them were yawning. Lea let himself be hugged by Isa's mom. "Sweetheart," she said sadly as she watched him put his shoes on, "you're still welcome to spend the night, if you like."

"Nah," he mumbled. "I'm fine. I didn't wanna spend the night, anyway."

"All right...well, it was wonderful to have you over. I hope we get to see you and your family tomorrow."

"Yeah, prob'ly." He stood up and rubbed the back of his head self-consciously. "Thanks for the cookies and everything, it was really fun."

"It was, wasn't it," she said with a smile, though she still looked sad.

Lea walked out into the chill night, hearing Isa's mom shut the door behind him. He wrapped his arms around himself, though not because of the weather. For a minute, he started down the sidewalk, heading for home - but then he paused, glancing up at Isa's bedroom window. A determined look came over his face.

0.o.o

Isa drew the blankets tighter around himself, feeling like he was drowning in misery. His mom could be so *stupid* sometimes. Lea had been here, he had listened to Lea and his mom moving around the house all evening, and now Lea hated him and even tomorrow when it was over, Lea would still be mad at him and then it would go back to like it was before, no friends and no one to eat with at lunch and people picking on him because--

There was a clatter at the window. Isa felt a surge of terror, and bit down hard on his own wrist to keep himself from crying out. He curled up as small as he could and wished he could disappear. It was happening...it was really happening...all the other years, nothing had actually *happened*, unless you counted the little bits of evidence he had found afterwards and, of course, the presents on Christmas morning. But now...there he was at the window, he was climbing inside, he wasn't satisfied anymore with just invading the house, now he was probably mad and coming after him
instead of the house and he knew, he knew every single bad thing that Isa had ever done and he was gonna--

The closet door was flung open. This was it.

"...What the heck are you doing?"

The voice was so unexpected that it took a long moment for Isa to register whose it was. He peeked out from under the blankets. "L...Lea?"

"Why are you hiding in the closet?"

"Is Santa out there?" Isa whispered.

"What? No, you moron. Santa doesn't come 'til you're asleep."

Isa burrowed deep into the blankets again.

"Isa, why are you sleeping in your closet?" Lea asked in disbelief.

"I'm not sleeping!" Isa shouted. "If I don't fall asleep this time, then maybe he'll never come!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"...."

Completely baffled, Lea crouched down and stared at the mound of blankets for a while. Then he poked at them. "Isa?"

"Go away."
Lea sat on the floor and crossed his legs comfortably. "Isa. Geez. You're actually afraid of Santa Claus, aren't you."

"...He sees you when you're sleeping." Isa's mumble came from within the blankets, barely distinguishable. "He knows when you're awake. He watches you all year long, he knows everything you do, and on Christmas Eve he comes and breaks into your house and...and...."

Lea raised an eyebrow, a trick he had recently mastered and was quite proud of. "And leaves presents for you?"

There was no answer. After a long time, Lea finally reached over and tugged the blankets away from Isa's face. "Are you crying?"

Isa yanked the blankets back down again, but not in time.

Lea burst into laughter. "Isa, you're such a moron."

"Shut up! I hate you!" Isa screamed. "I knew you were going to laugh at me, I knew you were going to laugh at me, I knew it I knew it I knew it and I hate you and I never want to see you and your stupid face again."

Lea felt a strange, squirmy feeling in his chest. "I...Isa," he said slowly. His face was hot, though he was not sure why. "Isa, I'm - sorry. Look, I'm not laughing anymore." He grinned a little. "You know what, you're right, Santa really is a creeper." Then he laughed. "Dude. I never thought of it like that. But you're totally right, Santa's like some sort of psychotic stalker!"

He laughed some more, then abruptly stopped. "Wait, no, I didn't mean it, seriously, I'm not laughing anymore." He was surprised to find that Isa was looking at him again, those liquid green eyes visible within the shadows of the blankets. "Hey...Isa? Kad-- I mean, someone told me something the other day. I got mad and punched him in the face, but...you know what, he was right."

"...."
"Look, Isa. Santa's not real." It hurt to say it, but not nearly as much as he expected. If anything, he even felt a little happy that this might mean something good to his best friend.

Isa stared at him. "What?"

"Santa Claus is fake," Lea said confidently. "Grown-ups just made him up to scare us kids into being good the rest of the year. There's no fat jolly guy in a red coat gonna come down your chimney, ever."

There was a pause. Then Isa slowly sat up, shedding blankets like a bear coming out of hibernation. He stared at the floor, his eyes growing wide.

"Hey," Lea said, a little resentfully, "if you'd known there was no Santa, would you have played with me today when I came over?"

"Yeah," Isa whispered. His eyes slowly filled with tears again. "I missed you."

"Cut it out, you sound like a girl."

Isa rubbed hard at his eyes. "I want cookies," he said fiercely. "I'm gonna make cookies, because I want to eat them, with you."

Lea smiled. "Nah, don't bother. You can just have the leftover ones, I won't tell your mom."

At last, Isa looked directly at him, and managed a weak smile in return.

"C'mon. Let's go to the living room and get the Monopoly board out again, and we can sleep in there and prove there's no Santa Claus."

Isa shook his head, gritting his teeth. "No. I'm not gonna sleep in the living room, not on Christmas Eve."

"Isa, don't be a chicken, I told you there's no Santa. And besides, even if he does come bustin' in,
I'll just hit him with my Frisbees and he'll have to leave."

Isa hesitated for a long time. "Okay," he finally said. Lea grinned at him, and they went downstairs together.

**Seven years later:**

Fresh from his first solo mission, Saïx came storming out of a dark corridor, into the Grey Area where Axel was lounging on one of the couches with a video game.

"Hey, Sai, you're back! How was Halloween Town--?"

Saïx seized him by the neck and shook him with each word. "You - told - me - he - wasn't - real."

"Can't breathe," Axel managed.

Saïx hurled him back onto the couch. "Halloween Town was only where the portal led to. My actual mission was in Christmas Town. Which is inhabited by toy-making elves and a certain hulking, easily-amused, white-bearded elderly man with highly disturbing hobbies."

Axel's mouth dropped open. "Flaming pants, are you serious?"

"Just be glad I don't have a heart to have gotten freaked out with back there," Saïx hissed, "or you would be dead right now." He whirled and stalked away.

Axel lay there for a minute, frozen. Then he leaped to his feet. "Vexen!" he yelled delightedly, dashing off in search of the castle's main mission-organizer. "Vexen! He's real! I call dibs on the next Halloween Town mission!"

**Author's Notes:** Saïx gave me this tidbit of backstory during *Roses & Kittens* (the sequel to *Raindrops & Whiskers*), so of course I had to actually write it out.
In this fic, Santa Claus only visits houses in the Christmas Town universe (and I guess Destiny Islands, too).
It had not taken Axel long to figure out why everyone in the Organization went to bed so early. A seven-days-a-week-365-days-a-year work schedule was wearying even with good sleeping habits.

Tonight, however, was special. This Organization might be run by a bunch of Scrooges, but no way he was gonna let Christmas go by without a word of acknowledgement.

"Isa?" The Luna Diviner's room was empty. Axel frowned, then went back out again, wondering where Saïx could possibly be at this time of night. "Saaaaaaxiy, where aaaaare you...?" There was no one in the bathrooms, or the kitchen. Axel finally came across his friend in the Grey Area. "Oi, Sai, whatcha doing up here?"

Saïx, who had his weapon summoned in his hand for some reason, turned away from the window and snarled, "None of your business. Go back to bed."

"...Grouchy Sai is grouchy. What burr got up your butt?"

Saïx turned away without answering, and Axel finally understood.
"For crying out loud, don't tell me you're still scared of Santa Claus!"

"I'm not scared of him," Saïx hissed, with as much venom as he could still project into his voice. "I can't be anymore, anyway. I'm just planning to bash his head off his shoulders if he comes anywhere near this castle."

"Saïx. Santa's not gonna bother traveling all the way to a different world to leave Christmas presents for a bunch of evil grown-up Nobodies who don't believe in him."

"I wouldn't put it past him to come here just to leave coal."

"We don't have stockings out."

"Socks, Axel. Stockings are just giant socks, which we have plenty of in this castle."

"Saïx, you are being ri-di-cu-lous."

"Don't talk to me like that! That's something my mother would say!"

They both stopped, waiting for a pang of grief. It didn't come, of course.

Finally giving up on trying to feel bad about the loss of their home and families, Axel said, "Look, just come stay in my room tonight. Christmas might suck this year, but we're gonna spend it together even if I have to stay up all night playing guard duty with you."

Reluctantly, Saïx followed him back to the Proof of Existence, still maintaining his grip on the claymore. "I shouldn't...keep you up...we've got work tomorrow...."

"Don't worry about it. If you can give up a night's sleep just to fail at remembering what it was like to be a spazzy panicking human, I can give it up, too. I'd probably just be playing video games, anyway."
Inside Axel's room, he rummaged around in his closet and came up with a wrapped gift. "Ta da! For you." He laughed. "It's the only one I bought, Christmas shopping was super-easy this year."

"Let me fetch yours. I left it in my room."

They opened the gifts right then and there, since there seemed no point in waiting until morning. "Night Howler II! Sweet!" Axel exclaimed, examining the game eagerly. "Heh, now I'll be the one having to hunt you down and knock you over the head to get it back when you've borrowed it for too long."

"I figured I'd save myself the trouble. Thanks, by the way," Saïx said appreciatively, giving the tiny music player a little flip in his hand. "You're right, having one of these would make recon missions seem to go a lot faster."

They transferred a bunch of Christmas songs to the device and turned the volume all the way up so that they could hear music coming out of the ear buds lying on Axel's bedside table. Then they just sat for a while, talking quietly. When they finally feel asleep, a sleep that for the first time in quite a while was not perfectly empty, they dreamed of their lost hearts.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Teenage Saïx is so much nicer than yellow-eyed elf-eared Saïx.... ;;

Complete: 44/101
Summary: When Xemnas & Saïx leave for a week-long joint mission, Axel's left in charge.

A/N: Takes place before 385/2 Days. I actually wrote this before Moonlight Seekers, lol. XD (Same universe, btw; this is what Axel and the rest of the Org have been up to while Sai & Xem were in the Keyblade Graveyard.)

0.0.0

"Remember. Do NOT fall for Demyx's whining and let him have any partners, he's perfectly capable of handling solo missions."

"And that would make this the seventh time you've told me that."

"Don't send Xigbar to fight enemies he can't keep his distance from, don't pit Zexion against heavy hitters or Lexaeus against strong magic users--"

"Sai, we've already gone over all this."

"Schedules are in the blue folder, supplemental and low priority assignments in the green folder just in case, reward chart in the--"

"I KNOW."

"Do not sign the reports, I'll have to double-check all the paperwork when I get back; and if you forget the barricade code, you'll have to look it up in--"
Axel planted a hand over his friend's mouth, shooting him an irritated glare. "If you're so sure I'm gonna wreck everything, why didn't you get Zexion or Luxord or someone to sub for you?"

Saïx glared back, stepping out of range of Axel's arm. "You know I can't risk anyone but you having such intimate access to my records while I'm away."

Axel smiled a little. "Say it, Sai."

"I need to get going, Lord Xemnas is waiting."

"Saaaaay iiiiiit."

Saïx expelled an annoyed breath. "I trust you," he said pointedly. "You're the only one I trust."

"Yup," Axel said in satisfaction.

"Please...I am begging you, do not blow anything up this time, either figuratively or literally."

Axel looked a little surprised at the desperation in his tone. "Uh...okay."

Saïx stepped close again and pointed a warning finger in his face. "I mean it."

"O-kay! Man, just take off already, it'll be fine! Seriously, how hard can this job be?"

Over the course of that week, while Xemnas and Saïx were on their extended joint mission in the Keyblade Graveyard, Axel found out.

The first three days in a row, Xaldin came barging into his room at 6:30 in the morning, demanding both to be given his day's assignment and to know why Axel was still in bed and not in the Grey Area half an hour ago like Saïx always was. That, and accidentally handing Zexion and Lexaeus each other's mission briefs (with disastrous results), finally convinced Axel to lay off the video games and start going to bed before 11:00. He was obviously going to need his brain in full working order.
On the second day, he found that Xigbar had hacked into Saïx's Secret Reports and then changed the computer's access code.

On the third day, he discovered that Demyx had been hiding out in the basement all this time with his sitar, a mountain of cookies and cereal, and several Dancers, meaning that Agrabah was now buried knee-deep in Shadow Globs and a Bully Dog had been running the Beast ragged.

On the fourth day, he forgot the barrier code just as Saïx had feared, and since he now had no computer access to look it up again, Vexen ended up wandering Twilight Town until midnight trying to locate and destroy his target.

On the fifth day, it became apparent that Luxord had somehow been cheating his way into four times the amount of mission rewards he should have earned, and Demyx was found hanging out in the basement again, this time with Xigbar, both of whom had dumped their missions on Lexaeus.

By that time, Axel had lost all the carefully labeled folders in the mess that was now Saïx's room (the Berserkers were not happy with their master gone, even when Axel sent Assassins to baby-sit them), and he declared a vacation for the next day. He fully intended to spend it all sleeping, but that was kind of hard to do when Demyx was holding a rock concert on the floor below, and Xigbar and Lexaeus were apparently having a boss battle on the floor above, and noises that Axel prayed were not explosions kept booming from the direction of Vexen's lab along with furious screams for Zexion to "Do something!!"

So Axel finally escaped to Twilight Town and fell asleep on the clock tower. He got home around 10:30 in the evening, grabbed something quick to eat from the kitchen, then headed for his room while trying to ignore the fact that the Proof of Existence had purple paint splatters all over the walls and tire skid marks on the floor, as well as a blue cat and a couple of chickens wandering around.

Xemnas and Saïx returned to the castle after breakfast the next day. Xemnas immediately went to check on the model of Kingdom Hearts that always hung in his bedroom window, and Saïx went straight to his own room. If he'd had a heart, he would have screamed. He didn't, so he didn't; but he did go drag Axel out of bed and back into his room and up to his desk and demand, "What did you do to my computer?"

"I need a hug," Axel said pathetically, using his best puppy eyes.
"What you need is to get kicked off the top of Memory's Skyscraper!"

"Argh, you and your cuteness immunity! Seriously, it wasn't my fault. A day in the life of Saïx, much less an entire week, is enough to kill a guy - your job is frickin' hard."

"He got to my Secret Reports, didn't he," Saïx moaned, headdesking on the computer after trying several key combinations.

"Yeah. Sorry."

*headdesk*

"...."

*headdesk*

"...Ice cream in Twilight Town?"

"...Yes."

They both raised their hands to open a portal at the same time.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Ao-chan is Kadaj's cat from one of my other fics. :p

Yeah. Don't get into teaching unless you're REALLY SURE THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT TO DO. ^^;

Complete: 45/101
Moonlight Seekers {Saix & Xemnas}

Moonlight Seekers
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

For Saïx/Xemnas Day, 1 July 2012

Summary: Saïx never thought he would miss the rest of the Organization, but then, he's never before had to spend a week in the Keyblade Graveyard with no one but Xemnas for company. Platonic fic for Saïx/Xemnas Day 2012.

A/N: Takes place in the same universe as Fire & Moonlight: A Day in the Life. I think it can stand on its own, though. It's before 358/2 Days.

Lol, my cargo ship, perhaps inevitably, ended up in here as well. XD I'm not actually sure if Master Xehanort's Kingdom Hearts is still hanging out in the Keyblade Graveyard or not, but whatever; we'll assume it is in this fic.

Saïx did not realize how much he had become used to Axel's banter and Xigbar's teasing and Xaldin's condescension and Vexen's whining and Lexaeus's pointed looks and Zexion's lectures and Demyx's obnoxiousness and Luxord's riddles and Marluxia's flamboyance and Larxene's colorful vitriol until that horrible weeklong mission with the Superior.

"Quite refreshing," Number I remarked tonelessly as they stepped out of a dark corridor.

Saïx glanced at him. "This barren wasteland?"

"The dark corridors. Being surrounded by my element has replenished me." Xemnas raised his chin in an imperious manner and paced ahead.

'Seeing as how your element is Nothing,' Saïx thought, 'I find that rather oxymoronic.' No matter,
as long as the Superior was pleased (or as pleased as a Nobody could get, anyway).

Of course, the Organization's leader did not lift a finger to carry anything. Dragging two backpacks that were stuffed to the seams, Saïx followed after his master and idly wished that they didn't have to keep wearing these heavy coats even outside the corridors. Although it was cloudy, there were also no trees here, and it was hot. He could already taste dust in his mouth. 'This isn't a vacation,' he reminded himself. 'You're not here to enjoy yourself, you're here to work.'

"This," Xemnas proclaimed, "is where we will start."

"Shall I begin cataloguing Keyblades?" Saïx asked deferentially, "Or would you rather I map the area?"

"A Nobody cannot be said to truly exist. Therefore, its goal is to seek out the heart that once gave it meaning. These hearts, wandering in darkness, corroded and filled with negativity...they shall ultimately come together to create a perfection of angst, the dark masterpiece we call Kingdom Hearts. This, this I must lay eyes on."

"...I take it you'd rather work in a higher area where you have a better view of your, ahem, beloved." Saïx set the backpacks down and dug out his clipboard and a pen. "We'll meet back here at nightfall for supper, I suppose."

"Indeed, for without sustenance, the body wastes away. This leaves the formless soul behind--"

"You can depend on me, Lord Xemnas, I will not let you starve. Now, if you'll excuse me." Saïx nodded politely and walked off to begin the gargantuan task of listing every abandoned Keyblade he could find.

Saïx returned dutifully at twilight and, finding the backpacks still sitting almost forlorntly where he had left them, he brushed off the accumulation of dust and began to set up camp. Shelters up, fire going, supper cooking, and still no Superior.

"Xemnas, where are you...?" Saïx corridored up to the top of a cliff so he could have a better look around, but the Superior was still nowhere in sight. "Hmm." He lifted a hand, calling on his power to sense where the rays of moonlight were most concentrated. "Perhaps I will find our besotted leader as close as he can get to the object of his affections...."
Sure enough, Xemnas was on a faraway cliff top, basking in the moonbeams shining through a gap in the heavy clouds.

"Superior, supper is ready," Saïx said demurely.

"Look at her, Number VII," Xemnas whispered. "Such beauty."

Saïx released a very quiet, resigned sigh and moved up to stand next to the other man.

"So close...." Xemnas stretched out his arm toward the heart-shaped moon and then closed his hand over nothing. "Yet always out of reach. Someday, Number VII. Someday...."

"She gazes longingly at you with affection writhing in her war-torn eyes," Saïx replied in his best monotone. "By her very nature, she is in eternal turmoil, yet one day she will break free and become yours alone. The two of you shall spend eternity wrapped in each other's embrace until you are consumed in the sublime power of dark nothing."

Xemnas turned shining golden eyes to him. "I chose my most trusted subordinate well."

"You chose me because I am good at getting important things done. Is there any chance that you mapped even a fraction of the Graveyard while I was down there making Keyblade records?"

Xemnas gazed at him for a while. Then looked at the blank parchment that lay discarded at his feet. "...Pitiful Heartless, mindlessly collecting hearts. The rage of the Keyblade releases those--"

"Thank you, sir, but I wrote that speech myself, I have it mem--" Ugh. "I know it by heart."

"And yet, you, Number VII, are no longer in possession of a hea--"

"Yes, thank you, I know. What I said was, by the way, a figure of speech that means I am very well familiar with that particular lecture. Now, if you would be so kind as to tear yourself away from your non-existent heart's desire for a few minutes, you would do well to come eat before the meal burns."
"As humans, our hearts once burned with passion for the trivialities of life, but now the illusions of importance are lifted away as we seek to...." Etc. etc. etc.

This was going to be a very long mission.
Fire & Moonlight: Ghost (theme 52)

Summary: Young Axel & Saïx are enjoying their visit to Disney Town.

A/N: Not sure how old they are here, except that it's when Saïx still had some Isa left in him.

First vacation in Organization XIII history? Of course they were going to Disney Town, duh!

"No, Lea."

"Whaaaat?"

"We eat sea-salt almost EVERY SINGLE DAY. You're trying something different, for once."

"Noooo, not my sea-salt!"

"One Donald Fizz and one Milky Way, please," Saïx mercilessly told the ice cream seller.

"But...but...!"

"Shut up and expand your tastes," Saïx ordered, brandishing the two desserts as if they were weapons. "Pick one."

"...But the blue one has a mouth. I don't want to eat something that still has a mouth on it."
Saïx rolled his eyes. "Take the other one, then."

"But it's not blue!"

"One-third of it is."

"It's not even ice cream! It's, like...fluffy!"

"Or I could eat both of them and you can go ice-cream-less."

"Jerk."

Even Axel, however, couldn't keep pretending to pout when it came time to discover what the effects were. His sent him swooping up into the air almost as if he was in Neverland. "Whoooo!"

"That looks fun," Saïx said appraisingly.

"What's yours do?"

"Well, I don't know."

They both waited for a minute. Nothing happened to Saïx.

"It's a dud," Axel finally declared.

"At least it's still delicious," Saïx said in resignation, taking another bite. Then he started walking over to catch up to his wind-tossed friend.

"Whoa!"
"What?"

"Do that again!"

"Do what again? All I did was walk."

"Yeah, walk!"

Saïx cautiously took another step.

"No, faster!"

Saïx obligingly jogged a few steps, and noticed a disorienting skip, as if he'd forgotten the last few seconds.

"Cooool!"

"What?" Saïx said in confusion.

"You have freaking after-images, man!"

Saïx looked behind himself and saw nothing.

"Run, Isa! Oh, no, I know, jump!"

Ghost Drive was more amusing to the observing Axel than to Saïx himself, but that was all right, since Axel readily offered to switch flavors with him next time.

"Will there be a next time?" Saïx wondered cautiously.
"Man, if they don't give us another vacation day, we'll just take off and make one."

"Constantly defying authority isn't the best way to stay in their good graces."

"Man, who cares about their good graces."

"Well, anyone who wants an easier time getting his own way."

"Yeah...I kinda fail at that, though...."

"Yes, I know. Which is why I do it for both our sakes."

"Heh. And then I'm the one who mouths off at them half the time so that all the groveling won't drive you crazy."

"Sometimes you're the one who drives me crazy...."

"What, only sometimes?"

"I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt," Saïx grinned.

"Heh...that ice cream turned your tongue blue. It matches your hair."

"Wonderful. Now we have to stall here until the rest of the Organization has retired for the night by the time we return home."

"Anything to save your dignity. Such a hassle," Axel teased, sweeping out an arm to indicate the rest of the park.
"At least we won't be bored in the meantime."

"Nope. C'mon, we're riding that one next."

"Slow down."

"Hurry up!"

"Always in such a rush...."

"Hey, at least I never run off somewhere you can't follow."

"I only did that twice...."

"Yeah, well, from now on, do it never."

"All right."

"Fine."

They smiled at each other a little and continued on at a matched pace.

o.o.o

Author's Notes: 235 words of unnecessary banter before they finally gave me a The End opening, geez. That's almost half the story. *sweatdrop*

Complete: 47/101
It was nearly midnight. *Why* was someone awake and wandering around at this hour?

...Well, obviously Saïx himself was up and about at this hour, but he had legitimate business to take care of. Surely the young idiot Keybearer had no such excuse.

"Oh - hi, Saïx."

"Why aren't you in your room, Number XIII?"

"I'm not sleepy. Xion's not in her room, either; do you know where she is?"

"I can't see why that would be any business of yours."

"Of course it's my business, we're friends! I've been worried about her."
"You think you're cute, acting just like a human," Saïx said disapprovingly. "It seems that certain members of our Organization have been a bad influence on you."

"Uh...okay." It was obvious that Roxas had no idea what he was talking about. "Saïx, do you know anything about girls' switches?"

Sacred moon, how in the world had they ended up in a conversation like this? "...I suggest you take your questions on the matter to Axel."

"I did. He just said that girls were complicated and I should leave them alone. But I can't, I messed up and somehow I pressed Xion's switch without meaning to, and now she's mad at me and we can't eat ice cream anymore."

'Did he suffer a brain injury on his last mission? What in the worlds is he talking about?'

"I've been trying to figure out how to tell her I'm sorry. Demyx and Xigbar told me to buy her a dozen red roses, a box of chocolate, and something called longer-a, but I don't know where to get that stuff."

Saïx definitely needed to have a talk with Numbers II and IX. Possibly a violent one.

"By the way, do you know what longer-a is? Axel wouldn't tell me, he just said my ice cream was melting like he does when he's trying to change the subject."

"Such matters are no concern of a Nobody. If this preoccupation of yours will be interfering with your mission performance, I insist that you clear things up with Number XIV as soon as possible."

"I'm trying! But she's avoiding me."

"Write a note."

"Ohhh...that's a good idea, Saïx."
"Then go to bed. Fatigue will negatively affect your mission performance as well."

"Okay." Roxas set off at a more purposeful trot, and Saïx continued on in the other direction, hoping the matter was now settled.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Heh, this was drafted back when I was drowning in AkuShi from HAIW. ^^;;;

Complete: 49/101
Fire & Moonlight: Switch (theme 60) [Real edition]

Fire & Moonlight, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Drabble challenge by Wishing-Fire, written by Raberba girl

Switch (Theme 60) [Real edition] {rough draft}

Summary: Axel & Saïx get to experience being each other for a day.

0.0.0

It was the closest he'd come to feeling emotion since he'd been a Somebody. 'Holy Kingdom Hearts, why are there children in my bed?'

Saïx edged away and got to his feet, staring at Roxas and Xion, who cuddled closer to each other while still asleep. 'What in the...?'

Then he saw the clock. "Sacred MOON, how did this happen?!" It was six o'clock. He was so late!

Whirling to the closet, Saïx yanked the first coat he could reach off its hanger and corriored to the bathroom; ripped off his nightclothes - he'd been wearing more than that when he went to bed, hadn't he?; and flung himself into the shower, ignoring an odd look from Lexaeus. Something already seemed very wrong, but it wasn't until he noticed that the hair he was rinsing was blood-red rather than blue that he realized what it was. '?!?!' He stumbled out of the shower again and to the mirror....

"Are you all right this morning, Axel?" Lexaeus asked dubiously.

"I'm...fine," Saïx murmured automatically.

"You seem...enthusiastic today, I don't believe I've ever seen you up this early.

"Those energy shakes Marluxia brought home from the last shopping trip apparently work
wonders." Saïx pulled on the coat and found the sleeves stiflingly close-fitting. 'This is outrageous. Someone has some urgent explanations to make.'

It was important that he get to the Grey Area as soon as possible, but...this matter definitely needed to be tended to first. He 'returned' to his room and was confused about the lack of small people in his bed before it occurred to him that the room he had awakened in must have been Axel's. 'Kingdom Hearts help you, Axel, what exactly have you been up to with our newest members...?'

Well, he could ask, since his bed was not entirely unoccupied. A blue-haired, scar-faced person was sprawled amongst the sheets, snoring lightly and completely unresponsive to the alarm clock that had apparently been ringing for over an hour. Saïx pressed the Off button. "AXEL."

The blue-haired Nobody jumped. "I didn't do it," he mumbled.

"Wake up, you fool. Something's happened."

Axel sat up at once. "What about Roxas & Xion?!"

"Speaking of which...."

"AHHHH!" A flaming chakram appeared. Which was interesting. "I'm going to kill Vexen!"

"I'm not your replica, I'm Saïx," Saïx said in annoyance.

Axel paused. Then he grinned. It was extremely strange for Saïx, seeing an expression like that on his own face. "Come to think of it, this is actually pretty sweet - you can do my missions for me, and I can sleep all day."

"I'm not a replica, and even if I was, there is no way Saïx would - I mean, I would let you get away with such a thing."

Axel studied him. "You're really Saïx?"
Saïx summoned his claymore.

"Whoa...that looks super-weird."

"You're one to talk."

"Okay, one more test - what is Saïx's worst fear?"

"My promise still stands to shove a Frisbee down your throat if you ever tell a soul."

Axel grinned again. "Yep, you're Saïx all right. Ho ho ho."

"Shut up."

"Heh heh...how'd you end up in my body?"

"Presumably the same way you ended up in mine."

Axel stared. Then looked down at himself. "I got fat." He slowly reached up to touch the ridges of scar tissue on his face, then grasped hanks of long, shaggy blue hair and stared at them. "Flaming...pants."

"So you know nothing about this?"

"No! Are you crazy?! Who did this to us!?"

"I hope to find that out shortly. Get out of bed, I'll need your help."

In the bathroom again, Luxord looked up from brushing his teeth, obviously surprised. "Pretty late for you, Diviner. Is today still a work day?"
"Nope," Axel said cheerfully.

"We're not sure yet," Saïx growled.

Luxord gave them an odd look.

Saïx tried to grin. It was rather uncomfortable. "We need to discuss some things with the...'bossman,' first."

Axel cracked up laughing. Saïx would have knocked him over if it wouldn't have made him look even more undignified and ridiculous.

"You feeling all right, Saïx?" Luxord asked cautiously.

"Stayed up too late processing mission reports," Saïx growled. "Right, Saïx?"

"Don't glare so much, Axel, your face might freeze that way," Axel said sweetly.

"Luxord, we're going to talk about card games now," Saïx said firmly.

Axel insisted on checking on the children first ("UGH! You are disgusting!" "What else am I supposed to think after seeing your sleeping arrangements?" "There was a thunderstorm last night!" "That was the most blatantly unsubtle subject change I've ever heard." "It wasn't a--! Xion--! I wasn't--! Argh! I'm not a freaking pedo!"). They ran into Numbers XIII and XIV in the Proof of Existence.

Axel gripped him hard and hissed in his ear, "Be nice to them, or I will CRUSH your dignity."

Saïx did not doubt that for a second. He put on the biggest smile he knew how to make. "...Mornin', kiddos!"
The children were already edging toward him and giving Axel nervous looks. "Good morning, Axel," Xion said in a small voice, gripping Saïx's sleeve hard even though its unseen gaze seemed to be fixed on the real Axel.

"Morning," Roxas replied to Saïx, though his eyes were fixed on Axel as well.

Axel grinned. "Grr, I am a scary werewolf."

Roxas's eyes widened. Saïx gathered them both together in a hug, his intent clear: 'Guess what I'm going to crush if you don't cease immediately.'

Axel coughed, folded his arms, and looked stern. "Why aren't you...incompetent, sorry excuses for Organization members in the Grey Area?"

"It's not even 7:00 yet," Roxas said angrily. "Half the Organization's still asleep."

"I don't care. How do you expect to be promoted if you're not slaving away collecting hearts before this world's version of the crack of dawn?"

'I'm not that unfair,' Saïx thought in what would have been annoyance if he still had a heart. "...Lay off, Saïx. Cut the kids some slack."

"Okay, I'll do that."

'Axel, you are a horrendous actor.'

"Um, are you guys okay?" Xion asked cautiously.

"We're peachy, X-- .... Xi."

"You sure? You're acting weird," Roxas said, fixing him with an appraising look.
'Can he tell, somehow?' Saïx wondered uneasily. "I think there was something weird in that--"
Saïx had to resist the urge to roll his eyes at Axel's dietary choices. "--pizza I ate last night. Saï--
Er, Sai and I - and me - are going to check something out. You guys go on and get ready for work,
all r-- okay?"

After a moment, they nodded and padded off, stealing dubious glances over their shoulders.

"That was awful!" Axel wailed. "Don't ever make me do that again!"

"That's my line," Saïx grumbled. "Come on, we need to find Vexen...."

"You think this is all Cryptkeeper's fault?"

"It's the most obvious lead to check first, at any rate."

Vexen was not in his laboratory/bedroom, the kitchen, or the Grey Area, though the latter had a
few disgruntled earlybirds in it (Saïx made Axel stay out of sight - he wasn't ready to deal with
how to handle the effects on today's missions yet). They were just about to ascend Naught's
Skyway when they heard voices. Both Nobodies immediately ducked behind a wall.

"When will you know if the experiment was a success?" Xemnas was asking.

"I merely need to observe the subjects firsthand, since their speech and mannerisms will be a dead
giveaway. I've already heard that they've been acting strangely this morning, and you said yourself
that Saïx has failed to report to you as usual. All I need is a confirmation, and then we can
proceed."

'Proceed with what?' From the look on his - Axel's - face, Saïx's partner was thinking the same
thing.

"Very well. I shall leave it to you." Xemnas swept away, and Vexen's footsteps were heard
approaching down the ramp. No time to run; corridors would be too noisy. The Luna Diviner and
the Flurry of Dancing Flames shared a single long look. That was all they needed.
Then Saïx purposefully rounded the corner and broke into a grin. "Well, if it isn't the very fugitive I've been looking for! What's the matter, Vex? You look nervous. Relax, they just sent me to find you, I'm not out for your head." He winked. "Yet."

"Wh...What?" Vexen gasped in nervous confusion.

Axel now came around the corner. "There you are. Get to the Grey Area at once, we've lost enough time already with this mess."

"What mess?" Vexen asked, sounding eager.

"I'd rather not have to repeat myself," Axel said coldly. "I shall inform the whole Organization of the situation at once." He snapped his fingers, summoning several Dusks. "Bring the other members to the Grey Area." The Dusks obediently slithered away.

Vexen was staring from one to the other. "So today's irregularities have some...external cause? How do the two of you feel?"

They stared back. "What are you talking about, Vex?" Saïx said.

"Is this your idea of stalling for time?" Axel wondered ominously.

Vexen gulped. "N-No. Of course not, I was simply curious. Excuse me, gentlemen." He corridored away.

Axel laughed. "Nice one, Sai. Didn't think you had it in you."

"You couldn't have done that earlier? Come on."

After a frantic ten-minute crash course in mission-organizing, Axel swept imperiously into the Grey Area with Saïx sauntering at his heels.

"What's the big idea, Moony?" Larxene snapped. "You'd better not have dragged me out of bed
this early for something stupid, or I'll--"

"Or you'll what?" Axel snapped. "Do enlighten us, Number XII."

"Hmph." She folded her arms and looked away. "Just brief us already so I can see if you're wasting my time or not."

To Saïx's displeasure, Roxas and Xion had edged over to him and were now standing uncomfortably close. "What happened, Axel?" Roxas asked in a low voice, as the rest of the Organization pestered the real Axel.

'I'm Axel, I'm Axel, I'm Axel,' Saïx told himself firmly. "Dunno, kiddo. We'll just have to wait and see."

"I hope nothing bad happened," the replica worried. Saïx forced himself to pat it on the head.

"SILENCE, all of you," Axel thundered. "It has recently come to my attention that several Heartless of an unusual nature have surfaced."

"I hope you're not talking about those gumball machines," Xigbar said with a wink.

Axel struggled to keep his expression stern and not burst into laughter. "The Rare Vendors and their ilk hardly warrant such a change in routine," he said coldly instead. "No, the new enemies' strengths and abilities are much more alarming, and it seems they are traveling from world to world."

"Whaaaaat?" Demyx exclaimed in dismay. "You're not gonna make us chase after these things alone, are you?!"

"Indeed. It is urgent that all begin preparations at once and depart as soon as possible. Number IX, you are to search Atlantica for any sign of the Heartless in question, and eliminate them if they are found. The rest of your assignments are here, come see me when you are ready."

"Ah, better get this over with," Saïx sighed, going up to take the fake mission brief Axel handed
Roxas stared at his assignment with a growing smile, as Xion's eyes lit up beside him. "Me and Xion get to go together?"

"He's probably afraid you two'll get eaten if you go alone," Saïx snorted, just barely managing to keep this tone playful rather than scathing.

"Hey!" the children exclaimed, as Axel covered his mouth with one hand.

"We can handle it," Roxas insisted.

"But we've been ordered to team up," Xion said hurriedly, "so we shouldn't argue."

Realization crossed Roxas's face. "Oh. Yeah, we shouldn't argue. Bye, Saïx; see you later, Axel."

"Be careful out there," Saïx responded, raising a hand in farewell. As soon as the children were gone, Saïx gave Axel a hard look ("Meet me as soon as you can get away"), and Axel nodded in acknowledgement ("Of course I will, chill"). Then Saïx opened a corridor to Neverland, where he waited.

Presently, Roxas and Xion came along, which would have surprised him if he was still capable of being surprised. He hadn't realized Axel had sent them to this world.

"What are you doing here, Axel?" Roxas asked.

Saïx ran his hand through his hair to buy time, just like Axel always did. "...Well, you know. I was chasing the Heartless, but I lost it once we got here."

"Let's look for it together," the replica offered.

"Yeah! That's a good idea, Xion," said Roxas.
'Ugh.' Unfortunately, he had no good reason to refuse, so Saïx reluctantly glided around the islands with the children, staying alert to any sign of Axel's approach as he endured the young Keybearers' inanities.

"Neverland's weird how you have to dive down to pick up prizes when you kill stuff."

"It's because we get to fly here."

"Yeah."

"I like this real flying better than Gliding."

"Yeah. Flying's fun. What do you think, Axel?"

"I DON'T CARE." "It's the best, man."

Finally, a dark portal opened below, and Saïx flew down to meet his partner at once as the children trailed hesitantly behind him. "Yo, Sai! What's up?" he asked, coming to a hurried landing.

"Coast is clear," Axel responded, shooting him a thumbs-up. "Let's go back to the castle and get this mess fixed."

Saïx glared, and could sense the children staring. "You feeling all right, buddy?" he asked pointedly.

Axel waved his hand in total unconcern. "Oh, you can drop the act, there's no one around now."

"No one?" Saïx growled, wrapping one arm around Roxas and the other around Xion, and dragging them close in demonstration.

Axel just laughed. "They don't count, we can let 'em in on it."
"What's going on?" Roxas asked suspiciously.

Saïx let go of the Keyberaers and stalked a few paces away as Axel explained, "Me and Saïx switched bodies. We're trying to figure out how to switch back."

The younger ones stared.

"This is Axel," Saïx said sulkily. "I'm Saïx."

"Yup!" Axel grinned.

The children stared some more. "What?"

"I don't understand."

Saïx resisted the urge to facepalm.

"Look," Axel said, blowing out a slightly exasperated breath, "I really am Axel. When we woke up this morning, Saïx was in my body, and I'm in his. We think Vexen and Xemnas have something to do with it, so we were thinking--"

"Whaaaaat?!"

Numbers XIII and XIV were far from the most intelligent Nobodies in the Organization's ranks, so it took quite a lot of tiresome and undignified demonstrations ("Oi, stop doomgazing my Keybearers") before they were finally convinced. They ended up clinging to Axel, staring at Saïx in horror as if this was all his fault.

"...so I was thinking you might be able to help us, Xi," Axel finished. "You know Vexen's stuff pretty well, maybe you can root through it and find something that'll switch us back."
"I'll try," Xion said doubtfully. "But what about the Heartless?"

Axel and Saïx looked at her blankly. "What Heartless?"

"Our target," Roxas clarified, obviously withholding the word idiots.

Saïx sighed. "We made up that story to get everyone out of the castle. We need to be able to search at our leisure."

"Whaaaaat?!"

Ugh.

"You guys'll get credit for defeating the super-Heartless," Axel laughed. "Then no one except maybe Xigbar will wonder why they never found it."

"We'll have to call them back as soon as this situation is resolved," Saïx said, making a mental note. "We can't have them wandering the worlds indefinitely on a useless mission...."

Once they returned to the castle, Axel and Roxas went on "Superior Patrol" to keep an eye out for Xemnas, as Xion calmed down Vexen's Nobody servants so that she and Saïx could look around for any kind of switching potion.

"Sacred moon."

Xion looked over as Saïx slammed a drawer shut. He leaned his forehead against the upper cabinet, closed his eyes, and just stood there for a while.

"Are you okay, Ax-- Saïx?" she asked cautiously.

"...Did that drawer truly contain what I thought it did?"
"Oh, you mean the dismembered--?"

"YES, all right, thank you." Saïx shuddered. It had nothing to do with emotions at all, it was pure reflex.

"Hey, Saïx, I think I found something that might work...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Heh, I'm sure they get revenge on Vex eventually.

Complete: 49/101
"Heeeyyy, just the man I was lookin’ for! So, Sai, I have a favor to ask for my next mission...."

"Only an amateur would waste my talents on a target of that low caliber."

"Are you insane?! I'll be lucky to RTC by 6:00! I gave up this job so I'd have more time to devote to my real work, not less!"

"I would like to lodge a formal complaint."

"Of course I don't have a problem with the assignment. What could I possibly complain about
when you send an operative with low HP and high magic stats after a target with magic-resistant armor and no elemental weaknesses?"

"Aw, Sai, Atlantica? Really? Ugh!"

"I didn't want to fight a big scary giant Heartless, I wanted to do recon! It's not against the rules to trade missions, right?"

"I say, I know I'm new to all this, but there are a few things I feel necessary to discuss with you...."

Axel walked into the Grey Area on Monday morning to find the entire Organization gathered together, either looking bored or impatient or talking to each other in gossipy tones. (Except Xemnas, who had never been seen in the Grey Area in all the years of the Castle's existence. Non-existence, whatever.)

"What's this all about?" Axel wondered.

Saïx, leaning against the window with crossed arms and a sulky look on his face, straightened up and called out coolly, "Congratulations, slacker, even Demyx showed up before you did."

"What, did I miss a memo or something? It's not even 8:00 yet!"

"I think we all missed a memo," Demyx offered. "Lulu's being uber-mysterious."
"Call me that again and I'll smash a claymore into your face. Axel, pick a number between one and ten. Actually, all the numbers have already been claimed except 1, 7, and 8, so your choice is limited to one of those."

"If I pick 7, will you stop acting like someone stole your kibbles?"

"Now choose a number between 50 and 100. I'll let you know if it's still available."

"...Kibbles are obviously still stolen, so I'm going with 88 on this one."

Briskly, Saïx scribbled a note on his clipboard and then started hurling cards at his fellow Nobodies. "You all are witness to the fact that these assignments were completely random."

Axel looked at his card: Numbers VII and VIII to Twilight Town for recon.

"Anyone who complains about future missions," Saïx continued, "must pay a fee of 5 Elixirs, 3 Lightning Crystals, and 7,000 munny, and will be required to take on a double assignment the next day. There is far too much work to be done for me to tolerate having to listen to constant griping. Anyone who has problems with the new policy can take it up with Lord Xemnas. I hope you find today's missions satisfactory in comparison with previous arrangements." With no further ado, Saïx opened a dark corridor and stepped into it.

Realizing that he was supposed to follow, Axel hurried to get to the portal before it closed, as a chorus of whining rose up behind him. "Completely random?" he said skeptically. "You taking an easy mission with your best friend to our favorite world?"

Saïx did not answer until they had reached their destination. Then he marched straight into Tram Common and growled, "Look, Axel. I've spotted a highly suspicious ice cream shop."

"Oh, man, you're right! We totally have to investigate that place for intel!"

"I'm glad to see we are in agreement." Saïx purchased several ice cream bars.

"Hey, Saïx," Axel said testingly, "don't you think there's something funny about the clock tower?"
We probably oughta check it out."

"Of course."

They went up to the top of the tower, sat down with their legs dangling over the ledge, and unwrapped their ice creams. "What are we doing now?" Axel asked cautiously.

"Gathering information, obviously," Saïx said shortly, biting into his ice cream.

"I see. I guess that sunset out there warrants some close inspection."

"Yes." Saïx was already three-quarters through his first ice cream and reaching for a second.

"Sai, you haven't been this stressed since Vexen sent us on that string of Wonderland missions a year ago. I hate to say this, but it looks like the job's getting worse, not better."

"I can handle it," Saïx snarled, chomping so hard on the ice cream bar in his hand that the stick snapped.

"...I can see that."

Saïx sighed and finally went still, hands dangling against his knees. "...It's difficult. I'll admit that. Harder than I thought it would be." He slowly raised the ice cream to his lips again. "But I can do it. Everyone can be so irritating with the constant complaints, but...I don't hate it. Somehow, I - I don't think teaching would have been much different, if things had worked out like they were supposed to."

Axel snorted. "I dunno, organizing monster-slaying in multiple worlds for an organization of sinister black-coated men toting humongous magical weapons seems like a pretty far cry from teaching little kids how to read and write...."

"You'd be surprised," Saïx said dryly.
"So, how exactly is this Mental Health Day of yours gonna go down in the mission report?"

"Obviously we searched the entire town, recording clues and drawing conclusions and making important discovers that will benefit the Organization."

"None of which will have anything to do with ice cream."

"Definitely not," Saïx confirmed, reaching for his third bar.

Axel clapped him on the back. "Sometimes it really pays off to be friends with you...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Huh - wow this story's old. I have a note here that says, "Thanks go to Infamousplot for suggesting that Isa might have wanted to become a teacher someday. ^_^" I didn't realize this was (I assume) the first story I wrote after she suggested that. XD

Complete: 54/101
Summary: Isa, recovering after finally being freed from Xehanort, would be happier to see Lea if there weren't a certain couple of "distractions" getting in the way of their friendship.

0.0.0

The former Luna Diviner, recovering in a hospital bed after his long ordeal, looked perfectly composed in sleep: features relaxed, yet without a hint of a smile; the bandages on his recently-reopened scars discreet enough to spare his dignity; his breathing deep and even.

Lea sat by the bed for a while, watching. Then he smiled a little and smacked his no-longer-ex-friend in the face.

Isa jerked, hands flying up in self-defense, glaring hard enough to make a Dusk wet its (figurative) pants. Though, since his eyes were a mundane green now instead of that creepy gold, a braver Dusk probably would've been able to keep its figurative pants clean. Lea, the actual target this time, felt more like crowing in triumph. He would never take his friends' eye colors for granted again.

"I knew you weren't really asleep."

"Don't expect a prize."

"Man, how long've you been faking? Xigbar-I-mean-Braig's been up and about for two days now, and Terra was out of bed for four whole hours yesterday. Aqua and Ven threw a party."
"It never occurred to you that I might be feigning sleep because I don't want to talk to you?"

Now Lea was the one glaring. "Well, you know who does want to talk to me? These kids named Roxas and Xion, maybe you've heard of them. They're eating ice cream right now, actually. With these other kids named Naminé and Sora, who also like talking to me. Maybe I should go hang out with them instead."

"No one is stopping you." Isa rolled to his side, turning his back to him.

Lea stared. Then he stood up, took the vase of flowers off the bedside table, and upturned its contents over the ex-berserker.

In a flash, Isa was sitting up, eyes blazing, hand outstretched--

There was a pause.

"The old weapons don't come when you call them anymore," Lea said in an explaining-something-to-a-cute-but-stupid-little-kid voice. "But I think I know which closet they dumped your claymore in, I can go fetch it for you if you want a boss battle. I wouldn't, if I were you. Unless you want your butt kicked. You're bedridden, in case you forgot."

Isa flopped back down to resume sulking, regardless of the now-wet bedding and all the flowers scattered around him.

Lea sighed and went around to where his face was, sitting down in the chair there. Isa, fortunately, was dignified enough to not turn away again.

"Hey. If this is about your pillar, I'm sorry."

"It's not about the pillar."

"I'm sorry for flinging myself into the deepest abyss of your heart and nearly drowning in darkness as I battled the second-strongest Keyblade-wielder in existence and dragged your half-conscious half-heart back to the Light so you wouldn't be lost forever."
"I told you, I'm grateful."

"Hey. Saying 'Thank you' while doomgazing me, and then ignoring me for five days, doesn't count."

"...Thank you for saving me," Isa muttered, eyes averted.

"You're welcome."

"...."

"...Man, it's not like I'm surprised you only had two people on your pillar."

"This, for the record," Isa said pointedly, "is why I don't want to talk to you," but Lea ignored him.

"I mean, you're not exactly cuddly, you don't trust anyone, I've never seen you smile at a single person other than me and your mom-- What?"

"You heard me," Isa said through gritted teeth.

"Yeah, I thought I heard a little fairy somewhere giggle 'I trust you,' but it can't have been you, because you won't even look me in the face. You wouldn't trust me to walk you to the bathroom, much less--!" Lea studied the alteration in his friend's (still averted) glare. "You have to pee, don't you."

"Just get out."

"Can you make it to the bathroom on your own?"

"It's ten steps away."
"Yeah, and you've been possessed for a decade, unconscious for three days, and fake-unconscious for two. I'd need help, if I were you."

"Well, you're *not* me, and even if you were, you have plenty of other help now, anyway, so my services would be superfluous."

Lea sat for a moment, translating this. Then, "Flaming pants, Sai, I mean Isa, are you ever gonna run out of ways to say 'I'm so jealous of the kids I could spit'?"

"One cannot be jealous of individuals so inferior that they almost escape notice," Isa said sourly.

"Riiiiight. Roxas and Xion are just sooooo unnoticeable, it was a *total coincidence* that you made his life ten times more miserable than it had to be, and hated *her* so much she gave you FEELINGS you weren't supposed to have."

"That thing--"

"That thing," Lea stormed, slapping a photograph so hard on Isa's chest that it prompted an actual 'Ow,' "has a heart, which makes her human and gives her the right to be called her and she and whatever, so STOP with the whole puppet thing, or I will find a different place to shove that IV line in."

"Xion isn't even in this picture," Isa said in annoyance.

"What are you, blind?! She's the one with the flower face paint!"

"Dressing Kairi in black and giving her a different name is no proof that your delusions are real, as I thought would be obvi--"

"*That's not Kairi!* Flaming-- *Look!*"

Isa frowned at the second photograph that had been shoved at him, of two nearly identical-looking
"Girls grinning at the camera like sisters. "Photoshopped."

Lea stood up again and grasped the IV line.

"But feel free to believe whatever you like," Isa said very quickly, trying to hold him back. "X-Xion is a loveable girl, and you may enjoy your new playthings to your heart's content. I never said I was stopping you."

Lea's eyes narrowed. "The way you talk about them...."

"I'm not going to involve myself in your personal affairs, since I seem to have lost that right."

Lea sat down, this time on the edge of the bed. "Isa. I know I joke around sometimes, but they're not just toys, or pets. You know? They're my friends. I know they're a lot younger than me, and freaking adorable, and half of them are kind of clueless, but...we're friends. We can talk about anything. We've risked our lives for each other. They're not just distractions. You know?"

"I know," Isa grumbled.

"Gah, what is your problem?! People can be friends with more than one person at a time, Isa!"

"I know."

"Even you."

Isa glared.

"So what if me and your mom are the only ones on your pillar? That just means you have room for lots more faces."

"I am not interested in those children other than as allies in battle."
"Well, why not?" Lea demanded. "You'd actually get along really well with Riku, if you ever talked to him. Sora'd annoy you, but I'd like to see the person that kid can't cheer up when they're going through a rough time. Kairi's one of the seven Princesses - take Roxas and Xion's heart-rays, and multiply them by fifty; I dare you to keep feeling like a heartless jerk if you hang out with her enough. Naminé has a whole folder stuffed with pictures of you, you and me, because she was helping from the outside and I never would have gotten you out alive if she hadn't been sending us all those memories to forge a path. Roxas...and Xion...sacred moon, Isa."

Isa eyed him warily.

"Just, I can't even-- Just be there. You don't even have to do anything. Just come up to the clock tower with us and eat some ice cream. You'll see."

"...."

"...."

"...."

"...Or you can keep hiding in here until you die of sulking. It's up to you." Lea finally got up and left. Headed down the hall, meaning to go join his friends. His other friends.

He sighed and came to a halt. Stood there thinking for a while. Finally started walking again. Ended up turning right instead of toward the elevators. Made two circuits of the hallways. Then turned back into the same hospital room he had left.

Isa was on the floor.

"Isa!" He ran, but his hands were brushed off when he tried to reach out.

"Go away." Isa continued to kneel, one hand resting against the wall, face impassive. "...I thought you'd left."

"Well, I came back. Obviously. And it's a good thing I did, because you need help."
"I don't."

Lea frowned. "Fine." He stood up and crossed his arms. "Let's see you make it on your own, then."

Isa ignored him and just knelt quietly for a while. Then he drew in a breath and surged upright, managed one-and-a-half steps, and sank gracefully back to his knees again.

"...."

"...."

Isa glanced back at the bed, gauged the distance, then sighed, his head dropping in a defeated way.

Lea sighed, too, then went to put an arm around his shoulders and heave him to his feet.

Isa made no resistance this time. "Why do I still think I have any pride left?" he said very quietly as they made their way toward the bathroom.

Lea grinned a little. "Because you're you. Honestly, I'd be kind of creeped out if you ever actually made things easy for me...."

Once Isa was settled back in bed (now with fresh sheets and sans flowers), both of them looked at each other wearily. "Thank you," Isa said in a low voice. "You may go now."

"Ah - my master dismisses me," Lea said without moving.

Isa's mouth quirked in annoyance. "I only meant that you're now free to return to the children."

"Which I can't wait to do, since I came here solely to help you use the toilet and couldn't have any other motive."
"Apologies, I didn't realize you enjoyed watching me lie here in a bad mood. I thought you preferred your flock of upbeat Keyblade wielders."

Lea looked at him for a while instead of continuing the banter, making Isa uneasy. Then he finally said, "You're still there, you know. There are more faces now, but...you're still there. Roxas told me, after he and Sora dove to my heart...heh, he was kind of mad about it, actually. He and Xion and you are on the stained glass closest to me."

Isa closed his eyes. A tear slipped down his cheek, and he shifted his head, but then went perfectly still without actually turning away like Lea expected. 'I trust you.'

"...."  'Open your eyes, Isa. See? You're not crying alone.'

The door creeeeeaaaked open in a quietly obnoxious way. "Is Axel still in there?" Xion whispered loudly.

"Yeah," Roxas replied, in a tone that clung to the description 'whisper' only by the edges of its fingernails. "SIIIIIGGHH. I wonder when he'll finish and come hang out with us again, like he promised."

Lea laughed a little, wiping his eyes, then laughed again when Isa muttered incredulously, "She really does look like Kairi...."

"I'll...I'll be there later, all right?"

"Okay, Axel," Xion said heavily.

"You don't have to," Roxas said in a resentful tone. "If you wanna stay with Saïx, I don't care. Then I won't have to listen to you going 'Isa Isa Isa' all the time."

"I don't go 'Isa Isa Isa' all the time!"
"Yes, you do," Xion said. "You told us when you accidentally broke his arm and he had to teach you how to splint it, and you failed math because you were cheating off him all year, and your sister pierced his ears so you guys could make him wear the ice cream earrings--"

"Ha ha ha!" Lea interrupted, trying to avoid the strong glare being leveled at him, "Did I say all that? I bet Demyx told you that stuff...."

"No, it was you."

"Yeah, because you like Saïx more than us now."

"That's not true!" Then, quickly, "I hate Saïx-who's-really-Xehanort, but I love all my friends. Got that memorized? You three are my most important people."

"But all you care about is him now. Is that how friendship works? You like your first friend, then when he's mean you make new friends, then when he likes you again you spend all your time with him because he was your friend first, and that's fair." Roxas was glaring with his arms crossed, looking like he was about to either break down or blow up.

"That is not how friendship works." They all looked at Isa in surprise, who was looking at the ceiling. "Your friends are the people you care about most. You stay loyal to them, even when doing so is difficult and unpleasant. And you don't let anything get in the way of your friendship." He finally brought his eyes down to Lea's and added, very quietly, "Not even new friends."

Lea smiled, unable to speak for a moment.

"Or old friends?" Roxas challenged.

Isa's eyes still held Lea's as he whispered, "You can let them stay."

"...I need a group hug," Lea said. "I need one now."

"Huh?"
"What's a--?"

"No."

Once they got their ice cream, the kids sat on the other side of Lea so that they wouldn't have to actually look at Isa, and Isa never addressed them at all. Lea, however, sitting between the three people dearest to him, with the taste of sea-salt on his lips and the sound of laughter in his ears, was happy, because he knew it was only a matter of time before his 1+2 would someday turn into 4.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Hee, so Caxceber claimed my DevArt kiriban, and was clever enough to request a fic about my OTP, which is why this got written and posted so quickly. :p She suggested a post-Xehanort hurt/comfort hospital scene, because I was too tired at the time to come up with a plunny. ^^

I'm not sure how much this qualifies as a "hurt/comfort" fic, and of course Rox & Xi shoved their way in because there's a reason why my OTP is half of an OT4, but...I hope you still like it, Caxceber dear. ^^;

Lol, I wrote this in two days. XD

Complete: 56/101
Versus Undistorted: Miracle (prompt 12) {Isa & Xion}

*Versus Undistorted*, a *Kingdom Hearts* fanwork: 100 Song Theme Challenge by Cherished Tenshi, written by Raberba girl

**Miracle (prompt 12)**

*Isa/Xion Day, 14 July 2013*

**Summary**: Just because he doesn't *want* to do it doesn't mean he *can't*.

*A/N*: I still love Bon-Bon's challenge, but there's just no way I can write 100 Zemyx stories.

* *sweatdrop*

Takes place shortly after *Fire & Moonlight: Dearest*.

- - -

Isa slept, mostly. Partly because it was so boring being awake - there was usually nothing of interest on TV, and the only one who really visited him was Lea, who was as often as not hanging out with all his new Keyblade-wielding teenage friends.

'So I just need to lose ten years of my life and obtain an exclusive weapon, and I'll have a friend again,' Isa thought resentfully.

It was while he was sulking in bed one time, facing the window, unable to sleep, that he heard someone come in. Not Lea - Lea would have burst in like an obnoxious whirlwind. Whoever it was just edged the door open and crept in with soft footsteps. Too timid to be a nurse.

Isa frowned, turning his head to look, and was dismayed to see the girl everyone called Xion. She looked so very different than the Xion he'd hated in the Organization, dressed now in fashionable clothes, with smooth glossy hair and bright blue eyes. He wasn't used to seeing her as a *person*.

She came to a halt when he looked at her. "Um...hi, Saïx."
"My name is Isa," he snapped.

"Isa...sorry...um, I brought you something."

They both looked at the flowers filling her arms.

"Don't tell me you brought me flowers."

"Uh...okay, I won't."

He sighed.

"I gave some to Terra and Braig, too. Terra was happy, and Braig pinched my cheeks and talked at me like I'm a baby."

"I see."

"So..." Xion came over and fussed with the flowers on his bedside table. "Um..."

"What."

"May I...may I please put a flower in your hair, Isa?"

"NO."

"Aw...Terra and Braig let me...."

"I don't care."
Xion pouted and flopped to sit on the edge of his bed. "I bet you'd look nice with a flower."

"Wear one yourself," he snapped.

Her expression turned crafty, and unnervingly similar to Lea's. "...But now I'm all comfortable, and I can't reach...can you get a flower for me, Isa? Please?"

"Lazy girl...." He impatiently pulled a flower out of the vase and handed it over. Then he watched her struggling with it for a while before he sighed, plucked the flower back out of her hands, snapped off the excess stem, grasped her chin so as to tilt her head into a more convenient pose, and carefully tucked the blossom into her hair. "Unless you have some hairpins I can use, it won't be very secure, but it should do as long as you're careful."

"Thank you, Isa," she exclaimed, looking both surprised and pleased. She made a sudden movement as if to fling her arms around him, then hesitated - but not before Isa instinctively flinched away, which made her grin and complete the gesture after all.

He stiffened in shock, then tried unsuccessfully to pull out of her arms. "Get off. Get off, Xion, I am not comfortable with this."

"Aw." She released him, but only after planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Ugh...." 'I hate children.'

"Why don't you like being hugged, Isa?"

He didn't know how to answer that. "We are not close, we don't even like each other--"

"Why don't you like me, Isa?" She scooted closer and grasped his hand, displeasing him again. "I always wanted to know," she said softly. "I could never figure out what I did wrong. So I could never fix it, and I could never make you like me."
"Why do you even care about my opinion?" he grumbled.

"Don't you want people to like you, Isa?"

"I don't care what other people think."

"But...don't you even care what Axel thinks?"

"His name is Lea. Not Axel."

She looked sad. He was surprised to find that it felt unpleasant, making this child feel bad. He sighed. "...Fine. I do care about what Lea thinks, and since he is somewhat attached to you, it will displease him if I treat you unkindly. For his sake, I will try not to let my revulsion be visible."

She still gazed at him, looking even more sad.

"What do you want, Xion."

"...Can I please put a flower in your hair?"

"Sacred moon, you're still harping about that?"

She practically crawled over him to reach the flowers, and was almost kneeling in his lap as she slipped one near his face and began twisting long blue strands around the stem. "Kairi taught me how to braid," she said proudly.

"Hn." 'You're doing a terrible job of it.'

"Do you know how to braid, Isa?"

"Why do you think I would?!"
"So I know how to do something you don't?" she said in excitement.

"I *do* know how to braid."

"Hmmm...."

"You don't believe me?" he snapped.

"Nope," she said, shaking her head. The movement caused the blossom to come tumbling out of her hair. Isa scooped it up, pushed her head back into a convenient position, and set to work.

Xion sat still and patient until he had finished braiding the flower securely into her hair, then she pulled one of the loose strands around in front of her eyes and admired it. "All the strands are the same size," she said in awe, "it's so pretty.... You really are good at this, Isa."

"It's nothing to brag about," he sighed, lying back against the pillows.

"Thank you for braiding my hair, Isa."

"*Don't* thank me."

"Doesn't it look nice, Axel?"

"It's gorgeous, Xi!"

Isa nearly fell out of bed. "How long have you been here?!" he demanded wildly.

"We saw Xion hug you," Roxas said as they came into the room, "but then Axel pulled me behind the door and we just listened for a while."
"It's a miracle," Lea laughed, wrapping one arm around Isa and the other around Xion so he could drag them both into a hug, "Moonwolf and Xi don't hate each other anymore~!"

"Get off," Isa growled, struggling.

"Do you want a flower, too, Axel?" Xion offered. "Isa can braid it for you."

"Urgh...um, sure, Xi." He sighed. "Oh man, Xion, the things I do for you...."

o.o.o

Author's Notes: Sorry...I know this was a bit OOC even for manga-Xion.... ^^;

Complete: 11/100
When The Lights Go Out {Organization XIII}

When The Lights Go Out

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Chaos ensues in the Castle That Never Was. What else can you expect from thirteen volatile people with magical powers enclosed in a dark room? (No yaoi.)

A/N: You know, just assume that every single one of my fics involving a fourteen-member Organization is gonna ignore canon chronology. Also, there'll be slight OOCness here and there, because I'm intentionally putting situational humor over characterization for once in my life.

o.o.o

It was probably a good thing that the power went out when they were all gathered together during a meeting - otherwise, the chaos of them being scattered all over the castle in complete darkness might have been ten times worse. Which was saying something.

"Ack!"

"Whoa!"

"What happened?"

"WE'RE ALL GONNA DIIIIEEE!!!!"

"Shut up, Demyx."

"But I've always wanted to say that!"
"Everyone needs to shut up," Xaldin rumbled.

There was a long pause.

"Explain," Xemnas finally commanded, seeming to address the world in general.

Vexen's voice answered first. "We seem to have experienced a failure in the castle's lighting system."

"Oi." That was Xigbar. "We could use you right about now, Mr. Walking Flashlight."

There was another pause.

"He means you, Roxas," Axel said.

"Oh." The room filled with a bright glow, illuminating the restless members of Organization XIII.

"Much better," Luxord said in satisfaction.

"Shall we adjourn, or continue the meeting and fix the problem later?" Marluxia asked.

"We will finish our business," Xemnas announced grandly. "Number IV, Number VI, you will see to making the necessary repairs after dismissal. For now, Number V, continue your report on--"

"Where's Xion?" Roxas suddenly burst out.

Everyone looked at him.

"Roxas--" Axel started to warn, but the Organization's second-youngest member was already standing up on his seat, looking increasingly agitated.
"It's still dark in the rest of the castle, right? Xion's all alone out there!"

"Roxas, don't, she's--" It was improbable that the Key of Destiny heard him over the sound of a dark corridor being opened. Within seconds, Roxas was gone, plunging the Round Room back into utter darkness. "--a walking flashlight, just like you," Axel finished in disgust. "For crying out loud, Roxas."

"Shall we adjourn, or continue the meeting and punish him later?" Marluxia asked, now sounding amused.

"I can't see," Demyx complained.

"Shut UP, Demyx!"

"I can't see, either," Xigbar said brightly.

"See, Xiggy can't see, either!"

Everyone was blinded for a second as Thundaga spells came ripping through the darkness, impacting two empty chairs.

"Hah!" Xigbar crowed from where he and Demyx were now perched in midair a safe distance away, "Saw that comin' a mile away, Larxie."

There was a ringing sound of knives being unsheathed.

"Cease, all of you," Xemnas ordered. "Number VIII, provide us with illumination."

"Well, if you insist." Axel's figure came bursting into sight, crackling with flames. He raised an eyebrow. Although he himself and his immediate surroundings were now very clearly visible, his fire did nothing to light up the rest of the room.
"Well, that's not going to work," Vexen complained.

Saïx's calm voice spoke up for the first time. "I propose we relocate to the Grey Area. The light of Kingdom Hearts is better than nothing."

Axel rolled his eyes as he let his flames die down. "Who're you callin' 'nothing'?

"All of us are 'nothing,' obviously," Marluxia pointed out.

"Way to be depressing, Marly."

"This is not solving our problem," Xaldin growled.

"Maybe Luxord can rewind time to before the power went out!" Larxene said brightly, each word sparkling with sarcasm. "Or I could summon a thunderstorm and illuminate our whole meeting with lightning!"

"No way," Axel said flatly. "That's stupid."

"Axel, she was joking," Marluxia pointed out.

"I know that. It's still stupid," Axel growled, glad for once that Xion was never included in meetings.

"You got a problem with my lightning?" Larxene growled.

"Yeah, maybe I do!"

The sound of a dark corridor opening masked the thunk of a blade impacting stone, so that only Zexion and Luxord heard it.
"Missed," Axel's voice said smugly, from somewhere across the room.

Larxene shrieked in fury, her boot heels clacking on her chair as she presumably stood up to fling more knives. More than one of the other members winced at the squelchy sound of a dagger slicing into flesh.

"Ow," Lexaeus said.

Then both Axel and Larxene started yelling at the same time, a combination of Xigbar's name, demands to be released, and language that Axel would have had a hard time explaining to Roxas later on, had Number XIII still been present.

"Now, now, naughty kids who fight end up in time-out," Xigbar drawled. "You two can just hang there for a while and cool your heads."

"I really wish I could actually see this," Marluxia sighed.

Xemnas's voice came booming out of the darkness. "The next person to speak out of turn will get shut in the Void for two days."

Instant silence.

"Now. To business. Number V, finish your report."

"...Yes, sir. To conclude, I find the increased Neoshadow activity in Beast's Castle some small cause for concern, but I predict that the Keybearers' involvement will clear up the problem before it gets unduly serious. Also, I am still bleeding, and I respectfully request permission for Number VI to speak."

"Permission granted," Xemnas said.

"Cure," Zexion said cautiously, and there was a brief green flare of light as Lexaeus's knife-wound was healed. "I now humbly request permission for Number V to speak."
"Permission granted."

"I thank you, Zexion," Lexaeus said. "In the future, I will not attend meetings without a suitably prepared panel arrangement. I, Lexaeus, now concede the floor."

"Very well," Xemnas said. "Number IV, what is your assessment of the replica program's current progress?"

Vexen sighed. "Unfortunately, the more recent experiments have been producing most unsatisfactory results. However, I think it fitting that you and I discuss the details privately," he added, obviously proud of having information meant for the Superior's ears alone.

"Very well. Come to my office after dismissal and give your full report. Number VIII, give us your observations on Number XIV's performance in battle."

"Xion pretty much pwns, sometimes she can kill, like, ten Heartless before I even get close enough to back her up, and I am so serious, the blood is rushing to my head and I'm getting visions of dancing sugar plums."

"I see. Number II, release them."

Xigbar chuckled. "I'm gonna take that as permission to speak, and sigh in theatrical disappointment that I can't continue harassing our favorite little hotheads here."

There was the sound of more yelling and hastily-summoned dark corridors as Xigbar apparently dropped the upside-down Nobodies without bothering to be gentle or offer a warning. Now from the direction of her chair again, Larxene made a half-strangled noise, as if she had started to shout something but caught herself just in time.

"Assuming it's still my turn to talk," Axel went on in a strained voice, now from the direction of his own chair, "I'm requesting permission for Demyx to go next."

"That is all you have to report on Number XIV?" Xemnas asked in disapproval.
"Nah, just need a minute to get my head back on straight, as it were...."

"Very well. Number IX, you are granted permission to speak."

"Awesome! And I'm gonna use my turn to say that if you let us talk normal again and promise not to toss us in the Void, I will bake you lots and lots of cookies and let you hug Chester."

There was a very long pause, practically bursting with the rest of the Organization's unspoken reactions to this.

"Very well," Xemnas finally said. "Since you all have resumed quiet and orderly conduct, I now rescind the previously-stated threat."

Eleven people burst out talking, almost at the same time.

"W00t! Blah blah blah chatter chatter I can talk now, whee!"

"Lord Xemnas, I really must protest this decision."

"Lexaeus, are you all right?"

"Yes."

"We need to stop wasting time here and get the lighting system fixed already!"

"For heaven's sake, this is ridiculous."

"Honestly, I'm getting bored."
"Everyone, QUIET."

"Heh heh, no one's listening to you, Xaldin."

"Wanna pick up where we left off, Blondie?"

"I want to stuff you down a toilet, that's what I want to do!"

Spells flared in the darkness as Axel and Larxene threw themselves back into their boss battle in earnest. Not that they could see each other, but they both did have Auto-Lock equipped.

"Ow!"

"Take that!"

"L-O-freaking-L, you just used Fira on the Flurry of Dancing Flames, moron."

"RAGH, WRONG PANEL! DIE!"

"Yow! Watch it!"

"Say good-bye, ex-Number-VIII!"

"Good-bye, hon."

Before Axel could fire off the last cast in his inventory, he suddenly found himself in a beautiful sunshine-filled meadow. A girl in a long yellow skirt joyfully ran up to him and seized his hands, singing in a pitch that could shatter glass. They danced together amidst herds of cavorting forest animals for a few very confusing minutes, and then everything went dark again as Axel was slammed back into reality. Where he was hanging upside down again. "Argh!"
"Are you quite finished?" Zexion's voice asked coldly.

"Freaking Kingdom Hearts, Zex, don't ever do that to me again." Axel shuddered. Enduring even just an illusion of Snow White's singing at point-blank range was a bit much, even for him.

"Can we dump them into the Void now?" Marluxia asked interestedly.

Both Axel and Larxene burst into a babble of frantic protest.

"No, wait--"

"He was ticking me off, I couldn't help it!"

"It was just a little--"

"If he'd only--!"

"I'll be good this time, I swear!"

"Silence," Xemnas commanded. "I will deal with you two momentarily. In the meantime, Numbers IV and VI, it seems best that you begin repairs right away. Numbers II and VII, remain here. The rest of you are dismissed."

Marluxia sounded wistful. "Was that an order, or just a suggestion?"

Elsewhere in the castle, Roxas and Xion, both emitting large quantities of light, were eating cake.

"You really can go back to the meeting now, Roxas. I'm all right, I promise."

"I know...I just don't want you to be lonely, all by yourself in the dark."
"I'm all by myself a lot," she sighed. "But really, I have light, too. It's not so scary, especially if you leave some of your Samurai behind to keep me company."

"Oh yeah. Good idea." Roxas finished the last bite of his cake and summoned some of his lesser Nobody servants. "Guys, I want you to stay with Xion until I come back. Keep her safe and don't let her get scared, okay?"

"Yes, my lord," they answered.

Xion smiled. "There's not really anything to keep me safe from. I can take care of myself, and besides, what could attack me here in the castle?"

Something large and black and red fell out of a dark corridor, nearly on their heads.

"Aaaahhh!"

The young Nobodies ducked to either side just in time as the thing crashed to the floor.

"Axel?!"

"What in the worlds are you doing?"

"Holy...flaming..." Axel started to say shakily. He stared around. "I'm in the kitchen. I'm in the freaking kitchen. Oh, Saïx, my best friend forever, I will never ever make another werewolf joke, ever again."

"Axel, what are you talking about?"

"Ummm, you know what, you never saw me, I'll be in the Void all next week, catch you later!" Axel opened up another corridor and practically fled.
"In the what?!"

"Axel!"

He was gone.

The kids stared at each other.

Then a herd of lesser Nobodies showed up, grabbed them both, and dragged them into yet another dark corridor, depositing them at Vexen's and Zexion's feet. "Ah! Well done," the older scientist exclaimed. "Just what we needed. Zexion, take the boy down to the basement; I'll use XIV in the central control room. Stay in contact."

"I will," Zexion agreed, patting the communicator in his pocket. "Come, Roxas."

"What? What's going ON?"

"There's been a system failure," Vexen snapped impatiently. "We need to fix the power grid. Make yourselves useful." He grabbed Xion and corriored with her to the central control room, where her light flooded the area as soon as they set foot in it. He picked her up and sat her on top of the control panel, ordering her to keep the light steady as he unrolled a tool kit and pried the cover off the circuit box.

Downstairs, Zexion set up Roxas on a box so that the boy's light would permit him to see the control panel. "I don't get it," Roxas said.

Zexion gave a long-suffering sigh. "Surely, even a person of your mental faculties should be able to understand that when you two Keybearers are the only illumination sources in this castle, we are in need of your services if we're ever going to restore--"

"No, I meant about Axel."

"Ah. Roxas, you were right to make yourself of use during this time. Perhaps Lord Xemnas will decide not to punish you for leaving the meeting without permission, the way Numbers VIII and
XII were for starting a fight in the Round Room."

Roxas's mouth went dry as he began putting the pieces together. "Y-You mean Xemnas actually throws people into the Void for real?"

"I assure you, our Superior does not make jokes. Hold this wire, please."

Roxas automatically grasped the wire that was handed to him, still preoccupied. 'So Axel somehow escaped, but he's pretending that he didn't so that he won't get in trouble. And it sounded like Saïx helped him. Maybe I shouldn't call Saïx names the next time he makes me mad...'

About a week later, Axel emerged from a dark corridor into the Luna Diviner's room, and dropped a plate of raspberry tarts on Saïx's desk. "From the Queen of Hearts."

"I suppose it's too much to expect that you didn't steal these," Saïx grumbled, edging the plate off of his mission reports in disgust. "You've been in Wonderland all this time?"

"World hopping. But yeah. Mostly in Wonderland. So many good places to hide, and most of the locals don't freak out when they see a weirdo in a black coat wandering around."

"I'm surprised you trust me enough to admit that," Saïx mumbled in an even lower voice, initializing his record book and then flipping to the next report.

"Saïx. After you corriored me to the kitchen instead of the Void? You have my trust forever." Axel laughed. "Right under Xem's nose, too; AND Xig's, for crying out loud. You've got guts."

"Unlike you, I've also got brains."

"Along with some traitorous tendencies."

Saïx froze. Axel laughed again and then leaned in close. Saïx, who had not looked at him all this time, could not see the affection on his face. "Sai. I thought you were the Superior's lackey by now. It really warmed the empty space where my heart used to be to see that it's still at least kind of an act."
"As if that means anything to us Nobodies."

"It does to me, anyway. And I hope you're not all hunched and tense like that because of the traitor remark, because guess whose job it is to go after traitors? Mine."

Saïx deliberately straightened up and relaxed his muscles, beginning determinedly to annotate the report.

"As if I'd ever kill you, orders or not, after what you did for me."

"I've done quite a lot for you that you never saw fit to repay before."

"Heh. True." Axel kicked his chair. "Oi, eat a tart. You look like you could use it."

"What I could use is some peace and quiet in which to get this work done."

"Did I tell you that I've sworn to never tell a werewolf joke again?"

Saïx paused. "No. You didn't." He reached for a tart.

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**Author's Notes:** I was kind of woozy from sleep-deprivation when I wrote this fic. I'm pretty sure that's why the tone seems off, since I took a nap right after drafting this and then wrote *Roses & Kittens*, which turned out much better. (Not that I think this fic is bad, it's just...really weird in comparison to my usual stuff.)

Anyway, this was originally written for my AkuSai-centered drabble series. Unfortunately, it turned out to be 1,900 words over the limit and had nothing to do with AkuSai until the very end. I decided to just post it as a separate, unrelated one-shot, and try a different idea for the drabble. *sweatdrop*
Demyx's pet Shadow, Chester, is a reference to JenxtheJinx's Demyx Time videos on YouTube.

Axel's anti-thunderstorm bit was him thinking about Xion, who's scared of thunder in my headcanon.
This was getting out of hand. Zexion did not consider himself to be paranoid, but the sixth time he walked into a room to find everyone in it abruptly ceasing their whispers upon his entrance, he could no longer deny that something, at least, was going on behind his back.

He opened his mouth, then shut it again without speaking. A direct confrontation would do no good, they would just deny it.

"Mornin', Zexy!" Demyx said brightly. "Sleep well?"

"I can't see how that's any business of yours," Zexion said shortly. He stalked past the rest of the group - Xigbar, Lexaeus, Axel, Luxord, Roxas, and Xion - without a word or glance, heading straight for Saix. "My mission for today?" he asked.

"Agrabah," Saix replied, though he was gazing in disapproval at the whispering group. "Recon. The details are inside."

"Thank you." Mission brief perusal; panel arrangement; dark corridor; work; lunch; more work; completion; corridor; home; definitely time for dinner. 'RTC time was later than usual, I am quite hungry. I hope that Marluxia didn't finish off the last of the tomato sauce, since I'm rather in the mood for--'
The kitchen, which was noisy and quite crowded and smelled delicious, got even noisier and more chaotic upon his entrance.

"Ah!"

"Hey--"

"It's Zexion."

"Quick, cover that--"

"The box, Xi, the box!"

"What?"

"Noooooo!" Demyx came hurtling out of it all, shoving Zexion back out into the corridor and then slamming the kitchen door shut. Demyx then proceeded to lean against it with arms spread almost protectively, offering a sheepish grin. "'Sup, Zex."

Zexion frowned. "What on earth is going on in there?"

"Uh...cooking! Yeah, because that's what you do in kitchens, right?"

"It's what I need to do, in any case. Move aside, please."

"Um-- Oh! Zexy, I need your help!"

"I don't--"
"See, there's this math problem I was working on, and I don't know how to do it!"

"That is no surprise," Zexion said flatly. "Ask for someone else's help, I just got back from Agrabah and I--"

"But you're so smart, I'm sure you can solve it in no time," Demyx insisted, grabbing his arm near the shoulder and propelling him firmly down the hall, away from the kitchen.

"Demyx--"

Zexion was not entirely sure how, but he ended up spending the next hour or so in the ninth portal (with no math problems in sight), helping Demyx clean out fish tanks and (since there were no other options) nibbling at junk food as Demyx loudly sang along to his music playlist.

"...and I will always ever love only yoooooooouuuuuuuuuuu!" the Nocturne finished extravagantly.

"Demyx, please turn it off now, or at least change it to some classical music that makes mathematical sense and doesn't induce headaches...."

By the time he was allowed into the kitchen, too hungry by now to cook a proper meal, there was not a trace of any of the other Nobodies or their unknown culinary project. Well, except for the lingering scent of cake, but that didn't really do anything to solve the mystery of why they were being so mysterious. Zexion ended up microwaving some ramen and putting the incident out of mind.

The next morning, Zexion woke up as usual and got ready for work, noticing that the castle seemed to be unusually deserted. It was not uncommon for Lord Xemnas to make himself scarce most of the time, but there was no one in the bathroom, kitchen, or dining room. A little warily, Zexion entered the Grey Area and noted with satisfaction that Saix, at least, was at his post.

Sort of. He was actually taping a Vacation Day notice to a window.

"There's no work today?" Zexion observed.
Saix turned around and gave him a surprisingly fed-up look. Zexion was not accustomed to seeing such expression on Number VII's usually blank face. "Thanks to you, that is correct."

Zexion frowned. "What do I have to do with the schedule?"

"A sevenfold bribe on your account, and even then, it was only allowed because I need to catch up on paperwork anyway." Then Saix shook his head and added in a mutter, "As if that idiot Axel will actually let me get anything done...."

"I'm afraid that I have no idea what you're talking about," Zexion said honestly.

"Of course you don't. It's a 'secret.' Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go see how long I can avoid participation." The Luna Diviner stalked out of the room.

"...Odd. But all right." Zexion turned around and made a beeline for the library.

He never made it there. Demyx came flying out of a dark corridor, screeching "Heeeelp! There's a fire in Luxord's room!"

"So? Go put it out."

Demyx paused, then stared at his own hand. He made a twisting gesture with his fingers to produce a spurt of water. "Ha ha ha! Oh yeah, I forgot I could do that."

As if he was even capable of forgetting such a thing. It was remarkable how far the young man would go in pretending he was utterly incompetent; Zexion had never been able fathom the Nocturne's motivation.

"Let me try that again!" Demyx cheerfully marched back into the corridor, then burst out of it again, yelling, "Heeeelp! Luxord's room is getting flooded!"

"I don't have time for this," Zexion said flatly. Well, more accurately, he didn't have *patience* for this, since time was actually something there was a lot of during vacation days. Except that 'patience' wasn't very accurate, either, considering he had no heart to get impatient
"Oh, whatever; come with me, Zex!"

"Demyx, what--"

The Gambler of Fate's room was large and open, which meant it was a fairly good place for most of the Organization to gather at the same time. It was not, however, the easiest place to decorate, but the conspirators had done their best anyway, having draped the entrance with balloons and streamers. The Keybearers had apparently even gotten the words "HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ZEXION!" to stay suspended in midair, written in letters of Light.

"SURPRISE!!!" they all yelled with varying levels of glee.

Zexion stared. "It's not my birthday."

Demyx elbowed him in the ribs.

"Wait," Roxas said, his face glowing with epiphany, "does that mean this is an unbirthday party, like in Wonderland?"

"Uhhhh..." Axel looked at Demyx, who shrugged. "Yeah, sure."

"Oops! We have to fix that, then!" Xion pointed at the Light banner, which changed to read "HAPPY UNBIRTHDAY, ZEXION!"

"What is the meaning of this?" Zexion asked in exasperation.

Demyx laughed. "Well, we needed an excuse for a party so we could get a day off, and you were the only one who wouldn't plan it with us but also wouldn't kill us if we threw it for you. Happy Unbirthday, Zexy!" He lifted a Power Rangers blowout to his lips and exhaled so that it smacked Zexion in the side of the head.
"Argh! Demyx...." Zexion rubbed at his ear. "You really are unfathomable."

"Yo, Zexy," Xigbar called, "think fast." He hurled a very pointy cardboard hat at Zexion with such force that it might have actually shaved off a few Hit Points if Luxord hadn't caught it with a Stop spell.

"Now, is that any way to treat our guest of honor?" the gambler admonished, reversing time along the hat's trajectory so that it went shooting back to rest atop (or below? Hard to tell, since the man was upside-down) Xigbar's head.

"Nope," Xigbar laughed, "just having fun."

Lexaeus silently stuck a plastic crown on Zexion's head.

"Perfect!" Demyx cheered. "Now, Axel, if you will?"

Axel pointed his fingers like a gun to light the candles atop the cake from afar. There were a great many of them.

"Wait a minute," Zexion said indigantly, "I am not--" He finished counting. "--forty-six!"

"Were we not supposed to use all the candles in the box?" Xion wondered.

"We didn't use all of them," Roxas reminded her, "Destiny chewed on those four we dropped, remember?"

Demyx waved his hand dismissively. "Ah, it doesn't matter; the more flammability, the better. Okay, everyone, on three! One, two--!"

"Wait!" Axel yelped, half-laughing, "I gotta get Saix to help us sing Happy Birthday! That'll be priceless...."

He dark corridored away as Roxas said in confusion, "Shouldn't we sing Happy Unbirthday?"
"Is there such a song?" Xion asked.

As the children continued to reveal their abysmal lack of life experience, Zexion surveyed the rest of the room more carefully, noting the table covered with wrapped presents, the array of snack food, the music setup, and the traditional games. "You really put a lot of work into this, didn't you," he said thoughtfully.

"Yup! Only the best for you, Zexy."

"Why?"

"Huh?"

"Why only the best for me?" Zexion clarified curiously. "We did not know each other before joining the Organization, and have never been particularly close. Why 'only the best' for me, rather than your usual slapdash efforts?"

"Uh...because it was fun?"

"We can't have 'fun,'" Zexion reminded him, "we have no hearts to enjoy anything with."

"Aw, we do too have hearts."

"No, we don't."

"Do so."

"We do not."

"Do so!"
"We don't, Demyx."

"Do so infinity, HAH! I win."

Zexion stared for a minute. "Unfathomable," he repeated. Then he smiled. "Yet I wonder if that's not such a bad thing...."

o.o.o

**Author's Notes:** Long story.... Soooo, my Demyx/Zexion inspiration's kind of been dried up for a while, I've been focusing a lot more on my Axel/Saix and Terra/Cinderella challenges. And I also realized recently that I don't even really ship Demyx/Zexion, even platonically, despite attempting it twice now...I prefer Demyx with Xigbar, and Zexion with...well, with Even, at least, since I have such trouble writing Vexen positively. *sweatdrop* Zexion in my headcanon pretty much hates Demyx because he's so annoying. I mean, obviously I'll keep trying for this series, but I just don't feel the Zemyx, guys. ;/

ANYWAY, so a long time ago I started writing a story for this theme, but then it started bothering me on a religious level. It lay unfinished for a while, but now here I am interested in Pairing Days with June 9th coming up. I could not think of anything better to do for Zexion/Demyx Day than to update this series again, which is kinda lame but better than nothing. At first, I thought I'd just rewrite the part of the original story that bothered me, but then gave up and realized I'd have to write something entirely different.

This fic was totally unplanned; a surprise party was the first thing that came to mind, and I basically just typed a lot and hoped that whatever appeared on the screen would be coherent. *sweatdrop* I've been vaguely wanting to write a birthday party story for a while now, but I don't know if this counts. For one thing, I'd had a couple of different characters in mind rather than Zexion. o.O

Lol, I did not at all intend for this to take place in the CatC universe (where Roxas has a pet dog named Destiny), but I needed the puppy, so.... XD

For the record, Marluxia & Larxene will eventually crash the party, but Vexen's holed up in his lab and Xem is oogling Kingdom Hearts the whole time. Xaldin's probably off relaxing on a beach somewhere.
"Art hater!" Demy yelled as a parting shot, then hurried the rest of the way out the door before his mother could march over and smack him or something. "Man, I'm never gonna get awesome if she keeps kicking me out...." Seriously, he wasn't that loud. But practicing on the street somewhere was better than having to put the guitar away and help with dinner, so now here he was, looking for someplace to play where he wouldn't get interrupted.

The shopowners downtown gave him warning looks before he could even sit down, there were some shady-looking guys down in the Fountain Court, and he knew that all the high schoolers making out in the Gardens would be just as appreciative of his music as his mother had been. Demy eventually came to the Outer Gardens, which was relatively deserted. A bit of traffic from people entering or leaving the city, but no one who would yell at him. So he sat down by a fountain, took the guitar back out of its case, tuned it again, and began to play.

Two songs. He didn't even make it through two songs before an annoyed voice cut through the melody. "Must you make your noise pollution here? Surely there's somewhere else more suited to your occupation." The kid who was talking came into sight from around the fountain - an itty bitty
guy, even smaller than Demy, his hair hanging in his face like an emo and a scarily thick book tucked under his arm. He was still in his school uniform.

"Dude, have you even been home yet? It's almost 6:00!"

"Well, there is no point in returning to the house when it's still devoid of other inhabitants," the kid grumbled. "And I believe you dodged my request. I would appreciate it very much if you took your activities elsewhere. I'm trying to read."

"Man, talk normal," Demy complained.

"I am using proper grammar, which is more than I can say for you."

"Whatever. And you don't own the fountain, I can play wherever I want."

The kid sighed and sat down, opening the book and hunching over it with his hands over his ears.

Demy went back to practicing, singing this time, with one mischievous eye on his companion until the nerdy kid finally couldn't take it anymore. "How can you tolerate that, much less enjoy it?! Is that really music to you?"

"Then what's your idea of music?" Demy challenged.

The kid took out a fancy phone that usually only high schoolers got to have. He pushed buttons until some kind of classical junk started coming out. "Please tell me you've at least heard this somewhere. It's so famous that even someone as uncultured as you can't have avoided it."

The music did sound familiar, as if it was from a commercial or a cartoon or something. Demy listened thoughtfully, then started plucking out the main melody on his guitar.

It took a few tries, but eventually he got it, at least the beginning of it. The phone was silent now, it was all guitar. Demy looked up and grinned. "How's that?"
"...Not intolerable."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I liked it better than your earlier noise pollution."

"Noise can't even be pollution, idiot."

"Ugh...."

"Hey, give me another one."

After a while, it had actually gotten kind of fun, trying to re-create the classical music with his own instrument and getting better at it the more he tried. So of course they had to get interrupted again.

"What is that?!" Ienzo yelled, leaping to his feet.

"Oh, come on, I wasn't that far off."

"No! That!"

Demy looked where he was pointing. "Eep!"

There was a creepy shadow struggling out of the ground nearby, twitching like an insect. It had a head and arms and legs, but there was no way it could be a person, with those glowing yellow eyes and antennae....

"What is that?!"

"How should I know?!"
"Well, you know everything else, don't you?" Demy said sarcastically.

The shadow lurched closer to them.

"It's kind of cute...."

"What? It's disgusting!"

"Maybe it's hungry." Demy pulled a candy bar out of his pocket, broke off a piece of it, and tossed it to the shadow. The shadow tripped over it a little. "No, silly, you're supposed to eat it." He crouched down, picked up the bit of chocolate, and held it up to the shadow's face-thing.

"Demy, I don't think--"

"AAAHH!"

"Demy!"

"Get it off!" The thing had latched onto him and was, like...sucking at him. Like a freaking vampire or something, except it was his heart that hurt rather than his wrist. "Gghh...." He felt so ugly...like if he threw up, it'd all be himself he threw up and he was disgusting, and he kinda liked it that way, he wanted to ooze around and dirty everything up so everyone else could be just as ugly as him--

The giant book came crashing down on the shadow's head, again and again until it finally stumbled loose. Demy fell, his injury looking black instead of the red he'd expected, pain flaring in his chest. "Ienzo...."

"Get up, fool! Run!"

Ienzo caught his other arm and heaved it up around his shoulders, but they had only taken a few steps when Demy suddenly cried out. "My guitar!"
"Leave it!"

"Are you crazy?" That thing was his baby. He pulled free and ran to grab it.

"Demy!"

He turned around just in time and instinctively smashed his baby into the shadow thing as it tried to claw at him. "AAAHH!"

"Again?" Ienzo said in exasperation as he started hitting it with his book some more.

"Noooo, my guitar!" Completely ruined. The claws had shattered the hollow wood, leaving a broken mess dangling from the strings. Demy's eyes narrowed. "Yaaaaahhh!" He viciously began bashing the shadow as hard as he could with the guitar's surviving neck.

To his and Ienzo's surprise, the shadow suddenly burst into a brief cloud of vapor and then disappeared. A small munny orb had popped out and went rolling to Ienzo's feet, as a squishy green ball came flying at Demy, hitting his arm and then vanishing into the skin. "AAAHH!"

"You have a very piercing distress cry," Ienzo muttered, rubbing his ear and wincing.

"GET IT OUT!"

"What is it?"

"I DUNNO, BUT IT--! ...Feels kind of good, actually." The ominous black tinge in his skin was gone, and he felt more fresh and healthy and energized, especially after that gross feeling the shadow had given him. He couldn't say the same for his guitar, though - he sadly held up the wreckage. "I need a baby that can make music and kick butt."

"I'll look into that for you," Ienzo said dryly, examining his own hobby-turned-weapon. "It's a good thing this volume was so thick, I'm not sure it would have withstood the trauma otherwise...."
Demy looked nervously around the courtyard. "Hey, Ienzo?"

"Yes?"

"We should probably go home now."

"I suppose so...."

That's right, Ienzo's parents didn't get home 'til late. "Ienzo?"

"What is it now?" the other boy asked, a little impatiently this time.

"You wanna come have dinner with us?"

Ienzo stared in surprise. "Er...well...I suppose I...am not adverse to the idea...."

"Man, is that a yes or a no?" Demy said, his turn now to be impatient.

Ienzo smiled a little. "I accept your offer."

"Cool. C'mon, let's hurry before anymore of those shadow monsters show up."

o.o.o.o.o

"You're spacin' out, Zexy."

Zexion blinked, looking up from the book he had not been reading. Demyx lounged at the other end of the couch, still strumming gently as he watched him.
"Whatcha thinkin' about?"

"Oh...just, more innocent times, I suppose...." He shook his head. "You were playing that same song right before we encountered our first Heartless."

Demyx laughed. "Oh yeah, that was when we first met. Man, you're still a nerd."

"And you are still irritating." Not unduly so, however. Zexion returned his attention to the book and did not mind much at all as the work of his favorite composer continued to shape the atmosphere.

Author's Notes: ...The KH wiki hath failed me. It doesn't have a proper list of Radiant Garden's areas and their names in BBS, and I didn't have time to double-check with the game itself. DX Sorry if I got some of them wrong, I'll fix it for the final draft....

Complete: 10/100
A brand-new world, only the second one he had ever been to, and pretty much the first thing he saw was a crying girl.

Terra paused in the dark courtyard, taking stock of the situation. The girl was a picture of sorrow, crumpled by a bench and sobbing as if her heart had broken. She and her mysterious plight had nothing to do with Terra's mission, but it wasn't exactly like he could just walk on by without trying to help.

He approached cautiously, noting the ragged state of her clothes. "Is something wrong?" he asked gently, kneeling down so that he wouldn't tower over her.

After a long pause, during which she seemed to be trying to gather herself to speak, she finally admitted without looking up, "It's just that my friends made me the most beautiful dress, but my stepmother and stepsisters ruined it...."

'Thank God,' Terra thought. He had been afraid it would be much, much worse. Still, she obviously needed comforting, and he cast about for something appropriate to say. "Darkness always finds a way into a wounded heart," was all he could come up with. 'For crying out loud, Terra, this isn't one of Master Eraqus's lectures!'

Then it occurred to him that the sentiment might have a legitimate place in this situation. "You have to be strong," he added, since even something as seemingly trivial as a torn dress could damage a heart enough to let the darkness in, and then he'd have more monsters on his hands. "Strength of heart will carry you through the hardest of trials." ‘...Definitely need more practice at making girls feel better.'
Even though what he had said was true, he got the distinct impression that normal guys, who hadn't been raised on an isolated training ground in the middle of nowhere, would have taken a different approach. *Aqua's last movie night choice had the girl scarfing down chocolate when her boyfriend dumped her. Maybe I should find some chocolate.*

However, he never got the chance. There was a tell-tale whisking sound, and Terra whirled to find a group of Floods materializing behind them. "Unversed!" He summoned his weapon at once, a little relieved. Whacking bad guys with a giant key was a LOT easier than trying to make a girl stop crying.

Terra dispatched the Floods quickly, but a stronger batch of dark creatures appeared right on their heels. "Have I ever mentioned that I hate rabbits?" he growled, bringing his Keyblade down on a Hareraiser's head before it could slap him with its ears. Then he heard an ominous bouncing sound behind him, and immediately dashed out of the way before the Bruiser could send him flying. "Gah! That's it, I'm Sonic Shadowing you creeps!"

When he had finally destroyed them all, Terra surveyed the courtyard one more time, tense and sweating, then finally expelled a long sigh and dismissed his Keyblade.

She was still crying. A raging battle had just taken place behind her, and she was still crying. She was either lacking in brain cells, which Terra doubted; too immersed in grief over her torn dress and missed party to care, which Terra found hard to believe; or - maybe she just trusted that Terra would keep her safe, trusted him so completely that she didn't even waste a thought on her own safety. That was...quite flattering.

*Plucky girl. Of course, she has no idea how badly I messed up with Princess Aurora back in the last world. I wonder how much she'd still trust me if she knew about that,* Terra thought bitterly.

However, since Cinderella's all-knowing fairy godmother showed up a second later to set her up for a happily ever after, rather than ten minutes earlier to save her from a horde of ravaging monsters, it seemed like Cinderella wasn't the only one to show a ridiculous amount of confidence in Terra's intentions and abilities. Perhaps they really did have reason to think he was still good enough to be a hero. That's what he hoped, anyway.

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** And here's a canon one for ya. Might not be a whole lot of these, since there's so
few KH canon scenes with these two characters, compared to the charas I'm doing my other challenges on.... Oh well, we'll see how it goes.

Complete: 2/100
Terra and Aqua were sparring in the practice room when Ven suddenly came bursting in. "Hey, guys!" he called excitedly. "Xion said they found a video room in Disney Castle! We gotta go check it out!"

"Is...Is that so?" Aqua fumbled.

Terra laughed and hefted Ends of the Earth casually over his shoulder. "Might as well, Aqua. He'll just start giving us puppy eyes if we try to refuse."

Aqua sighed. "That's true."

"All right!" Ven cheered. "Trust me, you're gonna love it!"

They found Xion, Namine, Kairi, Data-Sora, and Pluto sprawled around one of the castle's lounges, munching on snacks as a movie played on the huge screen hanging from one wall. "Where's everyone else?" Terra asked.
"Still filming for Dream Drop Distance," Ven explained. "Come on, grab some pizza, and there are sodas in that ice chest over there. What'd you pick?" he asked the girls.

"Cinderella," Kairi called back, waving the trio over. "We just finished Aladdin. Guys, this is amazing! It's, like, the original worlds, the way they were supposed to be before Sora and the Organization started wandering around messing things up for them."

"I messed things up for them?" Data-Sora exclaimed in dismay, and Namine patted his shoulder soothingly.

"What does that mean?" Aqua wondered.

"Come on, you'll see! I bet there won't even be a single Heartless or Unversed in here."

She was right. Terra felt the tension in his shoulders as he watched, waiting for Unversed to pop out of nowhere, especially when Cinderella was crying in the garden and then when she was trying to get into the palace....

Nothing! Not a single one! Not a trace of Terra, Ven, or Aqua's help or presence, either.

"Did she not even need me?" Terra wondered bleakly. It was almost anticlimactic. "It's like the worst she ever had to worry about were housework, bullying, and clock chimes."

"Nothing bad is happening to that terrible stepfamily of hers, either," Aqua said indignantly.

Ven sighed. "All my hard work, and the mice get all the credit."

"I bet they sew better than you and Jaq, though," Kairi laughed.

Ven smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, they do."

Then Cinderella ended up with her prince, married happily ever after, and "Ohhhh!" Terra realized, his eyes widening. "No wonder! That...connection I felt...the way I was drawn to her...when I
thought - hoped - she might pick me over some rich guy she'd never seen before in her life...." He sighed. "No wonder she chose Prince Charming."

"Can't really fight fate," Aqua said sympathetically, patting his shoulder.

Ven snorted. "I'll say. I swear, if I'm still locked up in that stupid Dive again after 3D, some people at Square Enix will be having a Keyblade to answer to...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Um...it worked out better in my head. -.-

Complete: 4/100
Dream Waltz: Save (theme 9) {Terra/Cinderella & Ven}

*ROUGH DRAFT*

**Summary:** Terra and Ventus have different gaming styles. Or maybe there's something else going on.

**A/N:** I imagine that the characters have lives offscreen when they're done filming for the games.

---

Terra was lounging on a bench in the Land of Departure's courtyard, playing *Birth by Sleep* with Ven practically draped over his shoulder as he watched.

"Bruiser's coming."

"Yeah, I hear it."

"Ooh, get those Hareraisers before they--"

"I'm on it."

"Try a Sonic Shadow, Terra."

"I don't really need to, I've got it covered."

"But it looks cool! Oooh, no, wait, your D-gauge is full again, D-Link with me!"
Terra sighed and complied.

"Hah! Yeah, take that! Whoo!"

"Ven, it's a little distracting when you're yelling in my ear...."

"Oops! Sorry, Terra."

"...."

"...."

"...."

"...."

"...It's easier to hit the flying pots when you lock o--"

"I know how to play the game, Ven!"

"Okay! Sorry, sheesh."

A cutscene came right after that which Ven fully expected Terra to skip through, but to his surprise, the scene played right on. "But sometimes just believing in dreams is easier said than done...."

"C'mon, Terra, we've seen all these a billion times. We lived through them, remember?"

"Mm."

"...."
"Go. And when you see her dancing, you'll know that she believes--"

"Terra?"

Terra suddenly paused the scene and swung his legs over the bench so that they were face to face. "Ven," she said, calmly but firmly, "either let me enjoy playing this game in peace, or go hang out with Aqua or the others. I mean it."

"Okay, fine! I just don't get it...." He expected Terra to explain, but his friend merely turned back around and resumed the cutscene. "--and that will help you to believe, too."

The Terra in the game jogged across the castle courtyard, fighting Unversed as he went. The real Terra didn't skip over the next cutscene, either. "Please, may I go with you? I so want to get to the ball."

"I hate these 'protect the damsel' missions," Ven grumbled. "Snow White Game Overed me so many times, I don't know how I manged to get it done in one try for real--" He paused. "Unless maybe the real time was like a game, too?" He shivered. "Terra, what if there's someone playing us like we play the avatars, and every time they mess up, we die and float in darkness forever and some other version of us has to keep playing, over and over and over again--?"

"Ven, can you please be quiet?"

Ven pressed both hands over his own mouth as the HP alarm started blaring.

"Aaaagghhhh!" game Terra screamed.

Ven stared at the unconscious floating body on the screen in horror. "Terra! Terra, I'm so, so sorry! I promise I'll be quiet!"

"It's fine," Terra mumbled.
"Are you gonna load a save file or retry the mission?" Ven asked in a small voice.

Terra wordlessly selected the 'Retry' option.

Ven was much more subdued as he watched the game Terra escort Cinderella down the castle entrance hall, defending her from hordes of Unversed. He let out a quiet sigh of relief when they reached the doors, successfully completing the mission. "Oh, good."

"Thank you, Terra," Cinderella said warmly on the screen.

"She's really pretty, isn't she," Terra said softly.

"Huh?" Ven stared at the virtual girl in the shimmering silvery dress. "Yeah, I guess so. I mean, they're all pretty." He frowned. "Come to think of it, we're all pretty, except, like, Master Xehanort. And Vexen. Aladdin told me the other day that I look like a girl. And you know what, I think he's right, I was looking at all those cosplay photos Tron found, and the girls who dress up like Roxas look more like him than the guys do, and he looks just like me so I was thinking--"

"Aaaagghhh!"

Ven shot to his feet in shock. "I made you die again?! Terra I'm so sorry I'm so sorry I'm so sor--!

"It's fine."

Ven gaped. "Terra, why didn't you pick 'Continue'?! The last time you saved was in the Lanes Between!"

"It's fine," Terra repeated.

"But you'll have to play the entire world all over again!"

Pause. Glare.
Ven clapped his hands over his own mouth again.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's just that my friends made me the most beautiful dress...."

"You know," Ven whispered cautiously, "you can skip through all the cutscenes, because we just watched them--"

"Ven, the next time you open your mouth, I'll sit on you."

"Sorry!"

Fairy Godmother, escort-the-damsel, ballroom dancing, boss crashes the party, game Terra heads off to face it--

"Aaaagghhh!"

"What?!" Ven cried. "But I was good this time!"

Terra didn't skip over a single one of the cutscenes this time, either. Bored, Ven tossed his Keyblade into Glider form and whooshed around the courtyard, trying out some of the new moves he and Roxas and Sora had experimented with earlier. When he came back, the game Terra was running down the staircase outside the ballroom.
"Finally." Ven dismissed his Keyblade and draped back over Terra's shoulder again to watch.

"Aaaagghhh!"

"Are you doing this on purpose?!" Ven shrieked.

Continue
Retry
[Load Game]

"TERRA!"

0.0.0

Author's Notes: This one's my second-favorite so far (after "Beginnings"). Though I think it was more fun to write than it is to read, I dunno.

Complete: 7/100
Eyes Like A Tiger's: Wave (theme 1) {Saïx & Jasmine}

Eyes Like A Tiger's

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Summary: Collection of ficlets and one-shots focusing on Saïx & Jasmine, though not always in a romantic context. Includes AUs.

Introduction: Around the time Kiryn got me interested in the Terra/Cinderella pairing, Saïx/Jasmine was also mentioned in passing. I don't think the latter was meant to be taken seriously the way the former was, but it caught my fancy anyway.

Even though I have lots of other, far more important projects to be focusing on, I wrote this first drabble and figured it couldn't hurt to post. I vaguely plan for this series to have at least seven installments, which is when I'll slap a "Complete" label on it, but if I get any other Saïx/Jasmine ideas, I'll just add them onto the end as new "chapters."

It occurred to me, RIGHT as I was first uploading this to FFN, that there's a "Forgotten Couples" challenge out there that Saïx/Jasmine might qualify for. Unfortunately, I can't find the original challenge, but if I can somehow get hold of the rules and prompt list and decide to take it on, it won't be until after I finish one or two of my current challenges in progress. I'll just stick with my seven-chapter idea in the meantime, or if the challenge doesn't work out.

1 - Eyes Like A Tiger's

Summary: The girl is a Princess of Heart, of course she's going to be nice to the weirdo in the suspicious black coat who's been creeping around her city.

O.o.o

Saïx was in Agrabah, preparing it for the mission he was going to assign Roxas the next day. He had already set out the treasure chests and recorded the Heartless types, making a note to warn about an abundance of Fire Plants in the mission brief. He was in the middle of setting up a barricade when he realized that his cover had been blown.
"Hello."

Saïx gave an annoyed sigh, then ignored the greeting and continued working.

"...Perhaps you're new in town and don't know this, but my name is Jasmine. My father is the ruler of this kingdom."

"You honor me with your presence, Your Highness," Saïx said without bothering to turn around. He affixed a barricade line to the ground and then reached up again, summoning another chain of non-existence to intersect with the first.

"I should probably thank you," the voice went on. She sounded less grateful and more like she was demanding to be paid attention to. "We've been wondering for a while now what those odd crossed shapes are. They keep appearing out of nowhere, filling doorways or gateways, but it's like they're not even there - people can just walk straight through them."

'Obviously,' Saïx thought. 'If they're made of nothing, they cannot bar the way of beings who actually exist.'

"Then they disappear again a day or two later. It's good to finally have an explanation. Even the less superstitious of us have been getting uneasy."

'Just go away,' he thought, completely uninterested in her chatter. 'There's so much work to do.'

"Why are you putting up those strange things, anyway?"

"Don't you have repairs to make or sand to sweep up?" he said, retrieving his backpack and moving on to the next area that needed to be sealed off.

"I'm bringing refreshment to the workers. I wonder if that includes you." She was starting to sound a little fed up, which likely explained the mischievous note that was creeping into her voice. Saïx had grown up with Axel. He was well aware that such a tone always meant trouble - people who were bored and/or annoyed seemed to have an inexplicable fondness for teasing him. Gritting his teeth, he turned to face the princess for the first time.
Close up, she was quite beautiful. Not that he had any means left to appreciate concepts such as beauty, but he was still able to acknowledge them. Her hair shone as glossy as a raven's wing, clearly well-cared for. Well, she was a princess, after all. Not surprising that she would stand out in this world full of far too many grubby commoners. Her dark skin glowed like copper in the bright sunlight, great swaths of it exposed in a way that was a little overwhelming for someone grown accustomed to seeing people clad in Organization coats. Not that this particular viewer could get overwhelmed, but...in theory.

The princess was regarding him appraisingly as she stood with a clay jar resting in the crook of her arm. "You seem to be working hard, but as far as I can tell, you're not really doing anything useful."

"I'm certain that our definitions of 'useful' differ significantly in this instance." He paused a little mockingly, as if thinking. "Though perhaps you might agree with me that decreasing the Heartless population here could be of some use to both of us."

"So mysterious," she said challengingly. "Just like the face that must be hidden under that hood of yours. Care to enlighten me?"

"I have better things I need to be doing with my time." He drew forth another length of non-existence.

"...In any case, I'm sure it's difficult to slave away in the hot sun while dressed in that ridiculous outfit. You must be cooking to a crisp in there."

Exaggeration and figures of speech aside, she was completely correct. However, it was none of her business, and it shouldn't have any effect on his mission. He had long ago learned how to work through such discomfort.

"Would you like a drink of water?"

Saïx paused. He would, actually. His own water bottle had developed a leak when that Heartless had ambushed him, and had been bone-dry since midmorning. The Hi-Potions he had equipped could substitute, but his supply of them was very finite, and their healing properties might be needed later on.

"A simple yes or no will be fine," she said, sounding a little amused. Saïx realized that he had been
standing there without moving for too long.

"Yes," he finally said. "I would appreciate a drink of water."

She hefted the jar up. "Here."

He made as if to take the jar from her, but she kept a firm hold on it, allowing him to steady the jar with his hands but not letting go herself. It robbed him of an independent stance, which he was sure was fully intentional on her part.

As the cool water filled his parched mouth, he felt his hood slipping and the touch of this world's harsh sunshine on his face. As soon as he had had his fill, he let go of the jar and stepped back, drawing up the hood again even as he wondered why he was bothering. It wasn't like she would be able to forget seeing a strange man with long blue hair and very distinctive facial scars.

Her mouth had come open a little in surprise. With her eyes still fixed on him, she set down the jar and stepped close, reaching toward him.

"Don't,' he wanted to say. Yet it would make him sound helpless, and again, he had no reason now to continue to hide his face from her. He did not resist when she pushed back his hood.

"Oh," she said softly.

'I must look so strange to her.'

Her expression broke into a smile. "You have such pretty eyes! Just like my pet tiger's."

'...What?'

"His name is Rajah. I should bring you to meet him one of these days."

"That...won't be necessary," Saïx managed.
Jasmine smiled again and stepped back, leaving his hood down. "Don't worry. He doesn't hurt my friends. *You are* a friend of mine, aren't you?"

What was he supposed to do, say no and incur hostile attention from the locals every time he had to come here to set up future missions? "...Yes."

"Of course you are. Though I never got your name, friend."

"My name is of no consequence."

"Oh. I see. Then I suppose I can just introduce you as Kitten Eyes. I think that's a cute nickname."

"Saïx," he said quickly. "My name is Saïx."

Jasmine gave him a wink. "Well, Saïx, I hope to see you around again soon. I'll be sure to have Rajah with me."

"Don't bother. I'm really more of a...dog person."

"Oh, that's all right. Rajah's very nice, he'll forgive you. Probably."

Well, it looked like he was never going to be able to let Xigbar, Axel, or Demyx come here for missions ever again. If any of them got wind of this whole business....

"I'd better finish making my rounds," she realized. "It was nice to meet you, Saïx."

"Thank you for the water," he sighed.

"It was the least I could do for a brave Heartless-slayer, hm?" She gave him a little wave as she left. She really was a pretty girl. Good thing he didn't have a heart to get distracted with.
"...Now, where was I?" Barricades. One more left to go. Saïx got back to work, not realizing that he was smiling a little.
Eyes Like A Tiger's: Within Music

Eyes Like A Tiger's, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

2 - Within Music (rough draft)

Summary: Saïx and Jasmine don't have much to pass the time with as they wait to be rescued.

A/N: There is a story behind this fic, but it's too complicated, so I won't bother right now. All I'll say is that this plunny occurred to me, and I ended up writing it instead of the SaiAku Day fic I was supposed to be working on. :p And that THIS IS AN AU, if for no other reason than because I don't want Jasmine ever actually kissing Sai when she's supposed to be with Aladdin.

*sweatdrop* I've decided to use this series to take on Cherished Tenshi's Forgotten Couples challenge, but not officially yet; this is just a semi-random SaiJaz drabble.

0.0.0

He never felt frustration anymore, but there were certain situations that made it very easy to remember what the emotion had been like. "If it just wouldn't give so much," he said in slightly less of a monotone than usual, "we would have been out of here within minutes." He tossed his useless claymore aside in disgust, giving up on trying to strike it against the cloud-like material that enclosed them. "It would have to be this world, wouldn't it...."

He had never had a fondness for this odd place, full of music and vibrant colors and mythological beings and a distinct lack of adherence to the laws of physics. He was now starting to decide that if he still had a heart, he would hate it. "I assure you, Princess, I am not usually this incompetent. I'm starting to think that such close proximity to my subordinates these last few days have had an adverse effect on me--"

He - almost - remembered what it was like to be startled when he felt her small hands on his shoulders. "It's not your fault we ended up in a situation you can't save me from."

"Yes, it is," he said shortly. He should have been prepared for anything, like he always was. But now he and the Princess of Heart under his protection were trapped inside a measure of sheet music, separated from their partners, with no safe way to escape. "...What are you doing?"

"Trying to distract you," she said in a amused tone as she continued binding his hair into a loose
braid. She looped it up at the back of his head and secured it with a long, narrow Blizzard Shard she had apparently picked up from one of the slain Heartless. "There. Doesn't that feel nice?"

"...It will eventually get cold in here again."

"Then you can take your hair down, and when it gets warm again I'll put it back up for you."

"Don't bother. We need to be concentrating on much less trivial matters, anyway." He opened a dark corridor.

"No," she said sharply.

"Don't insult me." He had thought it was clear by now that her safety was one of his highest priorities during this horrendously extended mission. He was already unzipping his coat - the way she watched him do it made him suddenly uncomfortable, so he turned away to finish and then pulled his arms free of it.

She seemed to realize what he was doing as he turned back and laid it over her shoulders. "I told you, no."

He gripped the zippered edges tightly together to prevent her from flinging it off. "As I've said before, the coat will protect you in the corridors. You have nothing to fear as long as you wear it."

She struggled a little, and glared at him. "Kitten Eyes," she said deliberately, making him sigh internally, "you only have one coat."

This was so irritating. ...Would be, if he had a heart. "We have been through this before. One unprotected trip won't kill me, and I have much less to lose than you. Do as I say and put the coat on."

"I'll tell Axel and Demyx and Xigbar all my nicknames for you."

He held onto the coat just a few seconds longer and glared as haughtily as he could, just to make a point. Then he reluctantly let go. She jerked the coat off and flung it back around him, then
crossed her arms and grinned triumphantly.

"I hope you realize that you've just closed off our only escape." He dismissed the portal.

"I care about what happens to you, you know."

"I can't imagine why."

"Hmmm, let me think, why in the world would I waste two seconds worrying about the man who's saved my life multiple times by now, has dedicated the past two weeks to getting me safely back home, who nearly drowned himself to rescue Rajah, and who is so incredibly fun to tease--"

"It's a job. Nothing more." He was not sure what to say about the teasing part, so he ignored it.

"Uh huh. That's why you gave me this back in the Dwarf Woodlands, right?" She tugged the flower out of her hair and twirled it meaningfully.

"You're reading too much into that."

"All right, fine, you hate me."

"I can't hate you. I can't lo-- like you. I don't have a heart to feel anything with, therefore what I feel for you is complete neutrality. Obviously."

She gazed at him for a long time, then finally said, "I think you believe too many things without questioning them, Saïx."

"You seem to believe that a lot of things are true just because you wish them to be." He summoned a few Berserkers, idly noting the way Jasmine shifted farther behind him. "They are under my complete control and will not harm you." To his lesser Nobodies, he commanded, "Find Axel and the others, tell their servants where we are and that we are in need of assistance." The creatures stumbled into the dark corridors again.
Well, there was nothing to do now but wait. Saïx went to sit against one of those fluffily unyielding walls and opened his backpack to sort through the items and panels inside, having nothing better to do. It should not have been surprising when the princess settled down next to him, rather close.

They were silent for a long time. Then the walls shifted from the warmer reddish tones down into blue and purple, and the music dropped into a lower scale. He took the Blizzard Shard out, letting his hair fall back down around his neck.

She was shivering. Well, of course she would be, in that ridiculous desert getup of hers. Repressing a sigh, he shrugged out of his still-unzipped coat, and this time she did not protest when he wrapped it around her.

"Thank you, Kitten," she murmured, pulling the coat close around herself and snuggling into his shoulder.

"How many times have I told you not to call me that."

"I've lost count," she said mischievously.

The only good thing was that she had at least never called him strange things in front of the other Organization members. "Maybe if I feed you, you'll stop pestering me." He handed over one of the protein bars he often took on field missions.

"You're so sweet, looking out for me." She knew what plastic was by now, but still had trouble opening it. He took the bar away from her, tore open and peeled off the wrapping, then handed it back.

"You need to eat more, anyway," he said in disapproval, surveying her dangerously narrow waist.

"It's rude to stare at a lady's bare flesh like that," she said, though she sounded more amused than offended.

"Is it?" Not that he would know. He hadn't really had any experience with girls before losing his heart. "That argument is not very convincing when you prance around in an outfit that barely covers your top." He reached to zip up the coat over the smooth, dark skin under discussion. The
way she watched him do it was a little disconcerting. ...Would have been, if he was still capable of being disconcerted.

"Ahh, so you have been looking."

"What?"

"There's a lot going on under your icy blank shell, isn't there."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Your face barely changes, you know. Your voice, too. But I think that's just what you do to hide...as I've discovered over the past few weeks, there's so much more underneath."

"I don't hide."

"Of course you hide. I've never seen the real Isa. Only glimpses of him."

He felt cold as he stared at her, and it wasn't from the chill of the blue notes. "...Where did you learn that name?"

"I was reading your diary the other night," she said casually. "You wrote this one cute entry about how you and your best friend used to--"

"You read my what?"

"I was bored. You won't talk to me when you're on guard duty, and I couldn't sleep."

"You read my-- They're called Secret Reports, by the way, not 'diaries.'"

"It's the same thing, isn't it?"
He could not think of an argument against that. "Don't touch my things without permission."

"You have soooo many rules, Kitten, it's so hard for a girl to keep them all straight." She had finished eating and was now, slowly and deliberately, licking the residual chocolate off her fingers.

It bothered him, forget not having a heart. "Here." He didn't have napkins, but he did have some cleaning cloths for Lunatic. He pulled out a fresh one and took her hands to wipe them. He was so focused on his task that he didn't notice her shifting closer, and was not-startled again to look up and find her leaning rather far into his personal space.

"Thank you," she finally murmured.

"...You're welcome." Not-nervous. Only name for this sensation, since of course he couldn't be nervous. Why was she so close? He was just lifting a hand to push her away when she delicately set her fingertips against his face, thumb resting on his lip, and he forgot to move again. "Have you ever been kissed, Mr. Luna Diviner?"

"...No." Must get control of situation, was rapidly spiraling out of hand. "And I don't see what that has anything to do with--"

She tasted like chocolate. He felt wrapped in her light, sweet scent...those were the best parts. 'What would this be like if I was still Isa?' he found himself wondering. Uselessly. All this was so useless. 'Don't do this to me. It's not worth it.'

She finally pulled back. Not very far. Kept gazing at him, fingers in his hair.

'She is very attractive. I'll give her that.' He closed his eyes and turned his face away, leaned back, and released a long sigh.

"It was that bad?" she exclaimed in disbelief, offended and jerking away. Even with his eyes closed, he managed to keep hold of her wrist. He didn't want to lose her entirely, after all.

He opened his eyes again and spoke vaguely into the distance. "You would think I'd have more of a reaction to being kissed by the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."
There was a long silence. She slipped over to sit on his other side, where he was looking, and their eyes met again. His hand ended up resting against her waist, she held it there softly. "You at least think I'm beautiful?"

"It would be a lie to deny it."

"But you didn't like kissing me."

"...I wish I did," he confessed quietly.

She finally smiled. "Coming from you, Saïx, that means a lot."

"If I had a heart, I would--"

"You say that so very much. Are you sure you aren't trying to convince yourself of something?"

"There are a lot of things you say often, too. Consider whether it's yourself you're trying to convince."

"...Hold me, at least," she said, finally giving up for the time being. "I'm still cold."

He couldn't see the harm in that. "Just until the colors change again."

"Mm."

When Axel and Demyx finally found them, the music was once more warm and bright, yet the Princess was still resting comfortably in Number VII's arms. Saïx regretted that slip-up much less than he should have.
Jasmine giggled as she poured water for Aladdin and listened to Genie's whining.

"Aww, c'mon, Al, just a little breeze?"

"Thanks, but no - really, Genie, we're used to this."

"I'm surprised you're not sizzling like bacon out here," the ebullient fey being muttered, pouring sweat like a fountain to make his point, and holding up some contraption to his face with blades spinning so fast that they created a sort of private wind.

"You'd be a lot more helpful out on the east side of the wall," Aladdin tried again. "They could really use a hand over there."

"They've got hands! But you know what they haven't got, Al? You."

Aladdin couldn't help grinning. "Thanks, Genie. I like being with you, too. But--"

"But your orders," Jasmine finally spoke up, "by the wish of Her Royal Highness, are to go to the east side of the city and help them. Okay?" She smiled as persuasively as she could.
"SIIIIGH, well, can't resist that. Very well, milady! I'm off! But I shall return!" Bowing deeply in a parody that his friends did not get the reference to, and in a sudden costume they had no context for, Genie whisked away.

"Thanks, Jasmine," Aladdin said, stealing a kiss before lifting the water jar to his lips. "It's so great having him back, but he really can be a handful...."

"He's really useful, though," she mused. "Maybe we should just let him fix everything with a snap of his fingers...."

"No," Aladdin said staunchly. "Last time the city got trashed, it was because of magic, so it was okay to let Genie fix it by magic. But when it's stuff that was no one's fault, we shouldn't be getting lazy and depending on him all the time.... Heh, I didn't free him from one kind of slavery just to let him get roped into another."

"I wouldn't quite compare it to that," she murmured, but smiled to show she wasn't all-out opposed to him. "When do you think you'll be able to take a break again?"

"Hmm...not sure, maybe in two or three hours...."

"All right. I'll be waiting." She kissed him, and wished she could have done it longer before a couple of passing workers made catcalls and prompted them to pull away from each other in embarrassment.

"Ah! Your Highness, I--!

"We didn't know it was you...!"

"Doesn't matter now, it's too late," she snapped, and flounced off, leaving the two workers fidgeting sheepishly.

The princess was halfway through her route when the sun suddenly seemed to darken for a moment. She instinctively dashed for cover behind a stall, and just in time, for a hulking figure came crashing down in the next second to land just where she had been standing. "M-- Monster!"
she managed to scream through her suddenly dry throat. This was no ordinary, run-of-the-mill Heartless that could be chased off by ordinary weapons; it would take quite a warrior to dispatch this one. These powerful Heartless did show up from time to time - they always mysteriously disappeared again within a few days, but could cause quite a lot of damage and terror in the meantime.

"Monster!" The cry was taken up, and people began to flee. One or two either brave or rash souls came rushing up to prove their worth, but as soon as they saw what they were up against, their faces paled and they backed away again.

"Jasmine!"

"I'm all right," she said quickly as Aladdin came dashing up to her.

"Did it just show up?"

"Yes--Oh, Aladdin, we've got to get it away from the houses!"

"Don't worry, I've got an idea."

"You always do," she murmured affectionately.

"Get everyone to the palace; I'll be back!" He hurled a broken plank of wood at the monster to get its attention, then leaped to the rooftops and practically flew across them, calling for Genie as he led the Heartless toward the outskirts of the city.

"Be safe!" Jasmine called after him, clutching a hand anxiously to her chest and knowing that he probably hadn't heard her. "You'd better come back to me, Aladdin...." Wasting no more time, she whirled and began urging as many people as she could towards the palace, where they would be safe.

Crash.

Jasmine stiffened in shock, then turned around. Behind her loomed a second Heartless, identical to
"Move," someone shouted down to her, so sternly that she dashed aside without even thinking. A huge ice crystal slammed into the creature's head and knocked it to the ground, where it kicked and flailed in a frantic attempt to right itself. "Get out of here, princess," the voice called again, with a sort of detached authority as if the speaker was well aware of the situation but had no personal interest in it.

She gaped up at him. "Saïx!" His face was hidden again in the depths of that black hood, but she knew it was him.

"Evacuate quickly. It will do no one any good if the only child of this kingdom's ruler, and one of the seven Princesses of Heart, were to get injured or killed."

"What are you doing?! Destroy it! Hurry, while it's still down!"

She could practically sense the coolness of his gaze, and she clenched her fists in response. "I have no intention of fighting this Heartless. I am on reconnaissance."

"You're just going to leave it here?!"

"I shall assign one of my subordinates to eliminate it tomorrow."

The Heartless finally managed to rock back to its feet.

"Tomorrow?!", Jasmine shrieked. "It's destroying the city NOW!"

"Which is why I highly advise you to flee immediately."

Jasmine was forced to run again as the Heartless leaped across the square and completely crushed a scaffolding nearby. "I ORDER you to destroy that thing this minute," she demanded in her best Princess Voice.
"No."

Her eyes narrowed. Then she turned her back on him and began to march toward the Heartless.

"What are you doing?" he said sharply.

"If you don't do something about this monster in the next minute," she said icily, "then you will only have six Princesses of Heart left."

"Princess Jasmine, get back here," he thundered.

She ignored him, coming to a halt and stretching her arms out at her sides in a sacrificial gesture, resolute despite her pounding heart. The monster turned around, its glowing yellow eyes fixed on her. 'I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die....' The Heartless swung its arms in preparation to jump. For a panicked second, she thought of giving up this insane idea and running for her life.

Then something crashed into the Heartless, so forcefully that its aim was completely thrown off and it skidded past her. Jasmine watched in relief and amazement as Saïx swept into a battle stance and roared, brandishing an impressive blue and silver weapon. The sound sent not-entirely-unpleasant chills down her spine. "Sai--"

He seemed beyond hearing. With beast-like savagery, he began to beat the Heartless without mercy, leaping again and again to reach its head, since its armored body seemed invulnerable to even the strongest attacks. The power in each of his blows made her breathless to watch, and she rather wondered why it took so long for the Heartless to finally burst into a cloud of darkness and vanish.

There was a silent pause. Saïx finally walked forward, and the golden orbs on the ground flew towards him as if drawn by magic. He took out a bottle and started to sip, then nearly dropped it when a loud cheer burst out around them. "What...?" Then he was descended on by the people who had witnessed the battle, all eager to congratulate him and thank him and drag him off to treat him to drinks. "Get away from me, I have work to do."

Jasmine giggled when someone tugged the hood back to reveal his scowling face. There was a brief falter when they saw his unsettling eyes and the prominent scars, but then off they went again, sweeping him along. "Unhand me, I said!"
It was strange how much it seemed to suit him, his unease amidst the merrymaking. Jasmine was sure he would fit more comfortably in a quieter setting. She was not surprised when he slipped off as soon as he could, and she, too, excused herself as soon as possible to follow him.

He was behind the building, ignoring the animals wandering around, focusing instead on writing something down. A dark portal was open nearby.

Jasmine went up to him, and he had not finished raising his head to acknowledge her before he was recoiling from the kiss she had touched to his cheek. "Why did you do that?" he demanded.

"A little reward for our brave hero," she cooed teasingly.

He glared at her in displeasure.

"Just a little one. I am betrothed, you know, and he'll get the bigger reward," she added with a wink.

"That has nothing to do with me. I only got involved because you were being hot-headed and reckless." He paused as if something had occurred to him, then shook his head and went back to writing. She thought she heard him mutter under his breath, "I am far too used to bailing such a person out of his own trouble...."

"Are you going to leave now?"

"Yes. Thanks to you, I am now far too noticeable here, and I've been significantly set behind in my work. I'll need to return to the castle to write up Number XIII's assignment for tomorrow, and adjust all the counts since they've now been so drastically altered...."

"You live in a castle?" she said, interested.

He glanced at her. His face seemed to close, and he drew up his hood before turning away from her and stalking into the portal.
"Good-bye, Kitten," she managed to call before he disappeared. 'He seems to come here fairly often. I wonder when he'll be back...?'

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**Author's Notes:** Okay, update on *Eyes Like a Tiger's*. Turns out that the Forgotten Couples challenge is actually by my friend, Cherished Tenshi. XD I would like, if I can, to undertake this challenge for the SaiJaz pairing.

There are fifty themes, and I will TRY to write one installment of a multi-chapter for each theme, though it might be difficult because A) I've never done that before (all my previous challenges have been a series of usually-unrelated one-shots), and B) the plot for this fic is ridiculous and boring and silly. *sweatdrop* Also, I'll be using the "Eyes Like a Tiger's" story on FFN and MMO to post any other random SaiJaz plunnies that won't fit in other series like *Stepsiblings*, but these installments will not be part of the challenge.

This current installment, "Breeze," is technically chapter 2 of the challenge story (the first chapter can fit the "Wave" theme, I need to edit the author's note and stuff); I'm only posting this now because it can pass as a one-shot. I REALLY want to avoid posting multi-chapters until I've finished their rough drafts. I make things a lot harder on myself whenever I try to post an incomplete story. *wince*

Progress on this challenge will probably be really slow, since I've got a ton of higher priority projects in the works right now. :/ Chapter 3, "What?", is when the main plotline should start; these first two chapters were just to give Sai & Jaz a bit of history together before things start going crazy. XD

**Oh, and before we get too far, let me state right now that the SaiJaz in the ELAT challenge story is not going to be romance.** ("Within Music" was not a proper installment of the challenge; for those of you who read *Stepsiblings*, it's like an "AU" from the main plot.) Jasmine is going to stay with Aladdin, and Sai is never going to fall in love with anyone; though for the non-challenge installments, there might (might) be either mutual or one-sided SaiJaz romance. Or not. I like platonic love. XD

**And yes, I do realize that I’m a super-confusing author, and I apologize a lot. orz**
Shadowless Princesses: A Curious Warmth {Axel & Alice}

Summary: They've both wandered through darkness. It does make it much easier to bear when you're not alone. Platonic Axel/Alice.

A/N: This is just a one-shot for now, I won't turn it into a series unless I get ideas for more Axel/Alice stories. "A Curious Warmth" refers to the strange feeling in Axel's chest when he somehow manages to experience emotions even though he's not supposed to have a heart.

I've developed a running joke in my fics that wherever Axel goes, he keeps finding adorable children who can make him do whatever they want by giving him puppy eyes. (The silly thing is that the fic where that became a running joke [one of the CatC sequels, ftr] hasn't even been finished or published yet.)

As usual, there might be chronology problems, because that's the one thing I just...don't pay attention to. *sweatdrop*

She sat there in the dark, weeping, overcome by loneliness and despair, because she knew that she was never going to find her way home. "Why...why, why, why do I never listen to my own good advice...?"

A man's voice startled her. "Con-spi-ra-cy."

Alice gasped and raised her head. Before her stood someone in a long black coat with outlandish crimson hair, crossed arms, and a sulky look on his face.
"Yup, there they are, all huge and blue and swimming and kicking me in the chest where I'm starting to think my heart left some pieces behind."

"Who are you?!" Alice gasped. Then she frowned. "And what on earth are you talking about?"

"Oh, the universe just has it in for me, that's all." He sat down on the ground beside her and handed over a strange little packet.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Disposable handkerchiefs. Go on, blow your nose and dry your eyes."

Uncertainly, Alice drew out an airy white sheet and applied it to her face. "I'm sorry...it's just that I've been wandering in this strange wonderland for ever so long, and at first it was quite fascinating, but I'm ready to go home now. Unfortunately, the path...it, well, it's vanished, and I...I don't know how I'll ever find my way home now."

"I see. Well, that's really too bad. But you know, I'm sure your folks are thinking of you, wherever you are. We pray for our sorrows to end, and hope that our hearts will blend. Now I will step forward to realize this wish. And who knows: starting a new journey may not be so hard, or maybe it has already begun. There are many worlds, but they share the same sky - one sky, one destiny."

Alice stared at him in surprise and appreciation. "Oh, that was lovely!"

"Don't be impressed, I was just quoting."

"You mean reciting? Well, I must say, I like it much better than the other nonsense I've heard in this place."

"The sun was shining on the sea, shining with all his might," he said softly. "He did his very best to make the billows smooth and bright - and this was odd--"

"--because it was the middle of the night!" Alice finished eagerly. "Yes, yes, exactly! And other
such things. The people here are all so very strange. Except you, I mean." She paused and studied the man beside her. With his sinister outfit and outrageous hair and the unsettling marks on his cheeks, he was, admittedly, rather strange himself. Yet there was something different about him, all the same. He seemed out of place here. "Pardon me, but what did you say your name was?" she asked.

"I'm Axel."

"My name is Alice," she said warmly. "How do you do?"

"Could be better. Tired, can't find my target, gonna miss today's ice cream, and I accidentally wasted my Hi-Ether when I was trying to reach a Limit Recharge, so now I'm out of casts."

"Oh," she said, taken aback. "I see."

Axel suddenly tilted his head back and smiled at her, finally meeting her eyes again. "What about you, princess? You feeling better?"

"Oh! Please, just call me Alice. But, yes, it makes quite a difference to have some company."

"Wandering alone in the dark isn't fun," he murmured.

"No, it isn't," she agreed fervently.

That made him laugh for some reason. "So weird that you, of all people, would know what it feels like." Then he shook his head. "Nah, you've only had a taste. Someone like you couldn't possibly know what it's like for real."

She found herself wanting very much to make him feel better. "Axel? Would you like me to sing to you?"

"Would I-- Huh?"
"I find that a bright song always cheers me up," she explained. "Here, I know one that goes like this: *When you get in trouble and you don't know right from wrong, give a little whistle...!*"

His laugh had an incredulous ring to it, but after that, he just sat there at her feet and listened quietly. Alice was not sure at first whether her idea had helped or not.

A little later, however, when they parted ways at the entrance to the hedge maze, he was smiling, and there was a sparkle in his eyes. 'I'm glad,' she thought. 'It seems as if music does do a person's heart good after all.'

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Author's Notes: Axel was quoting Kairi's letter to Sora in KH2, the text of which also somehow appeared in KH1's opening credits. Unless you're willing to make up some complicated explanations, that letter is mostly where this fic's chronology issues come in. Other quotes were from Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter" and the song "Give A Little Whistle" from Disney's *Pinocchio* movie.

Yeeaaahhh, so Kiryn got me into Terra/Cinderella and also intrigued me with the thought of Demyx/Kairi, Saïx/Jasmine, and Ven / Snow White (I think Cherished Tenshi shares the blame for some of those, too). So I started writing the *Dream Waltz* theme challenge for Terrella and idly jotted down *Eyes Like A Tiger's* for SaiJaz, thinking to eventually turn it into a series. Thanks for that review, K, because now I want a complete set. XD It's solely for experimental purposes, because I like to challenge myself.

Oh, and K. If I do manage to churn out all of them, there is one couple you will loathe (even though it rather delights me and is finally giving me the chance to do something I've wanted to try for a while). I'll leave your name off and will simultaneously post a fic for an alternative couple that you can pretend is the only version. ^^; Probably a vomit-inducing pairing for other readers as well, but this guy has gotten pretty fun for me to write, and he needs some love too, dang it! XD
Before Sora (part 1) {VenVan}

Before Sora

(ROUGH DRAFT)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Ventus is such a sweet boy...and yet, the pure darkness that is Vanitas had to come from SOMEWHERE, right? My take on what Ven might have been like as a child, before he was broken and before his heart encountered Sora's.

A/N: I feel like this fic needs some warning labels, but I honestly have no idea what they should be. I personally don't find any of it disturbing, but I think some people might.

I want to take Lulu's magic out of the final draft, since it started making me uncomfortable, but I'm running out of time to post this, so I'll have to put up with it for the rough draft.

*wince*

The reason that the main characters for this fic are Ventus & Vanitas is because they're still a complete being at this point, you know? o.O Vani fans, plz don't get upset because he's "never onscreen" or something....

0.0.0

He stared sullenly at his feet, his cheeks hot with humiliation. Yazoo and Loz held his arms and laughed as Kadaj went leisurely through his pockets, inspecting the contents and making fun of everything that was not munny. The rest of their fourth grade class was gathered around watching with great interest, even Lulu and her friends. Ven could not look at her. If he had, he would have seen an expectant, half-disappointed expression on her face.

"You have a cigarette lighter?" Kadaj was now exclaiming in gleeful disbelief. "You were retarded enough to bring a cigarette lighter to school?"

Yes. Because he had been entertaining the thought of using it to set the Jenova triplets' bikes on fire.
"I cannot believe anyone would be so stupid." Kadaj clicked a small flame into life, laughing as it trembled in the sunlight. "Pathetic little thing, isn't it. You two were made for each other." He began to bring the flame close to Ven's face. Ven jerked and struggled, but the boys held him fast, and he watched in terror as it got closer and closer.

"That's enough, Kadaj."

Everyone turned, shocked and awed that anyone other than an adult would dare to interrupt.

Of course it was Lulu. She put one hand on her hip and surveyed them with distaste. "Do you know how much trouble you can get in for hurting someone like that? They won't care if you're just a kid, they'll put you in jail."

"Not if we tell 'em widdle Ven-Ven 'accidentally' burned himself with the freaking cigarette lighter he brought to school," Kadaj said with relish.

"Who do you think they're gonna believe, Kadaj? The straight-A student whose father is on the school board, or the gang of loser delinquents who only show up to graffiti the lockers and shake down other kids for munny?"

Kadaj frowned, and the other kids all gasped in excitement. "You gonna snitch on us?" he murmured, a dangerous glint in his eye.

"Lulu," Ven said weakly, "don't--" Loz punched him in the mouth, silencing him. He hung his head again and watched bloody saliva drooling out of his mouth, clenching his hands into fists. If they hurt Lulu, he would kill them...he would really and truly kill them....

"Aw, look, Lulu," Kadaj was laughing. "The little loser wants to protect you. Isn't that cute?"

"Why don't you let him try, instead of ganging up on him?" she snapped.

Since Ven was not looking at anyone, he missed the gesture Kadaj made at his brothers. They released him so abruptly that Ven fell to his knees, scraping the skin off his palms as he caught himself before he met the pavement face-first. He looked up at Kadaj, who was cracking his
knuckles in anticipation. "Well? You gonna take a shot at it, loser?"

Ven stared at him. He glanced warily at the other two, and then with deep hatred at the crowd of watching kids. He could not even face Lulu, the girl he wanted so much to impress and yet who probably thought he was lower than dirt.

Ven slowly go to his feet. This was so stupid. Kadaj was just going to beat him up again, and even if Ven somehow miraculously won, Yazoo and Loz would just take him down in the next minute.

"Well? You gonna fight me or not?" Kadaj taunted.

Ven ran. He heard everyone yelling behind him, and because he did not see Lulu hold up a hand and cause the lighter to burst into flames, he had no idea why the Jenova triplets were not seizing him. All he knew was that he had not been caught yet, that he had been humiliated yet again, that the girl he liked knew what a horrible, horrible coward he was....

The teacher, who had been too busy gabbing on her cell phone to notice the disturbance at the other end of the playground, now snapped at Ven to get back here, where was he going? Ven ignored her. He turned the corner and went straight for the ladder bolted to the back of the cafeteria building, climbing up until he had reached the roof.

It was one of his safe havens, where the air was clear and he could feel the wind. Ven huddled in a corner, eyes closed as he listened to the breeze play through his hair, and wished that he was a different person.

O.0.0.0.0

It was easy enough to slip down among all the other students once they had been dismissed for the day. Ven wove through the crowd, deciding it was not worth going back to retrieve his backpack. He had no friends to wait for, no one to walk home with, he simply ambled down the main road through town, looking in shop windows and stalling. Home was not a place he particularly enjoyed being.

"Oi!" A shopkeeper had come out, shaking his fist as if Ven was a dog to be chased off. "Don't you dare come snooping around my store again, you little thief!"
"I wasn't gonna steal anything this time," Ven mumbled. Honestly, one or two little shoplifting incidents (or maybe more than two...), and everyone got all bent out of shape forever.

"Just get out of here before I call the cops."

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Ven slouched on past, trying to decide if he was angry enough to egg the guy's windows tonight. No, somehow they always knew when it was him, and he would get in so much trouble...again. His mother was acting weird enough these days, and the unpredictability made him nervous.

He finally ended up going down to the beach, which had the usual Friday afternoon crowd. He wanted to go out and swim, to lose himself in the sound of the waves, but he stood out like a sore thumb in his school uniform.

He skulked up by the touristy shops instead, wandering by the surfboard rental, the lifeguards' station, and various refreshment stands.

"Ooh, look, it's that little loser you stuck up for today."

Ven's head shot up. There she was, Lulu looking wonderful in a black and purple swimsuit, sitting at a table with her friends and the parfaits they had bought from the nearby cafe. She was frowning at him. Ven swallowed nervously. "You're right," was all she said.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" the same friend huffed, now addressing Ven. "No one wants to see your loser face. Go bother someone else."

Ven's hands clenched into fists, and his neck felt hot.

"You don't have to be rude, Alyza," Lulu said quietly. "He may be a coward, but that's no reason to stoop to being cheap and petty by insulting him."

He was not worth enough to even warrant an insult from Lulu. Unable to stand it anymore, Ven ran again.
There was a car in the driveway. Recognizing it, Ven groaned and ran around to the back of the house where his room was. He climbed onto the trash can, then jumped to catch the edge of the porch roof and swung himself up on top of it. He started walking over to his window, but tripped and accidentally knocked some of his toys off the roof. By the time he climbed into his bedroom, his mother was standing in the doorway. He froze.

"There you are!" she exclaimed. "I thought I heard a racket. Why didn't you come straight home?"

"...."

"Hurry and change, we have a visitor." She swept out again.

'Yeah, I can tell you were really curious about why I took so long to get home from school.' Ven clambered the rest of the way inside and changed into his rattiest T-shirt and jeans. Then he reluctantly made his way downstairs, kicking the walls as he went.

Sure enough, Mrs. Jenova was sitting in the living room. Ven stared at her beautiful, silken, silvery hair, and had to fight the urge to seize fistfuls of it and yank it out of her stupid head.

"She brought her new baby!" Ven's mother cooed, steering him over to the carrier sitting on the floor.

Ven glanced into it. The infant blinked clear aquamarine eyes at him, almost as if it was studying him. Its head was topped with silver-blue fluff that looked as soft as a cloud. 'You're as ugly as your big brothers,' Ven thought vengefully. He was tempted to say it out loud, but knew that his mother...would not react well.

"Isn't he precious?"

"...."

"It makes you want to have a little brother to look after, too, doesn't it?"

"Not really."
"Oh Ven, you're so silly." Ven's mother squeezed him so tightly that he made a sound like "guh." Then she sat down and started chatting with Mrs. Jenova again. As soon as Ven could tell that they would not notice, he slipped away to the kitchen and sneaked some cookies out of the pantry. It was not like he deliberately meant to 'spoil his appetite,' he just...felt like eating cookies.

That evening, he picked sullenly at his dinner.

"How was school today, Ven?"

"Fine."

"Did you learn anything interesting?"

"No."

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Why aren't you eating?"

"I'm not hungry."

His mother frowned dangerously. "You didn't eat any sweets, did you?"

"Of course not," he scoffed. "I know better."

His father laid a hand on her arm. "Honey, did you and Ven get to have a nice talk today?" he asked meaningfully.

"Oh, well...." Ven's mother took a deep breath. "Ven? Sweetie?"

"I told you, I didn't eat any cookies!"
"That's not what I-- Ven, listen to me. Ven!"

He reluctantly brought his eyes to hers, and stopped kicking the table at his father's warning look.

"Ven," his mother continued, "you would like to have a little brother or sister, wouldn't you?"

"Nope."

"...But if you did. You wouldn't mind, right?"

"I'd drown 'em."

His mother gasped and slapped his face. Ven stared at her in shock, trying very hard not to cry.

His father hurriedly came over and knelt down by Ven's chair, taking his hands. "Ventus, your mother is going to have a baby in a few months. We are very, very happy about this, and we know that you will be, too. Babies are wonderful, you know - you'll get to help take care of him, and teach him things--"

Ven pulled free and stormed into the pantry, where he dug out a box of cream cakes and began cramming them into his mouth. His shoulders tensed in anticipation, but neither of his parents came to stop him.

0.0.0.0.0

He was not upset enough to have forgotten his plans for revenge. Ven awakened at 5:00 that Saturday morning. Then he quietly dressed himself all in black, crept down to get a package of Pop-Tarts from the kitchen, and slipped out into the dark, cool morning.

He ate his sugary breakfast as he made his way to the Jenovas' house, creeping along in hiding wherever he could rather than using the main roads.

The boys' bikes were on the back porch. Ven looked hard at the windows, making sure that
were all dark and either covered or showed no sign of movement. Then he tiptoed to the porch and pulled a knife out of his pocket.

O.O.O.O.O

He sat on the beach to watch the sunrise afterwards, feeling more peaceful and more relaxed than he had in days. Barely anyone was here at this hour. The light looked absolutely beautiful playing over the water, seeming to dance in the rippling waves. When the sun's rays were finally shining full on his face, Ven got to his feet and dusted sand off his pants.

He wandered back to town, wondering how to kill time until the ice cream shop opened. There was a stick on the ground...he picked it up and experimentally whacked it against the side of a building. "I wish this were a real sword."

As he continued on, he got to an intersection between the main road and a shabby little street that was pretty barren except for a few small, eccentric-looking houses. There was a little girl there, maybe six or seven, crying beside a tall, twisting tree. A man in a worker's uniform was trying to comfort her. "Come on now, honey, stop crying, I've just called the fire department. They have a big ladder, they can reach the top of that tree with no problem. I have to get to work now, but will you promise to be a brave girl and wait for them?"

"Yes, Daddy," she sobbed.

He kissed the top of her head. "It will be okay, sweetie. Be good today."

"I w-wiiiiiiill!"

He patted her on the back sympathetically and then walked away. Ven quickly stepped into the bushes to hide as the man passed, since he had been chased off once or twice before by overprotective parents. Then Ven ambled over to the crying girl and looked up. High in the branches was a little ball of gray fluff, mewing pitifully. "Is that your cat? Did he climb up there and get stuck?"

"Y-e-eeees!"

"What a dumb cat," Ven remarked, gauging the distance and the footholds between ground and
"Waaaaahh!"

Ignoring her, Ven took a running leap and seized a branch that stretched out just over his head. He braced the soles of his shoes against the bark and scrambled up, aiming for a fork in the trunk where he could rest a second and grip a branch in the next-highest level.

As the girl watched anxiously, Ven made his way up the tree until he had gone as far as he could without braving the smaller branches that would probably not take his weight.

The kitten hissed at him and started to back away.

"Oh, no you don't, you little rat." Before it could get too far out of reach, Ven flung himself on his stomach and managed to seize one of its back legs, clinging tightly to the branch with his legs and his other hand. The kitten squeak-yowled, and Ven cautiously tried to adjust his grip. As soon as he had pried its claws out of the wood, it wriggled frantically and bit him. He yelped, nearly dropping it. "Friggin' monster!"

Using some language that he would not have dared to utter within earshot of his mother, Ven resisted the urge to squeeze the kitten until it popped, instead managing to scoot back along the tree limb and shove the animal in his pocket. Then, hissing in pain and irritation as it dug its claws into his flesh straight through the fabric of his pants, he began the long climb down.

It was a little harder going down than it had been to climb up. He kept having to crane uncomfortably over his shoulder to see where he was putting his feet. At one point, he misjudged the distance, stumbled, lost his grip on the branch he was holding onto, and went plunging.

A sudden strong wind whipped up, and for a second, he had the weirdest sensation of arms catching him. Then he hit the ground, just barely remembering to angle his body so that he wouldn't land on the kitten and end up with a pocket full of gore.

"Ash!" The little girl ran forward and frantically dug the animal out of Ven's pocket. It felt a little like being mugged by Kadaj again, which he resented. "You're okay!"

"You're welcome," Ven said pointedly as he climbed to his feet, but the girl was too busy snuggling
and cooing over her precious rat to notice.

Ven looked down at himself, assessing the damage. His hip felt a little sore and he had a scrape on his elbow, but otherwise, he seemed remarkably unscathed. *'Huh. Thought I'd be bruised more, falling out of the tree that high.'*

He turned back toward the main road and then froze when he unexpectedly met a pair of appraising black eyes. "L-Lulu," he choked out. She was standing there on the corner, watching him. Shame flooded his body as he remembered their last few encounters; she had to think he was scum. Unable to bear her attention, he plunged out of sight between two houses and began making his way through people's back yards, trying to put distance between himself and the girl who hated him.

It was pretty interesting, seeing the backs of strangers' houses like this. No one was out, they were probably sleeping in at this time of the morning on a weekend, not lounging in their yards. Ven hurriedly snuck past the back doors where people could be seen inside, but at the quieter houses, he paused to explore a bit.

Lots of yards had toys left out. He slipped a cowboy action figure and a water pistol into his pockets, then discarded them later to make room for a little red car with flame designs and a slinky. The pom-poms on a kid's bike caught his fancy, so he pulled off a green one and tied it around his wrist. Someone had also left out a black marker. He used it to draw his gang symbol on every fence he passed, the one he had made up in case his *real* father, who was a mafia boss or a ninja warlord something cool like that, ever came back to claim him.

His guard was so relaxed by the time he reached an occupied yard that he had actually already drawn his symbol before he turned around and saw the old lady lying on the grass. "Ack!" He jerked back against the fence, the marker dropping from his hand.

The woman smiled at him. "Hello, love."

He stared at her.

"It seems like you've come just in time. I'm having a bit of trouble, you see," she said, her voice sounding a little strained and breathless.

"Why are you lying on the ground?" he asked warily. "You look weird."
"Yes, well, my walker is still packed away, and I thought I could make do with a cane, but I was sadly mistaken." He could now see the stick lying nearby. "Would you be a dear and run down to one of the neighbors to ask them for help?"

"No way! Are you crazy?" He couldn't let people know he was here, he would get ridiculously in trouble.

"Sometimes people say I am," she remarked. "Oh dear, I hope Annie gets back soon...."

Ven slowly approached. "Did you, like, fall down, and now you can't get up?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes. Well, I might be able to get up, but it hurts a bit, so I'm afraid to try. I'd rather an adult be here, so I'll just stay put until then."

Ven laughed and sat down by her head. "That is really, really pathetic," he told her appreciatively. Finally, he had found someone who was more of a loser than he was.

"The elderly often seem to be," she said regretfully. "What's your name, honey?"

"I'm not your honey. My name's Ventus."

"Ventus," she repeated with a smile. "As difficult to touch as the wind, aren't you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ah, don't mind me, I'm just rambling...."

It suddenly occurred to Ven that they might not be as alone as he thought. "Are you the only one home?" he asked quickly.
"Yes, unfortunately...my daughter Annie was helping me get moved in, but she ran out for a bit to run some errands. She should be back soon, though."

Ven quickly stood up. "I gotta go."

"Ventus...." For a moment she looked distressed, but then her face cleared. "You know, we'll be able to hear her opening the front door, it's downright squeaky. You'll have plenty of time to run off before she gets to the back."

"I'm not running away!" Ven said hotly, immediately plopping down again.

She reached out and patted his knee. "You're a good boy," she said softly.

"No, I'm bad. Everyone hates me."

"Well, that's not true, Ventus. I like you very much."

"Why would you do that?" he said disbelievingly.

She smiled again. "Well, you are a very good conversationalist. I've found our conversation so far to be very interesting."

He felt hot, and squirmed a bit.

"Do you live nearby, Ventus?"

"Over on Cloud Street," he mumbled. "Call me Ven."

"Oh, I do like that. Whoever nicknamed you has good taste."

"Everyone calls me Ven."
Just then, a woman came around the corner and gasped as soon as she had a good view of the yard. "Mom!"

"Oh, Annie, there you are."

Ven jumped to his feet.

"Mom, what'd he do to you!?

"No, darling, Ven was just keeping me company while I waited for you--"

"He's a hooligan, Mom!" She turned fierce eyes to him, apparently about to start a tirade. "You!"

Ven ran.

o.o.o.o.o

Ven had learned by this time that people automatically assumed you were guilty when you ran, so when he saw Officer Carlson heading purposefully over to him, he stood his ground. He simply put on a haughty expression as he continued to lick the ice cream bar (that he had bought with actual munny, thank you very much), held the man's eyes steadily, and locked his joints in an effort to hide the fact that he was shaking. "Is there a problem?" he asked when the man was within earshot.

Carlson used his "I'm-nice-so-let's-be-friends voice, which meant that Ven still had a chance to escape if he played his cards right. Unfortunately, he rarely did; Carlson was a lot smarter than him. "Good morning, Ven," the officer said pleasantly. "Out for a walk?"

"Uh huh."

"That's good. Mornings are usually the best time for a stroll."
"Mm hm."

"Say, Ven, did you happen to tell your parents where you were going?"

"...I left a note."

"I see. Well, unfortunately, they must not have seen it, because they're pretty worried about you."

"They're still asleep. They don't even know I'm gone." Wait, that sounded bad. "But they know I like to take walks on Saturday mornings, so they won't be worried."

Carlson sighed. "Ventus, they called me."

Crap. Not a good sign when Carlson started using his full name. "Oh...well, guess I should go see what they want," Ven said nervously, edging away.

"I think that's a good idea. Here, I'll walk home with you, keep you company."

"That's fine, I can make it back on my own," Ven said quickly.

Carlson gave him a long, serious look. "Ventus. I got one or two other phone calls this morning, as well."

Crap, crap, crap. Probably that Annie woman. He was gonna have to go break one of her windows soon. "I...don't...see why that should have anything to do with me," Ven said awkwardly.

Carlson folded his arms sternly. "Ventus. You have a choice here. Is there anything you'd like to tell me, or would you rather discuss things with your parents?"

Ven glared at the ground and took a big, rebellious bite of his ice cream. "Let's go home," he growled through the resulting brain freeze.
Now that Carlson had gotten his way, he was back to his nice voice, keeping up a friendly, one-sided chatter all the way back. Ven shoved his hands in his pockets and trudged along sullenly, taking a tiny bit of pleasure in ignoring the officer and not getting punished for it. Carlson was not one to kick a guy when he was down.

Ven’s mother opened the door before they even reached the porch. "Oh, you found him!” she cried in relief. She grabbed Ven and hugged him protectively. "You haven't heard from Jen, have you?” she asked, her tone anxious.

"No," Carlson said seriously. "However, though I haven't committed anything specific to record yet, it would be in your best interest to contact a Miss Anne Wilson on Seagull Lane. She and her neighbors have a situation that I will need to address if you don't."

Ven squirmed uncomfortably as she gripped him harder. "Thank you," she said tightly.

Carlson nodded politely and headed back out.

Immediately, she seized Ven by his collar and one arm and dragged him into the living room, flinging him onto the couch as he screamed, "No! No! Wait, Mom, no!"

"What did you do?” she screamed back. "Where have you been?”

"Nowhere! I-I went and got some ice cream!"

"You were at Jen's house!"

"NO I WASN'T!"

"She SAW YOU!” she shrieked, so close that flecks of spittle landed on his cheek.

Ven covered his face with his left hand to shield himself, since she was still pinning his right arm. "No she didn't!” he cried back, surprised to find himself sobbing.
"She got up to feed the baby and she saw you! What did you think you were doing?!"

"I didn't do it," he wailed despairingly. He was finished. All he could do was go down fighting.

"Do you know how much munny it's going to cost to fix those bikes?! And I don't even know what you did to those poor people down on Seagull! Are you trying to get picked up by the police again?!"

"I didn't do anything...I didn't do anything...."

"Don't give me those puppy eyes, they are not going to work," she growled, flipping him over.

"Nooooo!"

"Honey," Ven's father intervened, "I thought we had decided to sit down and talk with him first."

"That was before I found out what he's been up to this morning," she snarled.

"Honey, just calm down for a minute, I don't think you being so upset is good for the baby...."

She began taking deep breaths, and her hold loosened. Ven instantly wriggled free and tried to make a run for it, but his father caught him, sitting down and wrapping him securely in his arms. "No! No! No!"

"Ventus! Ven, settle down, we're just going to talk."

"I didn't do it!"

Ven's mother opened her mouth heatedly, but stopped at her husband's pleading look.

"Ventus," his father said, "you don't have to lie, we already know that you went to the Jenovas'
house this morning to sabotage their bikes. Why did you do that?"

"I didn't!"

"You want me to get the soap?" Ven's mother threatened.

He clamped his mouth shut and shook his head frantically.

"Your father asked you a question, and if you don't answer it with the truth, you're gonna wish you'd ended up in jail!"

"Honey...."

"K-Kadaj stole my munny again yesterday," Ven choked out past the lump in his throat, still straining unsuccessfully to get loose. "H-He and the other two p-pick on me all the time."

"That is ridiculous, the triplets are all very nice, gentlemanly boys."

"They're nice to you!" Ven shouted. "They kiss up to the grown-ups their mom likes and then when no one's watching, they beat up other kids and steal stuff and break stuff and they're more bad than me, they really are! They are!" he screamed desperately, seeing his mother's disbelieving look.

"Honey," his father said reluctantly, "maybe we should talk to Jen--"

"Absolutely not! I'm not going to accuse my best friend's sons of being hooligans with no proof, especially right after she witnessed my own little hooligan vandalizing her property!"

"I...I see what you're saying, but...well, he wouldn't be this upset over nothing, would he?"

They both looked at Ven, who had slumped forward and was sobbing as if heartbroken.
"...Why does our little monster have to have such an adorable face...?" Ven's mother took a deep breath and then reached out, tenderly brushing his spiky bangs out of his eyes and wiping the tears off his cheeks. "Sweetheart, you're really unhappy about Sora coming, aren't you. The baby," she explained in response to his blank look. "We're not sure if it's a boy or a girl yet, but we decided to name it Sora."

Ven stared at her. He had not even thought about the baby since yesterday.

"Sweetie, you're not the only one, there are lots and lots of kids who find out that they're going to have little brothers or sisters. It won't be a bad thing, I promise. You'll love Sora when he comes!"

Ven studied his mother's glowing, hopeful expression. "Am I still in trouble?" he asked cautiously.

His mother sighed. "Well, since you've already lost your allowance for the rest of this year, you're going to have to start doing extra chores to pay us back for fixing the bikes." She frowned. "And I still don't know what kind of havoc you wreaked after stopping by Mrs. Jenova's house."

"...."

"What, did he do something else?" his father asked in confusion.

"Apparently," his mother growled, "Ven didn't stop with the Jenovas. Officer Carlson talked about some people on Seagull Lane who filed complaints."

"Ahhh...."

Ven hunched his shoulders in shame at the hurt sound of his father's sigh.

His mother, her touch no longer gentle, grabbed his chin and forced him to meet her eyes. "What did you do?" she demanded.

"N-Noth...ing...." Lying was so habitual for him by now that he did not even realize he was doing it for a second. "I mean, no, wait," he said quickly, imagining the chalky taste of soap on his tongue, "I-I just went...and...trespassed." That seemed like the safest of his crimes. "I
was...wandering around in...people's yards."

Her eyes narrowed. "And what did you do while you were violating strangers' private property rights?"

"I...I...kicked some things...and...a lady came out and yelled at me," he said haltingly.

"His heart is beating pretty fast," his father observed.

She tightened her grip on his chin. "Ventus Caelum King, are you lying to me?" she demanded.

He could not speak, just stared at her with tears starting to drip down his face again.

"Why does he do that?!" she shouted. "How can he do such horrible things and then look at me like that and break my heart!?"

'It's working?' Ven thought in surprise.

"Honey, I think we should believe him, at least until we have more information. But first...you remember what we were talking about earlier...."

Ven's mother sighed and released his chin. He immediately turned his eyes back to the ground, glaring as he tried again half-heartedly to get loose.

"Ven. Sweetie. Your father and I were thinking."

Ven tried sliding down out of his father's arms, but simply got hauled up again for his trouble. The man was strong, very patient, and very used to this.

"We know that you don't have many...well...that is, you obviously don't get along with the Jenova boys, and there's not really any other...um...."
His mother having trouble expressing herself was so rare that Ven paused, eyeing her with wary curiosity.

"We thought it would be fun for you to have a little friend to take care of," his father explained. "You know, someone to talk to when you get lonely and don't feel comfortable talking to us."

"I told you, only babies have imaginary friends," Ven said quickly, wondering if they'd overheard him talking to Zidane again earlier. He knew Zidane was not real, it was just...nice to pretend that someone actually listened to him sometimes, for a change.

"What? No, I meant...."

"Ven, we're going to let you have a pet," his father said. "We'll let you pick something out, a turtle or a frog or maybe a bird. Nothing big, just someone to keep you company and...help you out a little."

Ven blinked. "How is a turtle going to help me?" Beat up Kadaj and them, was what he meant, though he knew better than to say this aloud.

"Well, the child psychology book said it would," his mother grumbled cryptically under her breath.

"Huh?"

She shook her head. "Never mind." She got to her feet, tiredly running a hand through her hair. "I'd better call that lady and see what the total damage count is...."

Ven went cold, and started to struggle again. "All I did was walk on her lawn, if she tells you anything else, she's a liar, too, I really didn't steal anything, or draw on anything--"

His mother's eyes narrowed. "Who said anything about drawing?"

Ven gulped.
"Don't let him escape," she ordered, and marched into the kitchen where the phone was. "...Hello? Yes, this is Saphrique King, I'm *deep sigh* Ventus King's mother. I heard he was, er, around your neighborhood this morning...."

Ven looked up at his father and opened his eyes wide. "Daddy?"

His father sighed. "Don't even start, Ven."

Eyes. "...Could you please--?"

"Wait until your mother gets off the phone."

Eyes...eyes.... "Daddyyyy?"

He hesitated. "...Do you promise not to run off if I let you go?"

Before Ven could answer, his mother's shriek echoed through the house. "HE DID WHAT?!"

Ven ditched the puppy eyes approach and fought hard.

"Oh my God! ...Oh my God! ...No, no, he'd never--! ...Oh, God, no, I know he can be a pill but he'd never do that, he wouldn't-- Oh-- Oh, wait, please, just wait one moment, I have to ask-- No, please, don't, the police have already talked to me, we're trying to work something out-- Hello? Hello?"

There was a long, long pause.

'I'm dead,' Ven thought. Though it wasn't like trespassing or theft or graffiti were anything new, so he was not quite sure why his mother sounded so horrified.

She came storming back into the living room. "You sent an eighty-seven-year-old woman to the hospital?" she thundered.
Ven gaped at her.

"He did what?" his father exclaimed.

"Apparently this boy assaulted an elderly woman on her own property, and now she's in the hospital!"

His father's arms went slack from shock. Ven himself was too astounded to take advantage of this. "I...di-didn't...do that," he said faintly.

She swooped down and seized his arms, her nails digging into his skin.

"I didn't do it! I didn't do anything!" he shrieked. He had never been more terrified in his life. This was different, somehow, than all the other times he had gotten in trouble. She really did look like she was going to kill him. "I didn't! I swear! I didn't hurt her! I only talked to her! Don't!"

"How could you do something like that?" she hissed.

"I didn't!" It was horrifying, almost suffocating, this utter desperation to be believed when, for once in his life, he was telling the truth.

"What should I do with you?" The rage drained out of her face, and, to Ven's shock, she started to cry. "What are we supposed to do?" she sobbed. "What do they expect me to do about him?! Lock him up? Have him committed? Pack him off to some boot camp? I can't handle him anymore! I'm pregnant and I should be enjoying my new baby but instead I'm constantly worrying about this little monster, and I can't do it anymore! Agh! If Sora turns out like him, I'll drown him and then I'll kill myself!"

Ven fell out of her limp hands and stared up at her, trembling and speechless.

"Honey, honey, just calm down, it will be all right, we'll get this straightened out." Her husband gently led her away, sparing a concerned look over his shoulder for his son, but unable to split his attention.
Long after they were gone, though he could still hear her muffled sobs, Ven crept to his room, pulled the quilt off the bed to wrap around his shoulders, and shut himself in his closet, where he tried to dissolve into the darkness.

He must have fallen asleep. He jerked upright when the closet door opened and stared up at his father, his eyes sore and bleary.

"Ven...you need to come out and get dressed in some nicer clothes. We're going to visit Mrs. Wilson in the hospital and see if we can get to the bottom of this."

Ven pulled the quilt over his head and burrowed deeper into it.

"Ventus...."

Brisk footsteps thumped across the carpet. Ven tensed as he sensed his mother's approaching presence.

"I'm through with this, Ven," she snapped, apparently more or less back to her old self. "If you give us any trouble, I will call the police and have them come and take you away forever. Get up. Get up!"

Sullenly, he crawled out of the closet and mumbled that he didn't want to go.

"Well, I don't want to do a lot of things, but I do them anyway. I don't want to get calls before six o'clock in the morning on a weekend from someone saying that my son is running around slashing bike tires. I don't want to spend my Saturday driving around town trying to keep you out of jail. I don't want to--"

"Okay, okay, I'm going!"
At the hospital, Annie Wilson said angrily that she did not want "that little horror" anywhere near her mother again, but after Mr. King had gone in to introduce himself, the old woman responded in a cheerful, easygoing tone. "Oh! You're Ven's father, then? How lovely! It was so very kind of you all to come visit me. Of course you can let him in, I'd love to see him!"

Ven's mother dragged him into the room and marched him over to the bed, where he stood glaring at his shoes. "This is the boy who attacked you," she said shortly. "I am deeply, deeply sorry for my son's actions, and will do everything in my power to make amends."

"Oh my, no, no, I think there's been a mistake. Annie, what have you been telling people? My goodness, it was all my own fault, being too adventurous! Ven just came over to introduce himself and keep me company while we waited for help to come, isn't that right?"

"I didn't push you over," Ven mumbled. "You fell down yourself."

"Yes, that sounds about right."

His parents were staring at her. "So...Ven didn't hurt you?"

"Mom," Annie protested, "he's not like Raye or the Mendez boys back home. I've seen this kid throw rocks at stray cats before. You just moved here, you don't know anything about him, but I do! I come home and find that he's got you on the ground - don't try to cover up for him!"

"I didn't do anything!" Ven cried in frustration.

"Annie," the old woman said quietly, "maybe I'm a fool like everyone says, but I wouldn't tell the kind of lie you're accusing me of."

"I didn't-- It's not that I--!"

The old woman smiled and reached out to take Ven's hand. He flinched. "Thank you for coming, Ven," she said warmly. "It looks like this was a hard thing for you to do, but I truly appreciate it. I'm glad to see you."
He squirmed uncomfortably. "I didn't push you over," he mumbled. "I wasn't lying. I didn't even know you were hurt." She had, however, asked him to go and get help, but he had refused, and she had not insisted. He had been so stupid. His face went hot with shame, and he could not lift his eyes from the floor.

"Oh...."

He tensed as his mother's grip on him tightened, but then he realized that she was only...hugging him?

"Oh!" Mrs. King burst into tears, holding her son tightly. "You don't know...how relieved I am," she sobbed. "I thought...I thought he'd crossed the line for sure...I didn't know what to do...oh, you don't know how horrible it's been...every day it's something, getting in fights at school, shoplifting, breaking things, getting calls from the police two or three times a week, I have Officer Carlson on speed dial, running off to who knows where all the time, everyone in town complaining to me, lying lying lying through his teeth, and he's only in fourth grade, sometimes I can't breathe thinking about what he'll be like when he's older, and I'm so terrified for the baby coming. I don't know what I'm going to do.... Sometimes I think...sometimes I wish...."

'She hates me,' Ven thought dully, not for the first time. 'I hate me."

"Now, now," the old woman said soothingly, patting Sapphique's arm like she was a little girl. "There's something to love in every child, every single one. Why," she chuckled, "I myself was a little hellraiser back in the day...believe me, honey, my own mother, God bless her, could get just as frazzled as you. Don't worry, you have a fine son. He's a very handsome young man." She smiled, and even Ven, trying to look everywhere but at her, could not miss her expression. "Such clear blue eyes. I know he can be very sweet if he wants to."

"Don't let those puppy eyes fool you," Mrs. King grumbled, trying to wipe her tears away. "He may have the face of a cherub, but he's a little monster inside, you have no idea."

The old woman was grinning straight at him. "Ah, but we know better, don't we, Ven?"

"No. I really am a monster," he told her, and did not understand why she laughed.

Mrs. King stayed to work out details with the Wilsons, and Ven's father took him out to one of the waiting rooms. Ven slumped low in a chair and pulled the toy car out of his pocket, running it
along the empty seat next to him.

"Well," his father finally said, "that's a relief."

"What is?"

"That you...well.... Heh, Mrs. Wilson seemed to like you, didn't she."

"She's real dumb."

"Ventus," his father said reproachfully, "you shouldn't talk about other people like that."

"Well, it's true."

He sighed. "Aren't you glad that she stuck up for you?"

"Yeah."

"She seemed like a very kind person."

"...."

There was a long silence. "Ven," his father finally said, "are the Jenova boys really giving you trouble?"

"...."

"I just...thought that since you were right about Mrs. Wilson, maybe...."
"So, Ven," his father finally said, giving up and changing the topic, "have you thought about what kind of pet you would like to get?"

"No."

"Oh. Well...I guess you can just look around the store and see what catches your attention."

"Mm." Ven paused. "I want an elephant," he said experimentally. An elephant could step on Kadaj and Yazoo and Loz and squish them.

"Urk...well, we don't really have a place to keep an elephant, right?"

"...."

Ven's mother came out and plopped into the chair next to him, sighing loudly. He snatched the little car out of the way just in time. "Thank God she didn't actually break anything. She'll be able to go back home soon." Then Mrs. King turned sideways in her chair and frowned down at Ven dangerously. "You lied to me. You just said that you trespassed."

"I didn't lie! I did trespass!"

"You also neglected to mention that you drew graffiti on ten houses, and one or two people told Annie that things are missing from their yards or were tampered with."

"I--! I...!" He could not think of anything to say that would get him out of this.

"You will be spending your weekend cleaning all that up, and--" Her eyes zeroed in on the car. "Where did you get that?"

"I've always had it."
"You have not. I've never seen it before."

"I...got it...as a prize. From school."

"You stole it."

"N--!"

"You stole it!"

"I was gonna give it back!" he burst out, though he had had no intention of doing so before this moment.

His father sighed. "I guess that was a bad time to bring up the pet idea gain...it would seem like we're rewarding him for bad behavior."

"Not if we spank him first and then take him to the pet store," she decided. She stood up and seized her son's arm before he was able to bolt. "Let's go get this over with."

"No! No! I don't want a pet, wait, Mom, no, I'll make it up some other way, I'm sorry for being bad and lying and being disrespectful, no, wait, noooo...!"

o.o.o.o.o

He forgot to keep sulking as he looked down into the pen, where little balls of fluff were yipping and wrestling together or sleeping.

One black-and-brown creature came romping over to investigate his lowered hand, sniffing at it and then giving it an enthusiastic lick.

"Ven," his mother said quickly, "you can look, but remember, we did not come here to get a dog."
The puppy rose up and set its paws on the side of the pen, gazing up at Ven adoringly.

"Aw, he likes you," a salesgirl laughed as she passed by. She seemed like a college student and her face was unfamiliar, which might explain why she was so friendly and not giving Ven dirty looks like all the older employees were. "Would you like to hold him?"

Ven tore his eyes away from the puppy to stare at her. "You'll...let me?" He had been meaning to ignore the "PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH US, WE ARE VERY SENSITIVE!" signs and pick up the animal himself, but it was surprising to hear someone make the offer first.

"Of course! Come over here to the play area." She lifted out the delighted puppy and placed it in Ven's arms. Chocolate, as Ven had already started calling it in his mind, lunged forward and licked him on the nose. "Ha ha! You think you're so cute," he laughed, rubbing the puppy spit off his nose with one hand and cuddling Chocolate closer with the other arm.

He was fully absorbed and did not notice his parents staring at him. "Dear," his mother said faintly, "when was the last time you saw Ven smile like that?"

"...I can't even remember."

"You think you're just adorable," Ven was cooing. "You think you're gonna win me over so that I'll love you and play with you and give you doggie treats forever and ever, but no, it's not gonna work, it's not gonna work," he crooned, obviously already head over heels.

His mother folded her arms and looked away as her husband asked how much it would cost to buy the black-and-brown puppy. The answer made him wince, though that did not stop him from reaching for his wallet.

To be continued...

Author's Notes: Again, I have a feeling this fic needs warning labels, I'm just not sure what they should be. I pretty much work in special education for a living, so I don't know what it's like reading this fic with a different sort of background.

The idea for this fic came when it occurred to me that there's a disconnect between the Ven we all know and love, and the epitome of evil that is Vanitas. We also only get a glimpse and a half of Ven before Sora touched his heart - really just the scene where Vanitas is born. The scene in the Awakening where Ven first met Sora almost doesn't count, since Ven was a (literally) heart-broken space case at the time. So I reasoned out what Ven might have been like when he still had all that
darkness in his heart and his behavior wasn't affected by Sora, and I threw in my theory that he and Sora are actually brothers or cousins, and this is what I came up with. I had a hard time trying to balance the Ven-chan and Vanitas aspects of Ven's personality, and I'm not sure I succeeded, but I wanted to at least make the effort.

By the way, I wrote all this at the same time as Christmas at the Castle - that is, I had the idea and wrote the first page, finished drafting CatC from the Disney Town chapters to the end, then returned to this fic with a vengeance until I used up the notebook and had to switch to a new one. After that was when I posted CatC and other fics, but the point is that the puppy eyes thing was still new when I originally wrote this. AND LOL, Mrs. Wilson was originally 86 rather than 87, because again, this was first drafted before AkuSai became my OTP. XD

"Caelum" means "sky" in Latin. This was the fic where I originally came up with Ven's full name for my headcanon (as well as Sora's/Ven's mom's name), so I'm really glad that I got to post this before I used the name for my MUCH more recent "Stepsiblings" series. And that other fic that I've been excited about and hope to post soon.

Among the many things that I'm sure I got wrong, I'm ignoring whatever negative effects Sora might have suffered from developing in the womb of a woman under constant stress from trying to raise a kid like Venitas and then having him go missing... Also the fact that the mother of a missing child probably wouldn't let her second son go gallivanting off unsupervised on the smaller islands.

I'm totally convinced that Jenova is Riku's mama. LOOK AT THE RESEMBLANCE BETWEEN HIM AND HER OTHER KIDS (Seph, Kadaj, etc.). Unmistakable!

I always thought it was supposed to be "Yazuu," but then I read somewhere that a "yazoo" is a little stream flowing off a main river, which makes sense.

Ven's "gang symbol" is the Unversed insignia, of course. Ftr, mafia bosses are not cool, that was just Ven's opinion. o.O
"Ven, don't feed the puppy bits of your hamburger."

"Chocolate likes hamburger."

"I know he does, that's not the point."

Mr. King pulled up by the house and leaned over to kiss his wife. "I really do need to stop by work today, but hopefully I won't be long. You'll be all right?"

"As well as can be expected," she grumbled, unbuckling her seatbelt.

Ven got out of the car and pulled out Chocolate, who was wriggling in delight at having a new place to explore.

"Don't let him go," his mother said quickly, "we need to get inside."

"But he wants to see the yard."

"Yes, but he can't right now. Take him to the house, Ven."

"But--"

"Do as I say!"

That was a tone Ven knew better than to mess with (most of the time), so he pressed his lips together and carried Chocolate inside.
They set up the main bathroom to temporarily accommodate their new pet, since it was the room in the least danger of getting damaged. Chocolate sniffed around with great interest as they set up a barrier in the doorway, laid out a sleeping cushion with a basket of toys next to it, spread out some newspaper, and filled the food and water bowls.

"You like your new room, Chocolate?" Ven's mother crooned. The puppy licked her fingers and then romped over to Ven, grabbing his sleeve in its little teeth and tugging hard as it growled playfully. Ven laughed and tugged back, showing total unconcern for the sound of ripping stitches.

"Chocolate!" his mother exclaimed, snatching up the puppy and struggling to get Ven's sleeve free of its mouth. "No, bad dog, don't bite people's clothes!"

Chocolate wriggled madly and licked her face in automatic apology. She smiled, despite herself, and reached for a thick chunk of rope, dangling the end invitingly in front of the dog's face. Chocolate instantly seized on it.

Sapphique soon went to take a much-needed nap ("Do not leave the house, or so help me I will take Chocolate back to the store"), leaving Ven to play with the puppy to his heart's content. For quite a while they were fine with amusing themselves where they were, but eventually, Ven got restless. He decided to show Chocolate the rest of his new home. "Well, this is the hallway, and my room's over there--"

Chocolate set off purposefully, sniffing at everything as if it was a very serious matter.

"This is the front hall...that's called a plug, you'll electrocute yourself if you stick your nose in it...those are umbrellas...no, you can't go out, then Mom will take you back and we'll never see each other again."

Chocolate moved on to the living room, where Ven looked around nervously. "Chocolate...be careful in here, okay?" After many, many unfortunate incidents, Ven's mother had given up on keeping her living room nice and had instead made Ven-proofing it a higher priority, but that did not mean it was now completely immune to damage. "Mom'll kill me if we break anything...."

Chocolate navigated his way into every corner and around all the walls, taking particular interest in the leather couch. "Chocolate, no!" Ven exclaimed when he realized that the puppy had started chewing on it. He hurriedly pulled Chocolate away and inspected the corner. There were visible
tooth marks. "Urgh...." Well, it was here in the back, and his parents would probably never notice it. "Listen, Chocolate, you have to be reeeaaally good, because I'm bad enough for both of us. Be a good boy, okay?"

The puppy licked him, wriggled out of his arms, and continued exploring.

*Crash.*

...o.o.o.o.o

Ven's mother woke up in time for her doctor's appointment, had a fight with Ven over whether or not to take him and the dog along, went to the clinic, came back, realized that her grandmother's ballerina statuette was missing *and* that the china closet key had been moved, and eventually found the shattered ballerina hidden under Ven's bed.

She very nearly punished him until she acknowledged that he *had* been good by not leaving the house while she was asleep (as far as she could tell, anyway). Besides, she did not have the heart to resist his tears, which were genuine for once in his life. So she just sat there with her grandmother's destroyed heirloom in her hands and cried. When Ven put his head in her lap and said that she should lock him in a cage too when she went to take Chocolate back to the store, she hugged him and they cried together.

...o.o.o.o.o

Ven woke up the next morning with his usual grumpy grogginess until he was startled fully awake. Something had licked his cheek.

'*Oh yeah!*

He had a dog now. Chocolate licked him again and yipped. Ven hugged him. "Good morning, Chocolate." He sat up and flung the covers back, which was when he finally realized one of the reasons why his mother had refused to let Chocolate sleep with him last night. "Ew! Man, you need a diaper."

His mother was already up, drinking a glass of juice as she paged through the newspaper. Ven stared at her apprehensively.
Sure enough, "I noticed that the dog wasn't in the bathroom this morning," she said conversationally.

"He was crying. I couldn't leave him in there."

She set down her glass and stood up.

"Chocolate peed on me," Ven said quickly, hugging the dog. "My bed's all gross."

"Well," she said briskly, "looks like you'll be doing your own laundry on top of spending the rest of your day cleaning up graffiti."

"Can Chocolate come?"

"Absolutely not."

"Oh, please, Mommy, why not?"

"Drop the puppy eyes and go put your sheets in the wash."

It was hot, and his arms ached. This was only the third fence, but he felt exhausted. His mother got to sit in the shade on the porch with a cold drink and chat with the house owner's wife about pregnancy and babies, but he was forced to stand out here in the sun and scrub until his arms felt like they were about to fall off.

Stupid marker! What was in that ink, anyway? It wasn't coming off! He did not want to have to repaint the whole fence like the second house owner had said he would have to once it became clear the ink was there for good.
"I need a break!" he yelled at his mother.

"You just had one ten minutes ago!" she yelled back.

"That wasn't a break, I just sat there and drank water!"

"I really hope you weren't expecting more, because I promise you won't get it."

Ven mumbled something under his breath that made her suddenly rise threateningly out of her chair.

"What did you say?" she demanded ominously.

"N-Nothing! NOTHING!" he screamed. Full to bursting with anger, he flung the brush at the fence, and when that did nothing to assuage his feelings, he kicked the unyielding boards, then picked up the brush again and gouged violently at the wood with the plastic handle. He sensed his mother storming over to him at that point, so he flung himself at the fence, got himself over it in a mad scramble, and took off running.

It was a horrible afternoon. Ven hid and skulked and tried to stay out of trouble, but he was already in trouble. Carlson seemed to be around every corner, eluding him was so hard. Ven did not dare show his face on the streets, he could not go home where his father would surely have gotten a phone call from his mother by now, he was afraid to go to any of the kids' hangouts where Kadaj’s gang might be lurking.... Also, he missed Chocolate. What was the point of having a puppy if he couldn't even play with it?

There was nowhere else to go. It would not have even occurred to Ven to hide here if he hadn't walked right past it, and even now, he was pretty mad that he was forced to take shelter in this stupid place. Unfortunately, he was out of options.

So Ventus sat there on the school roof and made a gun shape out of his fingers and pretended to shoot animal-shaped clouds, because there was nothing else to do.

The sound of girls' laughter startled him. He crawled over to the edge of the roof and watched as Lulu and her friends milled around in the courtyard below. 'What are they doing here?' he thought in amazement.
Practicing for a play, apparently. They all had booklets that they either read out of or referred to from time to time. Lulu was the only one who did not even look at hers except between "takes." She was also the only one who seemed to be serious about the project at all. "Guys," she sighed after about the twentieth time of the others making a dumb joke and setting off everyone into high-pitched laughter, "we have to perform on Thursday. Let's try to focus, please."

"Lu, that's four days from now," someone pointed out. "We've got plenty of time!"

"Shari, you don't even have all your lines memorized."

"I told you, I'm working on it! Besides, I can just improvise if I forget anything."

Lulu was silent for a moment. Then, "All right, fine. Everyone put your scripts away. Just for fun, let's see if we can do the whole scene straight through without checking our lines. Improvise if you can't remember what to say."

They were all such giggly morons that it took a ridiculously long time for them to prepare, but at last, the scripts were all piled on a bench and the girls had taken their places.

Lulu imperiously swept in among them, as if entering a room. "Gather 'round, girls, I have received excellent news."

"Oohh, really?! What is it, what is it?" the girls squealed as they bounced over to her. 'Just like a bunch of brainless chickens,' Ven thought.

"I am pleased to announce that the Edgewood property has been let. Rejoice, girls - Sir Thomas Knightley is now our neighbor, and he is single."

Girlish squealing followed. Ven was very tempted to chuck something down at their heads.

"Umm, is he handsome?" one girl asked.
"Yes, very. And quite amiable, too, according to Mrs. Billings."

"Oh, that's great!" someone yelled too loudly.

"Oooh, I really wanna marry him! Is he rich?"

"5,000 a year," Lulu said in satisfaction.

"Eeeeeee!"

"You have to get us introduced to him, Mother!"

"Does he have a Porsche and a big screen TV?" someone else asked mischievously.

There was a pause. Then all the girls burst into laughter - except Lulu, who simply waited.

"My gosh, Margo!" someone laughed. "You just cannot shut up about the Porsche, can you."

"I am telling you, Sir Thomas has a Porsche, the girl asserted smugly, as if she was happy about throwing a wrench in the rehearsal.

"He does not have a Porsche, or any other car, this play took place 200 years ago!" a dorky-looking girl in glasses complained.

"I don't care. Sir Thomas has a Porsche. Maybe he has a time machine."

More idiotic laughter. "I bet he totally uses it to sneak pizzas and stuff back home."

"L-O-L! 'Delivery from Hot-'n-Fresh!'" someone laughed.
Lulu finally spoke up. "Guys, this is exactly what I mean. We can't joke around like this on stage. And Michelle, you forgot to mention the neighbor cleric. That's important setup for later on. We need to get our act together and start taking this seriously."

"Aw, relax, Lulu!"

"Seriously, we're not gonna say that kind of stuff on stage."

Ven was pretty fed up. "You guys suck," he shouted down at them.

They all whirled around, screaming, looking hilarious as they tried and failed to find him for a second. Only Lulu calmly raised her head and met his eyes, as if she had already known he was there.

They finally noticed where Lulu was looking and figured out where he was. The shrieks were indignant and gleeful. "Eeeewww!"

"It's that loser!"

"Ugh, he's spying on us!"

"What a sicko!"

Ven hunched down, cringing.

The girls continued to jeer at him. Then Lulu suddenly raised her head and stepped forward. "Ventus," she called up, her voice light and clear. "Will you please come down here?"

"No!" he yelled.

"Please?"
"NO!" He actually kind of wanted to, just not with her horrible friends around.

Lulu paused. Then she said, "I promise they'll back off. Please, Ven, I really want to talk to you. Fair warning, I will *make* you come down if you still refuse."

"Just try it!" he shouted, his chest tightening in a strange, eager sort of anticipation.

Lulu frowned. Then she raised her arms and spoke a word.

The mild breeze whipped into stronger winds, causing the girls below to scream irritatingly. Ven felt like hands were tugging insistently at him. He staggered unwillingly to his feet and was buffeted about. It was hard to keep his footing amidst the windy gusts; after struggling for a minute, he found himself at the very edge. His knees were pressed against the bricks, his arms outstretched in an instinctive attempt at resistance, his hair whipping his face. For a minute, he hung poised, fighting hard to stay upright. Then he lost the battle and went pitching forward.

His mouth opened in a strangled cry, but then he clenched his teeth together. He did not want the girls to hear him scream. He did not feel as panicked as he expected, though. It was not a swift, deadly fall; rather, he seemed to descend in a series of sluggish, controlled drops that ended with him tumbling completely unhurt in a sprawl at Lulu's feet. He got up ungracefully, his face red.

"Hello, Ven," Lulu said cordially.

He looked away, not answering. The other girls were tittering like angry birds.

"What's the big idea?"

"Why were you spying on us?"

"You're such a freak!"

Ven was shocked into meeting her eyes when Lulu spoke to him again. "Ven, treat me to something."
"Wh-What?" Her eyes were glittering with some kind of emotion. "I...well...I can't--"

"Are you out of your mind, Lulu?!"

"What about practice?!"

Lulu suddenly rounded on them. "I'm sorry, but I don't call this practice. I'd rather hang out with the school outcast than continue to let you all waste my time." She seized Ven's hand and marched away.

He struggled to keep up with her, too shocked and confused to speak. Finally he got his wits together and said in a shaking voice, "Lulu? I don't get it."

She paused. Then she turned, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "I'm not your girlfriend or anything, Ventus. I'm just angry right now, and I want a treat, and I know you'll buy me one because you like me, and I don't want to be around my friends right now but I don't want to be alone, and...there you were. You're not stalking me, are you?"

Ven did not know what to make of this speech - indeed, he barely understood it, except that Lulu seemed to be saying one thing while actually meaning another, and that she expected him to buy her something. He finally said, "I can't really...be seen right now."

She frowned in confusion. "What?"

He closed his eyes, stuck his hands in his pockets, and leaned against the side of the building they were standing next to. "I ran away," he said in a low voice. "Mom's gonna kill me if I get caught. I only went to school to hide." He did not realize until the words left his mouth how pathetic that sounded. He lifted his head and faced her. It wasn't like she liked him or anything. "...Your friends are right. I really am a loser."

She studied him. "Yes."

He closed his eyes again.
"Sort of. Not entirely."

"What?" He stared at her, trying and failing to figure her out.

"You mess up so much. It's kind of sad to watch. But I don't think that's really...who you are. It just seems like...you're trapped in there."


"The wind really loves you, you know," she said softly.

"What?"

"The wind. Your hearts speak to each other, it will do whatever you want."

"..."

She sighed. "Never mind. I feel like muffins, let's go to CeeGee's."

"I can't," Ven mumbled. "They call the p-- um...they don't like me going in there."

"Oh...all right. How about doughnuts at Riverside, then?"

"..."

"Mac's Pizza?" she tried, disbelief creping into her voice.

"...No. .... I don't feel like pizza."
"Is there anywhere we can go where they won't kick you out?" she said in exasperation.

Ven squirmed. "The ice cream guy will still sell me stuff, but...you're gonna have to buy it. I told you, I can't be seen." 'And even if I could, Kadaj took all my munny.'

She gave him a long look that made him want to sink into the ground. Trying to escape the attention, he looked away and mumbled, "I like sea-salt. The blue ones."

"Maybe this was a mistake," she mumbled to herself as she stalked ahead.

Dispirited, Ven went to sit on someone's stoop, hidden by a trash can on one side and a wall on the other. Lulu was gone for a very long time. He had run out of stuff to daydream about, was getting bored, and had almost decided that she had run off and he might as well leave, when Lulu finally appeared in front of him.

"Where were you?" she exclaimed.

"Where were you?" he shot back.

"I couldn't find you," she said in frustration. "You weren't there when I got back."

"I've been here the whole time."

"Thank you for telling me," she huffed, holding out one of the ice creams. "Here. They're melting."

"Why didn't you make him sell you fresh ones?" he said in annoyance.

"They were fresh when I bought them." Lulu shook her head. "Never mind. Let's just go eat on that bench over there."
"No, let's stay here."

She looked at him in disbelief. "The stoop's dirty. And I'm not going to eat next to a trash can."

"What's your problem?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Just so you know, you are not improving my opinion of you."

Sulkily, Ven got up and shuffled after her. They sat down on a white wooden bench in the shade of a blossoming tree, where they had a nice view of the whole square and the mermaid fountain in the middle.

"See, isn't this better?"

"...." It was so open and exposed. His time was going to be very limited.

"I've never tasted the sea-salt flavor. I got some for myself, so I could give it a try."

"You've never had sea-salt?" he said in surprise. He was beginning to feel a little bad about tickling her off, though he was not sure exactly how he had displeased her. "You have to try it. It's the best."

"Yes, that's what I'm doing now."

Ven tore open the package, which by now was a quarter full of liquid ice cream. He hissed in annoyance at the mess and wiped his hands as best as he could on his jeans. He had taken several bites before he realized that Lulu was staring at him, eyes wide in disbelief. "What?"

"...." Her eyes moved from him to the ground. When she returned her gaze to him, her expression was closed and disapproving.

After staring back at her in confusion for a while, Ven finally realized what her problem was. Reluctantly, he reached down to pick up the plastic wrapper he had discarded, holding the tip of it
between his thumb and index finger in distaste. 'What does she expect me to do with it?' Finally, he stood up and pushed the dripping wrapper into his side pocket. He could feel the other stuff in there getting all wet and sticky with melted ice cream, but if Lulu was happy, it was worth it. Probably. Maybe.

There was a long silence. Finally, Lulu held out her own ice cream wrapper and said in a deliberate voice, "Ventus, will you be a gentleman and throw this away for me, in the garbage can that is ten steps away?"

...Oh. "Yeah," he mumbled, taking the trash and heading off to properly dispose of it.

They just sat there for a while after he got back, eating their ice creams and not speaking. 'Say something,' Ven thought at himself angrily. He had no idea how to make conversation. He could not think of anything interesting to say, so he finally just blurted something out and hoped it wouldn't be lame. "That play of yours didn't make any sense."

"It's a sort of Jane Austen mash up," she said, a little stiffly. "My mother and I have been reading those books together, so I thought it would be fun to do an Austenesque story for the drama project."

"'Thought' being the key word there," Ven laughed.

She sighed. "Yes."

"I kind of want to go watch it now. It'll be really funny when your friends mess up."

"That doesn't make me feel better, Ventus."

"Oh." He had not even realized she wanted to feel better.

A shadow fell over them. Ven stiffened.

"Hello, Officer," Lulu said coldly. "Is there a problem?"
"Hello, Lulu," Carlson said. "All your friends were busy today?"

"Mm," she murmured non-committally.

"Kids, I'm really sorry to interrupt, but - Ven, you know why I'm here."

Ven took another bite of ice cream.

"Ventus."

Ven abruptly jumped to his feet and stalked away without a word, forcing Carlson to jog a little to catch up with him.

They moved along for a while in silence. Ven finished his ice cream and tossed the stick aside defiantly. As Carlson picked it up, Ven increased his pace and considered making a run for it before Carlson's thundering "Don't even think about it, Ventus King" rang out behind him.

Ven froze, then kicked his shoe off. It felt both good and entirely unsatisfying, so he kicked off his other shoe and then ran to pick them up, flinging them both as hard as he could into the distance while yelling at the top of his voice. Still screaming, he fell to his knees and pounded his fists against the ground until it hurt too much to continue, so desperate was he for some sense of resistance, something solid to simply be there and stay there. Then he just huddled there and focused every ounce of his being on trying to hold the tears in.

After a while, he became aware of Carlson kneeling beside him, patting his back soothingly. It felt nice, and for one long, long moment, he was torn between hurling himself at the man to tear him up, or letting himself be comforted. Eventually, common sense won out and Ven uncurled a little, sobbing dryly.

"You want to talk about it?" Carlson murmured.

"I hate my mom!" Ven screamed. "I hate her I hate her I HATE HER!!!!"
"She's making you work hard today, huh."

"I hate her! I hate her! I want to play with Chocolate!"

"...You want to play with chocolate?"

Ven suddenly sat up, staring at Carlson in apprehension. "I got a new puppy," he mumbled shyly.

"Oh! A puppy?"

"He's all black and brown like someone spilled paint on him. He's a really bad dog."

"Well, all puppies tend to get into trouble. Is he cute?"

Ven grinned.

"He's a cutie, huh."

"No, he's really ugly and tough," Ven said eagerly. "When he grows up, he can tear off the leg of a full-grown man!"

"Sounds ferocious. Maybe I'll get to see him when I drop you off."

Ven scrambled to his feet and paced around in agitated circles, thinking, 'Run away, run away, run away.' He wanted to be bad. He wanted to be so bad, the worst. But he also did not want to be punished, and he was already in huge trouble. 'Ruuun awayay!' He didn't.

Carlson came up to him. "You ready to go?"

"No!" was the automatic response.
"C'mon, let's go."

"No!!" Ven grasped Carlson's arm lightly, almost questioningly, wondering if he dared actually push him. Before he could make up his mind, Carlson wrapped him in a restraining hold, but somehow it didn't feel truly restricting like a real one would have, and the man's voice was playful as he growled, "Soooo, Mr. King, gonna add assault of a police officer to the list?"

"No," Ven giggled, twisting away. He reached for Carlson's arm again, this time to push him in jest, his eyes sparkling.

"Eh, now, that looks like aggression to me," Carlson laughed.

Their hands met and they struggled together, trying to push each other back. Finally, Carlson let him win, and Ven shrieked with laughter as he watched the man stumble back ungracefully into the sand beside the road. "Beat you, beat you, beat you!"

"Man, all that training for nothing," Carlson mock-lamented, stepping back onto the pavement.

"Mom said she'd take Chocolate back to the store if I was bad," Ven remembered. His fragile happiness instantly dissolved, and something inside him broke. He began to cry for real, too tired now to hold back.

Carlson put an arm around his shoulders, and Ven leaned into him. "I should just go kill him now," Ven sobbed. "Because I can never, never, never be good, and she'll take Chocolate away and at least if I kill him, I'll know where he is! I...I'll...!"

"Ven," Carlson said softly, "Chocolate trusts you. He loves you. Just picture how he would look at you if you ever did something cruel to him."

Ven sobbed harder.

"Ventus. Ven, ssh, listen. Your mother won't take Chocolate away, and even if she does, you know what? I'll adopt Chocolate. Mrs. Carlson and I will take care of him for you, and you can see him every time you come over."
Ven went silent, and very still.

"Doesn't that sound better than what you were saying before?"

Ven gripped the man's shirt tightly in his fists and jerked until Carlson had bent down closer to him. "Promise," Ven hissed fiercely. "Promise me."

"I promise you, Ventus. We will take care of Chocolate if you can't."

All grown-ups were liars. Kids were liars, too. Promises meant nothing, but Ven did not know what else to do. He felt trapped.

Perfectly solemn, Carlson raised his fist, pinkie finger crooked out.

Grown-ups didn't let themselves look silly, either. Ven relaxed a little, returning the gesture. "Cross your heart and hope to die," he challenged.

"Stick a needle in my eye," Carlson finished generously. Ven finally smiled a little, relieved. "Now c'mon, let's go get your shoes."

"Oh yeah."

When they got home, Ven half-hid behind Carlson as the man rang the doorbell. Ven's mother opened the door at once with a stormy look on her face. Ven seized the blue uniform shirt tightly in both fists as she reached to grab him, but both of them were surprised when Carlson put out a hand to stop her. "Mrs. King, could I please speak to you privately for a moment?" he asked quietly.

She stared at him. "What?"
"He wants you to STFU and go inside," Ven snarled.

His mother shrieked and lunged for him, but Carlson managed to hold her off. "Mrs. Ki--Sapphique! Sapphique, stop it, he's just trying to get a rise out of you!"

She paused, glaring.

"Sapphique, please. Just step outside for a moment; Ven, you're the one who needs to go in."

"I'm staying on the effing porch! I'm gonna run off again! Don't stop me! I'll kick you!"

"Ven--"

"No!" Ven usually tried to hold it in check around adults, but it was just rushing and rushing as he screamed profanity as loudly as he could.

"Shut your dirty mouth!" his mother was screaming back, and for a minute, no one could hear themselves think. Then Carlson put his hands on Ven's shoulders and said in a low, intent voice, "Ventus King, hush, I know you're scared, but this is not helping."

Ven broke off in surprise.

"Please go in the house, Ven. I want to talk to your mother so she won't be upset when I leave you two alone."

"I'm not scared," Ven hissed fiercely. "I'm not scared of her, and I'm not scared of you, I'll hurt her and you can't make me do what I don't want to do, you can't--!" His attacks were complete failures, as he had known they would be, and it was not until he was in a restraining hold that he realized how tense he was. "Lemme go," he said sullenly.

"Ventus. Do you think you'll be able to walk calmly into the house and shut the door and stick around until you're ready to work things out with your family?"
"I'm not a baby! Don't talk to me like I'm a baby!"

"Ventus. Will you do this?"

"Yeah! Yes! Yes, sir!" Ven shouted angrily. "Let me go!"

"Don't just answer on autopilot."

To Ven's fury, he felt himself on the verge of tears again. What the freak, why was his body trying to cry when crying was the last thing he felt like doing? "Aaaaahhh!" he shouted instead.

"Ven." The voice was lower than ever, speaking slowly and distinctly. "Will you do me a favor and walk into the house and shut the door and wait patiently? You are very capable of doing this. Will you?"

So often the emotions just seized him, but suddenly it felt like he had a choice. Ven deflated. Noticed that Carlson was waiting patiently for him. Felt a little appreciative of that in a tiny corner of his mind. Finally went very still and said in a low voice, "I'll walk inside."

His mother started to snarl something sarcastic, but Carlson talked right over her so that Ven could not make out the words. "Good man. Good choice. Thank you, Ven."

Ven expected to be released slowly and cautiously, but the gesture was so trustingly casual that it killed any lingering thoughts of running off again. Without looking at his mother, Ven marched to the door, grasped the edge, and paused, glancing apprehensively at Carlson as he half-hid behind it. The man's smile was unexpected but reassuring. Ven did not realize that he smiled back as he shut the door.

At first he tried shamelessly to eavesdrop, but the sound of his mother's muffled shouting made his chest feel tight. He crept away and went to find Chocolate. "Hey, puppy," he crooned as the creature threw itself into a fit of excitement at his approach. "Hey there, Choco. You missed me? You missed me a lot?"

He played with the ecstatic puppy until he heard the approach of heavy footsteps. He meant to go somewhere with more escape routes before they reached him, but then his mother and Carlson were in the doorway, and there was nowhere to go. Ven snatched up Chocolate in his arms and
backed up against the wall, glaring for all he was worth.

Carlson's voice was measured and friendly. "Well, I'm gonna take off now, Ven. You think you can handle everything?"

Ven did not answer. His mother opened her mouth and evidently tried to say something, but nothing coherent came out.

"Sapphique? You gonna be all right?"

"Yes," she said tightly. "Yes. You can go." The adults exchanged a last meaningful look, and then Carlson left. Ven and his mother both just stood there and listened until he had shut the front door. Then their eyes met, and Ven opened his mouth to yell, but she got in first. "Shut up. Shut up, Ven. My temper is hanging by a thread."

He clenched his teeth tightly together, willing his voice to stay inside.

"Now." She spoke in a strange, disjointed way, as if someone was choking her. They both felt keenly how narrow the edge was that they were treading. "You have a choice. Ven. You lose Chocolate for the night, for the entire night, or you go over my knee. You get to pick."

He was so, so tempted to scream something hasty and rebellious, but he knew that with the mood she was in, she would take him at his word. Yet he also wondered if he really would willingly endure it this time for Chocolate's sake.

The pause to think cleared his head a little, and another possibility occurred to him. Speaking in a low voice to keep himself calm, he asked, "Can I...not eat dinner and breakfast, and get to keep Chocolate?" Withholding meals had always been taboo in their household, but that was his mother's rule, he didn't care. He had long ago grown used to not being provided enough to eat.

Her face was conflicted. "You can't skip meals."

"Please," he begged. "Please don't take Chocolate. Please."
She was gritting her teeth. Finally she said slowly, "You have to have breakfast. I'll...let you go without dinner, and Chocolate can sleep with you if you wash the sheets again if he pees, but you can't have him until bedtime."

His grip tightened, and he started to open his mouth.

"That's it," she said harshly. "OR you can lose him for the ENTIRE night, OR you can--"

"O-kay!" he shouted. "Okay! No Chocolate 'til bedtime! Shut--!"

The look on her face. Ven clapped his hand over his mouth, horrified at the realization that he had ruined it when he was so close to winning.

After a very long pause, her mouth quirked a little. "What did you say?"

"N-Nothing, ma'am," he said meekly, cautiously. It was so weird, how grown-ups could suddenly show mercy at the strangest times.

"That's what I thought. Now put the dog down and come here."

Very reluctantly, he put down Chocolate and tried to leave, but the sight of the puppy romping along after him broke his heart. He could not have left if his mother had not grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the bathroom and shut the door.

They could hear Chocolate whining pathetically on the other side. Ven reached vaguely for the doorknob, but his mother pulled him away and dragged him downstairs. He was crying by the time she sat down with him on the couch. She held him for along time. "Ventus," she finally said softly.

For once, he had no arguments, so he ignored her.

"Ven...I love you. I love you so much. You know that, right?" When he still did not answer, she cupped her hand beneath his jaw and lifted his face so that she could see his eyes. "Ven, I love you."
Since she apparently was not going to leave him alone, he finally said, "I know."

"...."

"I'm...sorry for...." For what? "For making you mad."

She kissed his temple and held him close until he finally got bored and pulled away.

To be continued...

Author's Notes: Again, I have a feeling this fic needs warning labels, I'm just not sure what they should be. I pretty much work in special education for a living, so I don't know what it's like reading this fic with a different sort of background.

Unfortunately, I'm probably going to be a lamebrain and not update this fic for a long time. I apologize in advance. :/ I only posted it now (what is currently published is all I have written so far, except for half a paragraph) because I felt it was urgent to get it published before Dream Drop Distance comes out in a few days and potentially shatters everything I thought I knew about Vanitas. *sweatdrop*

*SPOILER* Btw, I don't know how long it's gonna take me to reveal this, but Sapphique is actually Ven's aunt - she and her husband adopted him when he was very young because of some issues with his birth mother (who, for example, didn't bother to feed him much. And I know that kids in that situation usually hoard food instead of being willing to go without it, so I'm going to have to figure out how to handle that in the final draft). Sora is actually Ven's cousin in this universe, though they obviously would have been raised as brothers.
One Sky, One Destiny: Kingdom Hearts

One Sky, One Destiny

(ROUGH DRAFT)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: 10th anniversary fic for the Kingdom Hearts series. Just a short tribute, nothing fancy.

A/N: AS USUAL, I'm really lame about paying attention to the timeline. -.-

0.0.0

One walked the paths between worlds, far from home and knowing that all was not well with those he held dear.

One struggled in the darkness, desperate to keep his newly-freed heart from being consumed once again.

One waited alone on a dark shore, watching life blossom into light and color around her, but knowing there was a vital part of it still empty.

Torn apart again after all too brief reunions, yet their hearts were still connected with an unbreakable bond....

0.0.0

Sora sat in the dark field, watching the fire as Donald and Goofy slept restlessly beside him. "I hope Riku's okay...." So many adventures and battles, so much strife and desperation, yet the hardest thing he had ever done in his life was to shut that door with his best friend on the wrong side of it. "I promise you, Riku. I'll find a way to get you back."

Sora sighed and lay down on his stomach, staring into the fire again as he propped his chin on one
hand. He wondered what Kairi was doing. He felt terrible, abandoning her there on that empty beach all by herself, even though he had tried his best to hold onto her. He refused to believe that he might never see her again. "Kairi...Riku...I promise...." His eyes drifted closed.

o.o.o

The cold silence of this place was starting to get to him. After what he'd been through, Riku would choose overwhelmingly white walls over darkness without hesitation, but it was getting harder and harder to remember that as he made his way through the castle. The incessant brightness was starting to feel suffocating....

Riku sighed and placed a hand on the wall - just to rest for a moment. He couldn't tell whether he was so tired from the battles, or from low spirits. "I've got to...pull it together...." He had to find the way out of here and figure out how to get home, back to Kairi and hopefully Sora. Hopefully Sora. He had no idea if Sora had managed to make it back to the Islands or not.

Though, tainted as he was now, Riku didn't...exactly relish the thought of facing his homeworld again. "I just...wanna make sure you're safe...Sora, Kairi...." He didn't know what he would do after that - hide, wander the worlds, he didn't particularly care - as long as he just had the chance to make sure his best friends were all right.

So tired....

o.o.o

It was getting dark. She really should head home, her parents would be upset with her for staying out so late alone, especially after everything that had happened. But...she couldn't...tear herself away....

"I miss you already," Kairi whispered, laying her hand over the drawing Sora had scratched into the cave wall. "I just saw you a few hours ago, and already I miss you so much."

Sora was not the only one she missed. She had looked everywhere she could think of, but she hadn't been able to find Riku anywhere. "What were you boys doing all this time?" She had been so confused - her happy life had been swallowed by a long, long nightmare that she couldn't remember but which still made her shiver every time she thought of it. Then so many strange things had happened upon her awakening, some of them awful.
"Why couldn't I be with you?!" Apparently they'd gone gallivanting off across many worlds, and she'd slept through it. They'd fought life-or-death battles and triumphed over evil, and she'd been uselessly waiting. Then the Islands had been restored and they were all supposed to be together again, but Sora had literally been ripped out of her hands and Riku was nowhere to be found. "Why am I always the one being left behind...?"

Still sitting there against the cave wall with her knees drawn up, Kairi rested her face against her arms and cried. "Sora...Riku..."

She drifted to sleep before the tears had dried.

0.0.0

It was dark, but a heart-shaped moon shone radiantly in the sky, illuminating their faces as they uncurled. "Mmmm! So sleepy," Sora yawned, stretching his arms in the air.

Goofy chuckled. "A-hyuck, I think we are asleep, Sora."

Sora stared. "Oh. Yeah, I guess we are."

"Only way we'd be able to see each other like this," Riku murmured softly, gazing at the ground.

"Wak! Almost fell off," Donald yelped, scrambling to get better settled on the pillar they all seemed to be perched on.

Kairi smiled and climbed higher up, reaching out carefully with one hand to touch her friend's knee. "Where have you been, Riku?"

"Nowhere," he mumbled.

"What are you talking about?" Sora exclaimed. "You were in the Realm of Darkness, I saw you! How'd you get out, Riku?"
"Why so glum, Riku?" Goofy wondered.

"Yeah!" Kairi exclaimed. "I haven't seen you in ages, I've been worried sick, and you're acting like you can't stand me!"

Riku's head shot up. "That's not true!"

Sora grinned and clapped him on the back. "You know she doesn't blame you for the whole 'I'm gonna turn to the Dark Side to get your heart back' thing."

"Shut up," Riku growled as he looked away again, hoping that none of them could see him blushing in the dark.

"I blame him," Donald pouted.

"Donald!" Sora scolded.

The duck winked. "But maybe if he says sorry really nice, I'll forgive him."

"I'm sorry," Riku mumbled.

Donald blinked. "Oh. Well, good!"

"I'm glad we can all be friends," Goofy said happily.

"I am, too," Kairi said meaningfully, taking her friend's hands.
"Me, too," Sora declared, scooting closer and smiling at them both. "And I'm also glad we can finally all be together."

"It won't last, stupid," Riku sighed. "We're asleep, remember? This'll all be gone as soon as we wake up."

"Then let's make the most of the little time we do have together," Kairi urged.

"Yeah!" Sora said eagerly. "Hey, let's climb down and see if there's anyplace around here that sells ice cream."

Riku stared at him in astonishment. "Ice-- You're thinking of ice cream at a time like this?"

"What's wrong with ice cream?" Donald challenged.

"I like ice cream," Goofy offered.

"Me, too!" Sora laughed. "Come on, Riku! There's this new blue flavor I've been wanting to try."

At last, Riku smiled a little. "Well, why not." Kairi was staring, and he suddenly felt self-conscious. "What?"

"I've just...never seen you smile like that before." She smiled back. "You look really sweet, Riku."

"Huh?!"

Sora laughed. "I kinda see what she means. Before, you were always kind of smirky."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Riku said indignantly as Donald and Goofy began to chuckle.

"Oh, forget that, we have to hurry and find some ice cream before one of us wakes up!"
"Whatever."

The boys scrambled down, Riku reached up to tug Kairi's hand as Sora stood at his side to catch her, and then the five of them made their way down the street together.

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** This was VERY last-minute. I'd wanted to do drabbles for all six games, but ran out of time; if I ever do manage to get to them, I'll add them to the end of this as new chapters. **This is supposed to be referencing the KH1 cover, where Sora/Riku/Kairi/Donald/Goofy are posed on that pillar in a dark world where a heart-shaped moon is shining in the sky.** And I forgot Jiminy. X( But Disney forgets him half the time, too, so whatever. Oh, and sorry for the title that I'm sure has probably been overused, but I like it a lot, and I think it fits what I was thematically aiming for.

Man, so I got on the computer this morning, and it seemed like half the Internet was amiably exploding with KH 10th anniversary stuff. So I was like, ":O I gotta write one, too!" But I was so freaking busy today! Managed to scribble out the beginning of the KH1 drabble while in the doctor's office, then scribbled more of it at work later while waiting for my student to show up, but by the time I got home, it was late and I had to scramble trying to get this thing typed/finished/quick-edited/posted before midnight. *wince* I made it, though! Yay! Happy birthday, Kingdom Hearts! :D
It was...kind of hard to draw them when they were moving around like that, actually, but she didn't mind. It was enough to just get a chance to watch them and admire them. They were so strong. Sora and Riku weren't afraid of anything. Riku would always keep them safe, and Sora's smile would always light up the sky.

"Noooo, not again!"

"Heh, keep practicing, Sora."

The boys tossed their wooden swords aside and threw themselves down to the sand on either side of Naminé, looking tired and sweaty, but happy.

"You're getting better, Sora," she said encouragingly. "You almost beat him that time."

Sora's face lit up. "Really?"

"Sora, you couldn't beat me in a million years," Riku drawled, idly fiddling with the hem of Naminé's skirt under his fingers. Suddenly realizing what he was doing, he sat up, red-faced, and
started sticking her crayons in the sand instead, as if making a fortification.

"I will so! I practice every day."

"So do I."

"Umm," Naminé broke in, not wanting to see an argument. "It's so hot out here. You wanna go get some lemonade?"

"Yeah!"

"Whatever; if you will, I will."

They went back to the house and Naminé got out the pitcher so she could serve it to them. Riku pulled out her chair for her like a gentleman, and Sora thanked her with a big smile. "This is really good, Naminé!"

"Well, Mom made it, but I'm glad you like it."

"Did you draw us again?" Riku wanted to know.

She blushed, but let them see the pictures she had made that afternoon.

"Ooohhh! Look, it's me!"

"It's both of us."

"You draw really good, Naminé!"

"How come you never draw yourself?" Riku suddenly asked.
"Huh? Oh...I don't know...." She didn't want to talk about this. The world suddenly felt flat, like a picture. A thought came to her mind. 'I don't draw myself because I don't want to see how I'm all alone.'

It was nighttime. The three of them lay on the beach, hands clasped.

"Look, Naminé!" Sora said, pointing. "A shooting star! Make a wish."

"Umm...." 'I wish I could be together with you forever.'

"Did you wish something?" 

"Yes...."

"What'd you wish for?"

"Shut up, Sora," Riku said on her other side. "If she tells her wish, it won't come true."

"Oh yeah...."

"It's okay," Naminé said, squeezing their hands to reassure herself. "As long as we stay like this...I won't have to worry about my wish not coming true."

"We can stay as long as you want, Naminé," Sora said happily, and she smiled.

Someone was holding her. He was warm, safe; nothing could hurt her as long as she lay in his arms like this.

"You want to know what I wished for?" Riku said softly.
"Hm?" They weren't children any longer. His silvery hair brushed his shoulders; his arms were strong and muscled, a warrior's arms. His hand cupped her face softly as he gazed at her with eyes sharpened by experience and hardship. There was something different about him. And she couldn't shake the sense that there was supposed to be a second boy. "What...what did you wish for, Riku?"

"I think you already know," he whispered. "Naminé."

It was difficult to speak. She was captivated and afraid all at once. "Yes?"

"I should tell you.... I gave you my heart."

Was he...declaring his love...?

He took her hands, and she sat up. "I didn't know where else to go," he said quietly, his eyes more intense than ever. "I was...afraid of the dark...just like Larxene said. I'm not so different from him after all. I couldn't go to the darkness that was pulling me. But, you...your heart was so warm and full of light...." He looked a little ashamed. "I stayed with you instead. Hidden inside. And...I thought...if you and the others have a chance, when you're Nobodies...maybe I do, too. As long as you let me stay."

"You're him," she whispered in awe. The replica. The one whose heart she had broken in more ways than one, now finding refuge with her, still trusting her.

"Please don't send me away. I have nowhere else to--" His eyes widened as she embraced him.

"You're safe with me," she assured him. She felt a tear drop onto her shoulder.

"Thank you, Naminé."

The alarm clock was ringing. Kairi awakened with a gasp, sitting up to stare around her sunshine-filled room. "Another dream about them...."

Once she was ready to go, she hesitated, then picked up the card Even had given her. A white
castle, full of secrets and lost memories....

Kairi finally slipped the card into her book bag and headed off for school.

\[\text{(o.o.o.o.o)}\]

The nice thing about this new adventure was that they actually had time to prepare for it beforehand. "Who needs a snorkel when you can breathe underwater?" Sora laughed, pointing at the items on the shelf. He was going shopping for supplies with his friends.

"Yeah, but we can only breathe underwater when we're in Atlantica," Jiminy said thoughtfully. "A snorkel might come in more handy for somewhere like Port Royal."

"Aw, now, Atlantica's a fun world," Goofy remarked happily. "Gettin' ta see the ocean like that...."

"Neverland's fun, too," Donald laughed. "Flying so easy, and you never get tired."

"Don't forget the Pride Lands," Sora added. "That place is awesome."

They continued chatting as they moved down the aisles, adding useful (and a few useless but cool) items to their cart. At the cash register, Sora was laughing at one of Goofy's jokes when something caught his eye.

"Whatcha lookin' at, Sora?" Donald asked.

"Oh...well, I was just thinking that girls would probably like it - it's cute." Sora was now holding the star-shaped charm he had taken from the little jewelry rack.

"Huh - that looks kinda familiar," Goofy commented, frowning as he searched his memory.

"I think I'll buy it," Sora decided.
Kairi hadn't realized how much she loved the islands until she had been taken from them. Now she seldom took for granted or failed to relish the presence of the sea, the unceasing sound of its waves and the taste of the salty wind rushing across its waters. Her eyes stayed fixed on the horizon, but she smiled as she sensed Sora scrambling up to sit on the tree trunk next to her.

"Hey, Kairi!"

She turned to him with a smile. "Hello, Sora. Did you guys find everything you need?"

"Yup. I don't think we can squeeze in anything else - I'm kinda wondering where we're gonna be able to stash munny drops and new items and stuff...."

She tilted her head in curiosity when she saw the yellow charm. "What kind of stats does that one have?"

"Huh? Oh! Uh, no, it's not an Accessory, I just...."

Kairi stared. He was blushing. "Are you okay, Sora?"

"I-- Um, well...I just...." He expelled a breath, perhaps trying to get his thoughts in order. "Um...this is for her."

It took Kairi a few seconds to get it. "Ohhh...."

"Yeah. Since you already gave me your charm, I thought you guys should have one, too."

She smiled a little sadly as she reached to accept the charm. "She says she'll miss you. I'll miss you, too."

"Yeah...." He was fidgeting now. "Kairi?"
"Yes?"

"Um...th-this is for her, too." He leaned close, then stopped, looking anxious.

Kairi caught on more quickly this time. She found herself leaning back, and tried to take a deep breath to calm herself. 'Hold on a sec, Kairi.' He was changing things, going too fast, but when she searched his face, she decided that he wasn't just using this as an excuse. It really wasn't her he wanted to change things between, and the knot of apprehension in her chest loosened in relief. "Sora...."

"You don't have to," he started to whisper, then abruptly cleared his throat and leaned back. He was blushing harder than ever. "You don't have to," he repeated, more loudly.

Kairi thought a while, evaluating her feelings. Yes. Herself, the one who could see this dear friend of hers clearly, that part of her had never changed. It was the other side of her heart that was fluttering so wildly with shock and anxiety and hope and despair. 'Sssh. It'll be all right.' She smiled a little and took out the card with the white castle on it. "Here."

"Huh?"

"Even gave it to me, but I'm pretty sure it's actually for you. He said you'd know what to do with it."

Sora took the card and then stared at it in perplexity.

Kairi kissed his cheek and then hopped to the ground. "I'm gonna head home. Meet us for dinner at 6:30, okay? Riku said that King Mickey and the others are coming, too."

"Okay...." He still looked so cutely bewildered, like a puppy wondering where its friend had gone.

"Sora?"
"Yeah?"

She smiled again. "Save your kiss - I'm sure she'll like it better if she can have it all to herself."

"Ah...!"

Kairi walked away, smiling a little as she listened to Naminé's heart alongside her own.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: The first half of this was drafted when I was awake for much of the night, unable to sleep as a side-effect of the medication I'm taking. I've been sick for a month now, it's annoying. Still, if not for that insomnia, I certainly would not have been able to get this fic done in time, so I suppose I'm grateful for that. ^^;

Ftr, I find the whole body-sharing thing to be really disturbing. And the vague afterlife stuff was difficult to write because it doesn't mesh with my religious beliefs. *wince* And I didn't do anything for the Reverse/Rebirth part because I hate its thematic conclusion.

With these One Sky, One Destiny fics, I'm trying to capture as best I can the "essence" of each game. Probably failing miserably, but that's the idea. There's also another sort of "theme" linking them all together, but I'll point that out at the end of the series.

Whoo, let's talk about pairings!

Sora/Kairi - They're my "canon OTP" in the sense that I feel they are meant for each other, and I would be upset if they ended up with different people in canon, but I don't like them in fandom. XD In any case, it's undeniable that Sora is in love with Kairi. I will RELUCTANTLY acknowledge that there is room for Kiryn's theory that his feelings changed upon reuniting with her at the end of KH2; and I would definitely say that Kairi's feelings for Sora could be interpreted as either platonic or romantic, it's not confirmed either way. I still ship SoKai in canon, though. Specifically in this fic, it worked best for Kairi to see Sora as a close friend only, and for Sora to have conflicting feelings between Kairi & Naminé.

Sora/Naminé - I've never really liked this pairing. (I ship based on how I feel first, and only figure...
out the reasons later.) Kiryn's love for it motivated me to actually spend some time evaluating it, and I've decided that, A) this pairing makes a lot of sense and I can definitely understand why some people love it, and B) I think the reason I dislike the pairing is because it seems like a sad and hopeless romance to me, and I like happy sparkly rainbow things. *sweatdrop* So I kind of support the pairing without actually liking it? Something like that. In this fic, Sora is torn between his feelings for Kairi and his feelings for Naminé, with SoNami implied to be winning out. XD

Also, I think this is actually my first excuse for a SoNami fic! :O

**Riku/Naminé and Riku/Kairi** - My favorite pairing for Naminé (though I don't really like her and therefore don't really care about shipping her); I think it makes sense because of KH2. (Ftr, I like Riku best as romantically single; Sora's his best friend and I don't care about shipping Riku beyond that.) I like Riku/Kairi all right and I think there was decent enough evidence for it in KH1, but I was frustrated by the way Riku seems to practically forget about Kairi's existence after KH1. -.- Nomura, is it too much to ask for some consistency? In this fic, Riku thinks of Kairi as a dear friend/sister; the ship-tease was honestly unintentional - like, it was just supposed to be one of those awkward moments, I don't want it to be read as implying that Riku's ever actually in love with Kairi. His feelings for Kairi are transferred to Naminé, since Nami's taking Kairi's place in the dream world.

**Repliku/Naminé** - I started taking an interest in this pairing because of the group dedicated to them on DevArt, and I'm starting to think it has a similar appeal to me that pairings like Xion/Vanitas, Aeris/Kadaj, and Tomoe/Enishi do. Not exactly the same, but similar. Naminé's definitely my favorite ship for Repliku, which is dumb because then my ships look like this: Riku/Naminé, Repliku/Naminé. XD *headdesk* Cooperate, Naminé! Kiryn seems to have similar problems shipping them. *sweatdrop* Anyway, in this fic...it's very "Kingdom Hearts"ish, I guess? Can be read either way, I didn't have it specific in mind whether he's actually in love with her or not.

**Roxas/Naminé** - I've never liked this pairing. (I've written RokuNami, and they can be adorable in fanart, but that doesn't mean I like the pairing.) I think there is ZERO evidence or chemistry for them in canon, with the exception of Square Enix suddenly realizing at the end of KH2 that they ought to ship-tease a love interest or something, hence the bizarre "We'll be together every day! :D" scene that came out of nowhere. In this fic, Roxas & Naminé are casually friendly acquaintances. If Sora ever tried to kiss Naminé with Roxas still hanging out in his heart, Roxas'd probably stick his figurative fingers in his figurative ears and whistle "Working Together" in the farthest corner of Sora's mind to give them the best he can manage for privacy. (And/or to hide from the squick, lol.)

By a happy coincidence, the KH2 anniversary is coming up soon - I hope hope hope I can draft its One Sky, One Destiny installment in time to post on the actual day! And I've already posted for the Days anniversary, so if I can get the Days OSOD installment done quickly after that, maybe I'll be able to make the BBS and Coded ones, so yaaaayyyyy for killing lots of birds with one stones! 8D orz
Summary: Ienzo's happy to be a Somebody again. Even, on the other hand, would be more interested if not for this stupid headache.

He regained consciousness with a groan, unable to open his eyes for a moment due to the pounding headache. "What...happened...?" He appeared to be lying on something soft. The room was very dark, but traces of sunlight were still evident through the thick, drawn curtains. "Where am I?"

Looking around, he discovered Xaldin nearby, unconscious but fascinatingly dressed in his old guardsman's uniform from their Radiant Garden days. 'How in the worlds did we get here like this?' he wondered. The last thing he remembered was.... Oh, yes. That cocky, traitorous wretch had been murdering him. Yet now, he seemed...fine?

Cautiously, he raised a hand and found to his surprise that it was ungloved. He was, in fact, not wearing black; the opposite, actually. 'This is what I used to wear back in the Garden, too,' he realized. 'What on earth...?' They couldn't have traveled back in time, could they? 'Perhaps this is some sort of hallucination experienced during my death. A flashback to the past--'

...He had been surprised, at discovering what he was wearing. He was confused and weakened. He felt surprise, felt confusion, in a way that was stronger and more real than anything he should be able to experience as a Nobody. 'I...what happened to me?'

This feeling of weakness...perhaps it was not just from the headache. Experimentally, he reached out a hand and tried to summon ice--
"Zexion!" he shouted, without thinking. He swung a leg to the floor and started to surge up, but then fell back with a groan. His head...throbbing so cruelly, it hurt to move....

There were footsteps from outside, and the door opened softly. "Professor?"

"Zexion?" he asked weakly. ...It had been a long, long time since he had been addressed as such by his protégé.

The young man approached quickly, leaning down to rest the back of his hand against Vexen's forehead to gauge his temperature. "Your clothes," Vexen observed in a murmur. A white lab coat, just like his own. "Yet you look as old as you were back at Castle Oblivion...."

"We're back, Professor," Zexion said gently. His little smile was the sweetest expression Vexen had seen on his face since...ever. "You can feel it, right?" The hand came away from his forehead to rest on Vexen's heart.

....

....

Not Vexen anymore, then. Even.

'We really are back,' he realized in astonishment. And was dismayed to feel very, very unexpected tears suddenly brimming in his eyes. 'Stop that at once,' he told himself firmly. 'It is neither professional nor seemly.' Especially with his young subordinate looking on.

"I cried, too," Zexion - Ienzo - remarked, irritatingly casual. "It's all right. Dilan's still asleep and Aeles is back in the Master's study, there's no one around to see. Just me."

"See what?" Even said angrily, forcing the tears back. "All I can think about is this blasted headache. I need a Potion."
"Virtually all our items are still back at the castle in the World That Never Was," Ienzo explained, "which is now much more difficult to get to than it was before."

"What? Why?"

"The Keybearer," Ienzo said simply.

Even thought a moment. "...Would it be a fairly reasonable assumption that our leader now no longer exists in any form?"

"We haven't been able to find some of them," Ienzo sighed. "Xehanort, Braig, Isa, all the members from IX to XIII... Apparently, Roxas reunited with his Other at an earlier time than we did, but there's not even a trace of the rest of our Organization." He paused, then added, "Not that he shows it, but I think Lea is worried. He left a little while ago, using the dark corridors."

"Did he, now. I hope he disintegrates."

"I was tempted to hold a grudge, too," Ienzo said resentfully as shadows crossed his face. "But...I am forced to admit that without Axel's treachery, the two of us would still either be lost to darkness or have been defeated at the hands of the Keybearer anyway."

"So that stupid boy survived, then," Even grumbled.

"It seems there is something to be said for those who wield the Keyblade, no matter how unintelligent or incompetent they might otherwise be. He defeated not only Marluxia and Saïx, but Xemnas himself. Most of the others, as well. I suppose we...should have known." Ienzo looked unhappy. "Sora's appearance and demeanor are deceiving. We must never underestimate him or his friend Riku again."

Those shadows were back. Even found that it strangely bothered him to see his young companion's expression so clouded. "Where are we, anyway?" he asked abruptly, thinking absently to distract the young man. Well, that and he was also wanted very much to know.

It worked - Even was startled at how well at worked. Ienzo unexpectedly smiled at him again, less
restrained this time, and it was amazing how much it lightened his face. He looked even younger than he really was. "We're back in the Garden, Professor. Master Ansem's study is down the hall. When we were looking for the others, I went out to see what's become of our world-- It's altered and scarred, but, oh, Professor, there are flowers again. Aerith's been working on that.... Do you remember her? She's still alive. Several of them are; they've been slowly restoring this town, and they've been doing a splendid job. There are some shops open in the square, the Heartless population is under far better control than I imagined, and I've even discovered that the great wizard Merlin is still residing in--"

Even, once he had received the most crucial piece of information, was now steadily losing focus. He would ordinarily have been interested in harvesting all this data, but his head was still throbbing, and he finally let out a small groan as Ienzo's chattering voice never let up. Since when had his protégé ever talked this much?

"Are you still feeling ill?" Ienzo asked sympathetically. "It took Aeleus and I a while to recover, also. Would you like me to bring you a cup of tea?"

"Why would I want tea?" Even growled irritably.

"Well, that's what they do in books. When a character feels unwell, another one will often bring them a cup of tea. I suppose it's a restorative item for humans, though I don't recall noticing it ever working half as well as Potions and such do."

"Very well, yes, bring me some tea," Even finally commanded, hoping to have a break from that disconcertingly perky voice. Since when had Zexion - or little Ienzo, for that matter - ever been so cheerful?

It was good to rest in the dark again, despite the pounding headache preventing him from drifting off as he might have liked. Soon, though, he began to grow restless. Feeling terrible, yet nothing to distract him from the pain, hating the sense of wasted time, increasingly overwhelmed by the waves of strong feelings he had grown so unaccustomed to over all these years....

He met Ienzo's return with just as much relief as when he'd left. "There you are. What took you so long?"

"Forgive me, Professor." The young man's arms were laden; he stooped to carefully set down both the tome and the tray he had been carrying in both hands. "Aeleus said that some people like sugar or lemon or milk in their tea. What will you have?"
"Nothing, just give it to me plain," Even said in exasperation, and reached out to accept the drink Ienzo was handing him. Then he watched as the young man dumped spoonful after spoonful of sugar into his own cup. "I wasn't aware you were fond of sugar," he said testingly.

Ienzo gave him a sheepish smile. It kept startling Even, both the uncharacteristic expressiveness of the boy's face, and the strength of his own reactions to it. "It...tastes good," he explained lamely. "I did not have much opportunity to eat sweets when I was small except when Master Ansem gave me something, and of course we didn't care during our time as Nobodies...."

Even frowned, feeling a strange twinge in his chest. "Are you accusing me of something?" he challenged.

"Not at all!" Ienzo exclaimed. "You and the others were very kind to me when I was young, and I will always be grateful." He sipped at his sugar-saturated tea. Even grimaced in response, imagining what it must taste like.

"You did have a very irregular childhood, I suppose," he mused.

Ienzo's voice was quiet. "An orphan like me could have no higher honor than to be accepted into your ranks the way I was. You and Master Ansem taught me, trusted me, treated me almost like an adult even when I was still so young...."

Even frowned, and after a moment reached up to his protégé. Ienzo gazed back at him, offering no resistance as Even held his face and studied him. "You know," Even murmured, "that might have been a mistake." .... 'Heart-wrenching.' Even had never, ever had any use for the term before, dismissing it as sentimental nonsense. Yet now, he began to get an inkling of what it actually meant, as he watched the way Ienzo's face fell.

"I," Ienzo said hesitantly, "I suppose I...have need to redeem myself, the way I...allowed myself to be so instrumental in betraying the Master--"

"Stop looking like that." He was also beginning to understand for the first time what Axel might have meant when he'd used to gush over Number XIII's 'Puppy Eyes.' "I was talking about us, treating you the way we did."

"The way you did?" Ienzo repeated in confusion.
Even found himself smiling a little. "Don't think I never noticed the way you'd look out the windows sometimes, like a caged bird yearning for freedom."

"But...I liked...I just--"

"The way you'd watch other children playing when we passed by. The way you only ever smiled for Ansem the Wise, when he'd waste time with his sentimentality that I'm beginning to think wasn't a waste of time after all."

"...."

"I forgot to let you go," Even suddenly remembered.

"Pardon?"

"That night - the Garden's final winter, when that Christmas party was going on and I'd said you could attend once you'd finished your duties - I forgot. I was doing the Rare Truffle experiments that night, and I needed your help. I'd forgotten that I'd promised to let you go. You never said a word."

"Our work was more important," Ienzo whispered. "I know that."

"That's what we told you," Even corrected. "That's what we thought. Maybe we were wrong."

There was a long moment of silence.

"You never really did have a chance to be a child, did you," Even finally said. It gave him a theory about the young man's odd behavior now.

Ienzo finally drew in a deep breath and said, in what sounded like an awkward subject change, "I've been looking through the research notes Master Ansem left behind, and I wanted to show you some things." He opened the book he had brought and flipped eagerly through the pages. "It
seems that we who regain our hearts wake up in the same place we lost them, which is why you and I, and Aeleus and Dilan and Lea, awakened in the computer room. It would be quite interesting to travel to the places where, for example, Luxord or Marluxia lost their hearts, and see if perhaps they might be there. It's just that none of us except Lea have dared to try the corridors yet - he's the only one who still has his coat, but I also wonder how well he will hold up to the darkness now that he has a heart to be corroded again. I've also been quite curious about Number XIII, whose circumstances differ so greatly from those of the rest of us. According to Lea, Roxas and Sora have--"

"Ienzo," Even said tiredly, resting an arm over his forehead, "you'll have to tell me this later."

Ienzo actually pouted. "Lea brushed me off, too. Aeleus listened, but I think he was only being polite. Why is no one interested in any of this?! It's fascinating!"

"The headache has something to do with it," Even groaned. "Just please be quiet for now, Ienzo."

"All right," he grumbled, sipping at his tea.

There was a long pause.

"You know," Even finally said, "I find it rather odd that your current childish behavior does not at all reflect how you acted back when you actually were a child."

"Childish?" Ienzo said indignantly. "How have I been unprofessional?"

"You're excited. I've never seen you excited before in your entire life, even when you still had a heart."

Ienzo fidgeted a little. And drank more tea. "Keep in mind," he finally mumbled, "that you didn't know me before I lost my parents."

"Your hypothesis appears to be similar to my own. Upon regaining your heart, you've reverted to behavior that circumstances had repressed until now. It's like your heart is still nine years old despite your mind and body having aged far past that."
"That might not mean as much as you're implying," Ienzo suggested a little sulkily. "Lea is twenty-five but often acts like a boy much younger than that."

"True," Even snorted. "That would explain a lot, actually...."

"Are you feeling any better?"

"Just a little. I don't mind talking as long as you don't chatter."

"I wasn't chattering!"

"And now you're whining."

"...If you weren't who you are, I'd think you were teasing me."

Even thought about this. "Who knows who any of us are now," he mused. "After such a long and traumatic experience, perhaps it's only to be expected that we might not return exactly like we were before...."

"For the record," Ienzo said thoughtfully, "I think I like this Professor Even better than the one from ten years ago." Then he winced a little. "Not that there was anything wrong with the last one...."

'And for my record,' Even thought, 'regardless of the other pros and cons, one thing I deem a certain improvement in this Ienzo is his smile, which I wish he would demonstrate again. I don't know how or why such a thing can possibly be so important, but it is.'

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"...No reason." Even took another sip of tea. "Ienzo, let's have a Christmas party this year." 'One that you can actually attend this time.'

Ienzo looked startled. "A Christmas-- What?"
"It seems you find the idea distasteful."

"No! Of course not! I would...actually...look forward to such a thing." This smile was even more pleasant to look at than the last one.

"Strangely enough, so would I." Even smiled back.

Ienzo studied him critically. "I think I've figured it out."

"Hm? Figured what out?"

"It's your eyebrows. This is the first time I've seen you smile without your eyebrows quirked in an ominous or disconcerting way. You should smile like this more often, I think fewer small children would run away from you then."

"Wha--! Are you mocking me?!

"I wouldn't dream of it, Professor."

"Good. A boy like you should know his place."

"I'm twenty-one...."

"You're nine."

"Professor!" He had the most amusing sulky glare on his face now. "Now you're the one mocking me."

"I believe the correct term is 'teasing.'"
"You're Professor Even. You don't tease people."

"The Professor Even of ten years ago did not tease people, just like the Ienzo of ten years ago did not bounce around handing out tea and rambling enthusiastically about flowers."

"...Yes. I hope these changes are for the better - I'm going to ask Aeles what he thinks."

"Wait." Even reached out again and caught his sleeve. "Don't leave yet."

After a moment, Ienzo smiled. "Would you like me to sit with you a while longer?"

"If you like," Even said haughtily.

"You'll feel better soon."

"Mm."

"I'll read to you."

"I told you, I'm not interested in hearing about your theories yet, I want my magnificent brain back in full working order first."

"Not from the research notes, I meant a fairy tale."

"A fairy what?"

"You'll see. Tell me if you like it." Apparently, the dusty book from Ansem's study was not the only one Ienzo had brought. He opened a much smaller volume to a startlingly colorful page and began to read. "Once upon a time, there lived a merchant with three daughters...."
Author's Notes: Good grief, my first "pairing day" fic, and it's for Vexen, of all people. XD I'll probably revise this story once more games come out and clarify some stuff that don't make sense to me.

I dunno if it's just me or what, but Ienzo in at least the Japanese version of KH3D seemed to act a bit hyper compared to his more dignified appearances in CoM and Days. I found that interesting.

Yay, I think this is the first time I've managed to post a fic where Vexen has a positive portrayal!

Lol, anyone pick up on the hinted Shadowless Princess pairing...?
Summary: Number VI experiences the results of a time travel experiment for the second time. Or maybe it still counts as the first time...gah, paradox. Platonic fic for Zexion/Ienzo Day 2012.

At the beginning, he had been more alert than usual whenever being sent to Hollow Bastion. After nearly ten years, however, he had all but forgotten, until he entered the abandoned library one day and found a small dark-haired boy in a lab coat standing forlornly among the shelves.

"Oh," Zexion realized, coming to a halt. "It's today."

The young boy turned and gazed at him silently.

'He's so small,' Zexion thought. 'I don't remember being that small at the time.'

They stared at each other a while longer. A flicker of recognition passed over the boy's face, but still he said nothing.

'Grief,' Zexion remembered. 'It affected me so deeply back then, yet now I have absolutely no recollection of what it felt like.' He reached out. "Come. Heartless roam this place. You must stay close to me if you don't want to get hurt, unless I order you to take cover. Then you must obey immediately."

The boy approached and took his hand, still staring at him almost impassively. Almost. Zexion remembered how shocked he had been, looking up into the face of his older self, even if not much
of that astonishment showed. He particularly recalled the fascination with how long his hair had
gotten. It was strange, now experiencing the opposite side of the memory.

"You'll have to take notes as we go. I've already eaten lunch, so you won't get a chance to sit down
and work at leisure until we RTC." It occurred to him that he needed to clarify, "That stands for
'Return To the Castle.' I'll explain more as we go, though there are some secrets I must keep even
from you, Ienzo." It was so strange, saying the name, and he did not miss the flicker of response
on the boy's face, either.

Hesitating, Ienzo reached out and laid such a small hand over his adult self's chest.

"My name is Zexion now," the Cloaked Schemer said quietly, and spelled it out. He could not
bring himself to answer the boy's real question, knowing what the reaction would be. "Why that is,
I cannot tell you, but you will notice something noteworthy if you think about it."

Throughout the rest of the mission, Ienzo followed silently on his heels like a shadow, scribbling
away on the notepad resting in the crook of one arm. The pose was interestingly reminiscent of the
way Zexion wielded his own weapon. Zexion knew the boy was taking shorthand notes on
everything from the Garden's changes to the types of Heartless that appeared to Zexion's fighting
style.

When the first set of enemies cropped up, Zexion motioned his younger self away. The boy didn't
need any more prompting, and ran to take cover without hesitation. 'Learned his - our - lesson
well,' Zexion thought. After being cornered and nearly killed by Unversed, he knew better than to
underestimate creatures of darkness. ...Or to try to pet them, no matter how cute they looked.

After the battle, which had been neither particularly difficult nor easy, Zexion took a moment to
regain his composure and then looked around for Ienzo. The boy was watching him from behind a
large slab of broken marble, his visible eye wide open.

"It's safe now," Zexion called to him.

Ienzo hesitated, then hurried up close to Zexion, reaching out to grasp the zipper of his Nobody's
coat.

"No," Zexion said, though the boy was already drawing the zipper down. "It's different for us
now," he explained as he lifted his undershirt to reveal the unmarked flesh beneath.
Ienzo stared. Zexion knew - remembered - that he had expected to see a great gaping wound where that Neoshadow had struck him so brutally, or at the very least some bruising. "We need a better way to measure and store the damage we take in battle," he continued. "It's very inefficient for our injuries to be reflected in our physical bodies. Therefore, Vexen--" He paused. "That is, Professor Even discovered a way to take damage using 'Hit Points' rather than flesh and blood. It's remarkably useful. For example, I can drink a restorative item such as this Hi-Potion to immediately regain HP, rather than have to slowly recover at a natural rate before being of use for future missions."

Ienzo was still staring at him.

"I won't drink anything yet, though. Both the number of items I can carry and the number of spells I can cast in the field are finite, so I'd rather save my supply for emergencies. I have not even located my target yet, these Heartless were just minor annoyances."

"...."

"Stop wasting time, you need to be taking notes again."

Ienzo finally began to write, but he still looked upset.

"Don't worry. It'll take more than these minions to cause me any real trouble."

Ienzo paused in his scribbling and eyed the tome in Zexion's arm.

"This is my Lexicon. In addition to being extremely useful for both research and recreation, its primary function is to serve as my weapon. As you saw, I can strike enemies with it to cause damage, but it is better suited to spell casting. It is currently customized with a Gear and panels - I'll explain that in more detail later - to specialize in powerful ice magic, since that is the elemental weakness of my fire-based target."

Ienzo was starting to look slightly helpless, the pace of his scribbling desperate.

"...Come. We have other places to search."
It was late in the afternoon before Zexion finally found his target. He sharply ordered his companion to run, and was displeased when he looked around and found the boy still rooted to the spot, staring at the giant Heartless with that eye of his wide open again. "Ienzo! Get out of here, this is no place for a human!"

Ienzo glanced at him, clearly terrified. Zexion strode over and seized the boy, flinging him into a dry tunnel just in time to avoid the monster's first attack. "Stay out of the way." Then he faced his target, readied his Lexicon, and got to work.

He had a difficult time with this one. He did eventually manage to defeat it without getting knocked out or having to abort, but he had used every single item and cast in his arsenal, and had thought for a second at the end that he wouldn't make it. But then, bashing away with his Lexicon and desperately keeping an eye on the monster's loss of HP in frustratingly small increments, his small size and agility were advantageous. He managed to avoid just enough of his enemy's attacks to finish it off before it could catch him in one of its devastating blows.

He stood there afterward, feeling a little ill and with his ears ringing, both signs that his health was dangerously low. Nothing he could do about that, however, except ignore all the enemies standing in the way and RTC before any of them could knock out the last of his HP. "Come, Ienzo--"

The boy was already rushing to him, grabbing helplessly at his coat.

"...I'm all right, you know."

Ienzo picked up an empty, discarded Hi-Potion bottle and stared at it in dismay.

"I've run out of healing options, but it is no matter. If I can survive until we return to the castle, I'll be perfectly fine."

Ienzo gazed up at him again and laid a hand over his chest once more, where his heart should have been. "Don't be ridiculous, you have no business protecting me, and no means to do so, either. Just don't fall behind, don't hinder my progress, and do not get yourself killed."

They made it to the portal with little incident, at which time Zexion realized that there was a problem. There was only one coat between the two of them.
'He gave it to me last time,' Zexion thought, wondering a little at the paradox of time travel. Had his self back then - now - given the coat to his younger self simply because he already knew he would? Or had he thought it through first and decided on that as the better option? 'One unprotected trip through a dark corridor will probably not cause serious damage. Ienzo has more to lose than I do, but...after all, he is eventually going to lose it anyway. Then there is the chivalrous aspect of protecting people younger than oneself....'

His ears were still ringing. He honestly was not in the mood to pursue this train of thought as thoroughly as he usually would. 'Just give him the coat and go home.' He unzipped it and slipped it off his shoulders, wrapping it around his child self and drawing the hood over the boy's face. Ienzo seemed to be almost swallowed in the heavy black fabric.

"The corridors we must use are dangerous, and I know you will find them frightening. The coat will offer you some protection. Keep hold of my hand and walk slowly so that you don't trip on the hem, do not let panic or fear get the better of you." Sometimes, having no heart could be useful.

Ienzo followed him trustingly enough into the corridor. A few steps in, though, he shrank close to Zexion and tightened his grip on his hand. "It's all right," Zexion told him. "You'll be fine." The journey to the castle somehow seemed to be far longer with the knowledge of how terrible his younger self found it. If he'd still had his heart, Zexion would have been very relieved to finally step into the Grey Area.

He drew out a small cloth and handed it to the boy. "Dry your eyes." Ienzo's face was still completely hidden beneath the hood, but of course Zexion knew anyway.

Saïx, the only one present at the moment, was staring at them. "What is that?"

"A guest," Zexion said. "An ally. He will be staying with us through tonight. I take full responsibility for him."

Saïx strode forward and took hold of the boy's chin, tipping it up until the hood slipped back. Ienzo had composed himself by that time and was gazing back calmly, though the signs of his previous tears were not completely gone.

"So it has a face," Saïx observed in a mutter, "unlike certain other small hooded figures wandering around this castle...."
"What?"

"Never mind. It's you, isn't it. What's Ienzo doing here?"

"Professor Ev-- That is, Vexen's time travel experiments from about nine years ago. I was the test subject for the final one."

"Ethical," Saïx remarked dryly. "Did you successfully complete your mission?"

"Yes, I'll fill out the report right now. And Ienzo will be gone by tomorrow morning, I assure you."

"Good. We are not running a daycare here--" His voice dropped to a mutter again. "--no matter how much Axel and the Keybearers might make it appear so...."

The boy was glaring a little, offended at being written off as useless.

"Ienzo," Zexion said, "our Organization currently has fourteen members. I am Number VI. This is Number VII, Saïx, who ranks very highly. 'And happened to join after I did, but why quibble about that.' "He is the one who hands out our daily assignments."

"Yes," Saïx said very flatly, "I simply stand here all day mindlessly distributing mission briefs and signing people in and out. Amazing how I can act as second-in-command with such a dull job description."

"Don't be sarcastic with that monotone when he's trying to take notes," Zexion told him. "Ienzo, don't write that down, it's inaccurate."

The boy stared at him in confusion.

Just then, a dark corridor opened, admitting two more black-coated men into the Grey Area. Although they had been chatting loudly about the combustibility of an average set of boxer shorts,
both of them came to a halt when they saw the unexpected figure.

"Hey!" Demyx exclaimed. "Someone threw Xion in the wash and she shrunk!"

Ienzo turned to face him in astonishment.

"That's not Poppet," Xigbar laughed, "it's fresh meat. Sooooo, kiddo, welcome to the Organization! Anyone filled you in on the initiation ordeal yet?"

Demyx giggled.

"Mission reports, now," Saïx commanded, fortunately for the young time traveler.

"I assume you remember Number II, Xigbar," Zexion said to his younger self, "and the other one is Demyx, Number IX. Don't listen to a word they say."

"Hey! That's mean!" Demyx made a last scribble and then tossed the pen aside, bounding back up to the Cloaked Schemer and his companion. "So you never explained, who is the little guy? He looks kind of like you, Zexy!"

"...That's because he is."

"Woooowww! Vexen's been busy."

"He's not a replica of me, he is me. From about nine years in the past, the test subject of a time travel experiment to gather data about the future."

"Awesome!" Demyx yelled. "Hey, Mini-Zex, go back in time and tell these idiots not to blow up the lab, okay?"

"We didn't 'blow up the lab,' we lost our hearts in a different manner," Zexion said, adding annoyance to his tone to let Demyx know how ridiculous he was being. "And the future cannot be changed. Although one can safely travel back and forth through time, perform actions, and interact
with other beings, the events themselves are fixed. Whatever the time traveler says and does is, in a way, inevitable, since it already happened. You see?"

"Ummmm...I think that's Zexy-speak for 'Mini-Zex can't bring our hearts back.' Oh well. Hey, Mini! How's your singing?"

"Chibi Schemer here is mute," Xigbar chuckled, coming over to clap his hands on Ienzo's shoulders from behind. The boy's eyes darted nervously to Zexion, who found that he did not quite like the Freeshooter standing so close to his young self. "Never said a word from the time we met him 'til the time he woke up as Zex."

"Really?!" Demyx gasped, crouching back down to the boy's eye level. "You can't say anything?"

Ienzo looked at him silently.

"Zexy! Make him say something!"

"Ienzo does not speak," Zexion said shortly. "Leave it at that."

"Aw, come on, he's gotta say something sometimes. Hey, Mini, how much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

The boy's brow furrowed slightly.

"Or how 'bout this, if you say 'I like cookies,' I'll give you one of the ones I baked yesterday! You like cookies, don't you?"

Ienzo looked at Zexion pleadingly.

"Demyx," Zexion started to say, but the other two were talking over him.

"Believe me," Xigbar laughed, "I tried everything in the book. Jokes, threats, bribes, squeaky toys- -"
"What happens if you tickle him?" Demyx said interestedly.

Ienzo's eye widened again and he jerked free of Xigbar's hold, diving to hide behind Zexion and cling to his coat.

"I suggest you drop the idea of tormenting him," Zexion advised coldly, "since he can fight back now." His Lexicon snapped open in warning.

"Oooh, tough guy," Xigbar remarked with sparkling eyes, as Demyx started laughing his head off.

"Ohhhh, I get it, he can fight back now because his self in the future is bigger - well, not quite so tiny - and he's got his Evil Book of Doom and everything, haha that is funny...!"

"If you will excuse us," Zexion said, "we have some work to get done."

"We'll come help!" Demyx said eagerly, though fortunately for the Cloaked Schemer, Saïx sharply put an end to that idea as well.

"You will not. What you are going to do is sit down and correct this deplorable excuse for a mission report."

"There's nothing wrong with my mission report! We did 'kill Heartless and RTC,' didn't we, Xig?"

Leaving them to argue, Zexion took his younger self by the hand again and led him out of the Grey Area. "Let's go to the library. We can both work in there until supper - it's usually pretty quiet, since our most obnoxious members never spend any time in there."

Ienzo eyed him questioningly.

"Xigbar and Demyx of course, and also Axel, Marluxia, and Larxene, for the record. Xaldin and our two youngest members don't come there either, despite their obnoxious level being much lower. It is the same with Lord Xemnas."
The questioning look had now gained quite a bit of interest.

"Not as young as you. They are fourteen. Well," Zexion amended, "Roxas is a special case - he's actually only four or five weeks old, but his Other is fourteen. And Xion's circumstances are even stranger...in any case, yes, they perform fairly well in combat and play a valuable role in the Organization, despite their youth."

Ienzo scribbled eagerly all the way to the library, so absorbed in his work that he would have fallen next to the chair if Zexion had not caught him and seated him in it correctly. "Pay better attention to your surroundings. There's not that much of a rush to record everything."

It was a bit later in the evening than he had intended when Zexion finally put all the books away and made Ienzo accompany him to the kitchen, where they found Number VIII and the Keybearers preparing their own meal.

"Hi, Zexi--" Xion started to say, then gasped.

Axel glanced over his shoulder at that, then his eyes widened and he turned all the way around.

"What's wrong?" Roxas asked, also turning to see what the other two were staring at. "Oh. Who's that?"

"This is my younger self, Ienzo," Zexion said in introduction. "He is visiting us from the past."

Axel's mouth quirked. "What the heck? You guys can time travel and you never told me?"

"The experiments were ultimately a failure, though obviously we are still dealing with the consequences."

"He's smaller than me," Roxas said appreciatively, still staring at the other boy.

"Axel!" Xion squealed, "Can I hug him? Please?"
To Zexion's displeasure, Axel laughed and said "Sure, go ahead."

Delighted, Xion ran to wrap her arms around the smaller boy before Zexion could stop her. "He's so cuuuuute!"

Ienzo's eye was very wide again.

"So he's Number XV?" Roxas asked.

"He will only be with us for the remainder of the evening," Zexion explained patiently, trying to get his poor past self disentangled from the replica's enthusiastic embrace. "His orders are to record his findings at this point in time, and he is under my charge until his safe return to the past."

"You're so freaking small," Axel laughed, going over to poke at the dark-haired boy. "Heeeeyy, Ienzo, remember me? It's Lea, the guy who kidnapped you for that Christmas party--"

"Yes, he remembers, thank you," Zexion said shortly. Then to the boy, "He's Number VIII now, he goes by Axel. And these two are the youngest of our members."

"Can I keep him in my room?" Xion begged, "Please?"

"Xi, he's not a toy," Axel said, expressing great amusement. "Much as he kinda looks like one...."

"Why doesn't he talk?" Roxas wanted to know.

"Hiii, Ienzo," Xion cooed. "Can you say hi back to me? Hiiiii."

Ienzo looked miserable. And simultaneously adorable, which made Zexion realize for the first time what the appeal might have been for so many people to have teased and bullied him when he was younger.
"He does not speak. By the way, whatever is in that pan appears to be burning."

With Axel, Roxas, and Xion finally distracted, Zexion took Ienzo's arm and drew him safely away into the opposite corner of the kitchen. "Stay here while I get out what we need."

Fortunately, the trio's meal seemed to be about ready, and Zexion made a non-committal noise when Xion invited him and Ienzo to eat with them. Then they left, and the kitchen was blessedly empty and silent.

"It's safe now. Come here, you can spread this on the bread while I get plates and napkins."

Ienzo's efforts were quite acceptable for someone his age, and Zexion, turning away from the junk food cabinet which Demyx kept well stocked, came over to approve of the boy's work. "Good. Go clean that knife off in the sink." While the boy did so, he opened the package and liberally sprinkled some of its contents over the expanses of peanut butter. The package was back in its cabinet before Ienzo finished his task.

"Thank you. Let's eat out on one of the balconies - I don't feel like joining everyone else in the dining room tonight."

A lie, since he was not capable of caring one way or the other. However, he knew how Ienzo would react to being offered the favorite meal he had not eaten in so long, and he did not want any of the others to witness it.

Zexion remembered just in time that his younger self did not handle the dark corridors very well. They made their way to the nearest balcony on foot. Ienzo stood at the rail for a while, looking out at the eternally dark world, before finally coming back to sit down next to his adult self and take the plate that was handed to him.

"I apologize for the simple fare. I usually try to cook more elaborate meals than this, but a lot has happened today and it was easiest to just put together something quick."

Ienzo nodded and bit into his sandwich. Zexion watched for curiosity's sake, and paid close attention to the taste of peanut butter and fruit in his own mouth. He found himself foolishly willing hard to feel something, anything, any sort of reaction to what should be recalling powerful memories. Yet there was nothing.

Not so for Ienzo. After a few bites, the boy paused and stared at his sandwich before carefully lifting the top slice of bread to see what lay underneath. He stared some more.
"Your favorite, as I recall," Zexion said mildly. His father had been a carefree and sloppy cook. Zexion had not discovered until he was eight years old how odd it was to eat peanut-butter-and-Gummi-bear sandwiches rather than ones made properly with jam or jelly.

Ienzo still had not moved or made a sound.

"Father's specialty when Mother wasn't around to feed us, hm?"

Very carefully, Ienzo pressed the sandwich back together again. Took another bite. Chewed slowly a few times - then gagged until it came tumbling back out, put the plate down, covered his face, and burst into tears.

Zexion reached out to place a comforting hand on the boy's back, continuing to observe. 'So messy and undignified...yet I should still envy him. Of course what I actually feel is nothing. I find it neither desirable nor repellant to regain the ability to do this, to weep, to feel my heart shattering as their memories come so strongly upon me again...Father's laugh, Mother's touch, their patience as they taught me new things and the love in their faces as they kissed me good-night....' He would never see them again, and it should hurt so badly. Yet he felt nothing. 'That in itself is reason enough to keep seeking my lost heart. Those people deserve to be mourned.'

Ienzo's sobs were growing concentrated, his breath coming in short gasps - Zexion could see the desperate effort it took to speak. "Wh-Why...did they...have to...?"

After a moment, Zexion shifted and brought the boy fully into his arms; Ienzo clung to him and sobbed with even less restraint than before. "They l-left me...th-they left me...."

Zexion held him for a long time, soothingly rubbing his back, waiting until the boy's crying finally began to grow quieter. "If it helps to know," he said softly, "the pain will not last much longer. Once...once you become me, it won't hurt any more. At all."

Ienzo stared at him with that one eye. Thoughtfully, Zexion raised his hand and gently pushed those long bangs out of the way so that he could see the boy's whole face. 'Why do I still hide now, when I no longer have a reason to? Is it simply force of habit?'

Ienzo drew in a deep breath. His words were hesitant. "I...miss them...a lot."
"They were good parents," Zexion acknowledged. "Not perfect, of course, but they were kind to us. It is no strange thing that you miss them."

Ienzo, looking very tired, leaned his head against his Nobody's chest, his body limp as if all the energy had drained out of him.

"Finish your supper," Zexion advised, picking up the plate.

Ienzo ate the rest of his sandwich while still sitting in his older self's arms, then whispered, not looking at him, "It was good."

"The taste alone is still agreeable, I presume, regardless of any memories still attached to it."

Ienzo's eyes filled with tears again as he nodded silently.

"We don't have to go back in right away. Take as long as you need to recover."

Ienzo reached to scrub his face and then got up to pace back and forth, trying to regulate his breathing. Zexion watched, and when the boy at last seemed perfectly composed again, their eyes met and they nodded at each other.

They encountered the castle's master in the hallway before they'd reached the dining room. "There you are," Xemnas said in his deep voice, sounding slightly displeased. Zexion shivered a little, though of course the reaction was purely physical. "I was coming to find you."

"You wished to see me, Lord Xemnas?" Zexion said, suddenly realizing that he'd moved in front of Ienzo as if to shield him. He already knew that he would do so, due to his memories of being in Ienzo's place, but he hadn't realized that his older self would do such a thing without any conscious thought whatsoever.

"Not you. The boy."
Zexion glanced over his shoulder, and found Ienzo staring at him with that one wide eye again. He moved aside with reluctance.

Xemnas did not deign to stoop down so as to inspect the boy; instead, he swept up one hand. Ienzo made a startled, frightened noise deep in his throat as he came rising into the air in the wake of Xemnas's gesture.

Zexion, watching, felt how tense his own body was as Xemnas regarded the boy with cold amber eyes. Ienzo stared back rigidly.

"What time did he appear?"

Zexion answered as best he could.

"And he has been in your presence ever since?"

"That is correct. He is in my charge, so I felt it best to keep him with me."

Xemnas raised his other hand, and the notepad came flying out of Ienzo's tight grip. The boy made another small noise, startled and indignant.

Xemnas gazed at the lines of scribbles for a moment before saying, "What is this writing?"

"...A form of shorthand that only Vexen and I can read," Zexion explained reluctantly.

"What does it say?"

"Notes. He is to record everything he notices, and the data will be analyzed upon his return."

"Yet the experiment was a failure."
"That is correct."

"Perhaps we should take the chance to perform our own experiments, before the opportunity is lost."

Zexion could not feel fear or anger. But the spot in his chest where his heart used to be went very cold, if that meant anything. 'It didn't happen,' he reminded himself, 'it didn't happen, stop acting as if it did.'

Ienzo, fists clenched, was staring at Xemnas like a deer stares at a predator in hiding.

"I assure you," Zexion said, slowly and clearly, "we were quite thorough. Though if you like, I can take up the matter with Vexen, I'm sure he would be best at judging what would be most useful."

There was a long, tense pause.

Then Xemnas lowered his hands dismissively and Ienzo, landing unsteadily on his feet, stumbled back into his Nobody. Zexion set his arms around the boy's shoulders to help him regain his balance, and found absolutely no inclination to let go once it was clear that the boy could remain upright on his own.

"Do so, then," Xemnas intoned. He turned and disappeared into a dark corridor.

Ienzo burst out of Zexion's hold and dove to snatch up the fallen notepad, wrapping it tightly in his arms as if it was a lost child. He continued to kneel there, shaking.

"Come, Ienzo. Vexen will want to see you regardless of the Superior's orders."

Vexen was in his laboratory, of course, entirely focused on his current experiment in progress as he dictated. Lexaeus was sitting at the computer, obediently typing everything.

Ienzo had taken a startled step or two forward, but Zexion laid a hand on his shoulder to hold him back. He shook his head when the boy looked back at him. Understanding, Ienzo fell back unhappily and fixed his eyes on his mentor, as fixated on Vexen as Vexen was on the experiment.
"...and the last one!" Vexen finally proclaimed, his voice alight. "Variable B, 21-3-12. Did you get all of that?"

"Yes," Lexaeus said. "Ienzo's come."

"Hm?" Vexen frowned, then turned to the newcomers at the door.

Ienzo was already running to him, face anxious as he lifted the notepad up to the older scientist like an offering.

"Ahhhhh!" Vexen exclaimed in delight.

"I found him in Hollow Bastion," Zexion explained. "It was unexpected - I had never known the destination coordinates. I'm surprised you didn't warn me."

"It's been so long, I'd forgotten all about it! So many more important things have cropped up since then...." Vexen plucked the notepad out of his apprentice's hands and flipped through it. "Hmm...yes, yes, very good...." He paused. "What class was this Heartless here at node 42?"

Ienzo looked where he was pointing, gasped in dismay, and practically lunged at the paper to frantically scribble an annotation.

"All right, all right, don't get too excited," Vexen said in annoyance, "you nearly knocked it out of my hands."

Ienzo stepped back and dropped his head as Vexen, oblivious to the boy's mood, continued to scan through the document. Seeing the hidden face and drooping shoulders, Zexion started to approach, but Lexaeus got there first.

"Hello, Ienzo," the big man rumbled, lifting the boy in one arm as if he weighed nothing.

Ienzo stared at him in surprise for a moment - then offered the very first smile Zexion had seen.
from him all day. It was a small, shy one, but it prompted a pleased beam from Number V in return.

"It is good to see you."

Ienzo patted his shoulder in greeting.

"Have you been taken care of?"

Ienzo smiled a little more and pointed at Zexion.

Lexaeus regarded the smaller Nobody for a moment. "Quite odd, isn't it."

"I wish I could feel how strange it is," Zexion confessed, "I'm sure it would be quite fascinating. Yet all I've managed is detached interest, just like with everything else."

"A shame, but only to be expected." Lexaeus carefully set the boy back on his feet.

"Yes, I suppose this will do," Vexen finally announced. "Not like there was anything better to report, anyway. Let me just...." He rummaged across his desk for a pen, blinked when Ienzo offered up the one he had been using, then scrawled a few paragraphs "To Professor Even" on the last page of the report. He flipped the pages back over and handed the notepad to Ienzo. "Guard this with your life."

Ienzo nodded and hugged it tightly to his chest.

"Don't tell him that," Lexaeus said in disapproval. "The experiment didn't even accomplish its primary purpose, and even if it had, it's not worth the boy's life. He takes everything you say seriously, you know."

"Why shouldn't he?" Vexen carelessly flipped his hair back over one shoulder and turned back to the experiment. "Now, Zexion, since you're here, if you would be so kind as to--"
"Forgive me, Vexen," Zexion said, "but I have matters to attend to. Please excuse me."

"What?" Vexen said indignantly. "I wanted you here to assist in--"

"He will be looking after the child for the rest of the evening," Lexaeus stated firmly. "I'll continue to serve as needed. What is it you would have me do next?"

Zexion smiled a little at the Silent Hero in thanks, then took Ienzo's hand again and led him away.

There were plenty of extra toothbrushes in the bathroom cabinets, so Zexion took out an unopened package and handed it to the boy. Ienzo stared at it for a moment.

"What's--? Oh." That's right, Ienzo had wanted a green one. So odd, that colors could be so important to human children....

Zexion took the first toothbrush away, searched until he found one more to the boy's liking, and handed it over. Ienzo absently smiled a little as he looked at the new package in his hand. "Open that and brush your teeth."

Since Zexion needed to tend to his hair, he took much longer in the bathroom than his younger self. It didn't seem quite right to keep taking care of business with the mirror reflecting how the boy was watching him, so he finally sent Ienzo out. "The Proof of Existence is the round room northwest of here, with an inclined floor. Your portal is number VI, it should recognize you and let you in."

When Zexion came into his room later, he found Ienzo standing at his desk, bent over the Lexicon and wholly absorbed in whatever was on the current page. 'A story,' Zexion remembered. The young hero had successfully slain the dragon.... I'd forgotten it was still stored in the book. I should take another look at it.'

He moved farther into the room and dropped his coat into the laundry basket. The noise of clinking drawstrings alerted Ienzo to his presence--

The boy gasped as if struck, slammed the Lexicon closed, and leaped halfway across the room so quickly that it all seemed like one motion. He stared at Zexion with his back pressed against the wall, face drained of color.
"It's all right," Zexion said, going over to open the book again. "Dragon stories," he summoned silently, and the letters on the page shifted in response. "Come here." He was absorbed in sifting through the search results and did not realize for a moment that he was standing alone. He turned around and saw that Ienzo was still pressed against the wall. "Come here, you're not in trouble."

Very slowly, Ienzo shuffled over to him, shoulders hunched and tense.

"This is the story you were reading, correct?"

The boy eyed him warily.

"Ienzo. I am not Professor Even. I'm not angry, and yes, this book is very precious to me, but it belongs to you as well. You are free to handle it as you please."

Still watching him, Ienzo very hesitantly crept closer to the desk, then yelped when Zexion seized him under the arms and stood him directly before the Lexicon. "Explore to your heart's content." 'Since you still have a heart, after all.' "I'll be going to bed, since it's best to get plenty of sleep for the sake of mission performance. If you get tired, feel free to lie down - this room is yours, obviously, so make yourself at home."

He was not sure how much later it was when he awakened. The room was dark, and Ienzo was hesitantly stretching out on the very edge of the bed. "You'll fall off," Zexion murmured as he turned over. He couldn't see anything except the outline of the boy's shape, but he could practically feel Ienzo staring at him.

They were silent for a while. Then he heard the quiet sound of indrawn breath. "I like your book," Ienzo said. His voice was so soft that Zexion could not actually hear it, he only knew the words from memory.

"Of course you do. It was designed to suit you perfectly."

Another long silence. Ienzo finally moved closer so that their hands touched, and Zexion sensed the boy relax as he came away from his precarious perch on the edge.
"...Ze...Zexion?"

"Hm?" So strange again, hearing his Nobody name in his own self's voice.

"...Did I...really fail?"

"It had nothing to do with you," Zexion said firmly, "you did an exemplary job. The experiment was inherently flawed from the start."

"...All right."

The silence stretched out.

"...Zexion...?"

"Yes?"

"...Even if...it failed...I...."

The boy could not bring himself to continue, but Zexion smiled, since he knew exactly what he wanted to say. "I cannot feel emotions, Ienzo. That is something that was lost along with my heart. However, if I were human, I would be very glad for this wonderful chance to meet you, also."

No spoken answer, but after a moment, Ienzo's fingers came to rest softly against his face in the dark.

"Ienzo?"

"...Yes?"
"You have so little time left, all six of you. You cannot imagine what it's like now. If I make a request of you, will you honor it?"

It was a long time before Ienzo finally managed to whisper "Yes," but Zexion had been patient.

"Thank you. Ienzo, Aeles would very much like to hear your voice again, even just once more."

"...."

"Please."

"...It's so hard."

"I know, Ienzo. Yet you promised me."

"...I'll...try...."

"Good." He knew that the boy would succeed. "While he still has the means to appreciate it, of course."

"I...I know."

He could feel that Ienzo was shaking. After a moment, he pulled him close, and by the time he drifted back to sleep, Ienzo had gone still and was breathing peacefully.

Morning dawned, as usual, with no change in the dark sky outside. Zexion was alone.

He sat up, gazing around the room, searching in vain. It was foolish to sit there for so long, trying to feel sad or disappointed or even just mildly dissatisfied, but of course there was nothing. So foolish, he would get up in a minute, yet here he was still sitting and his chest felt so, so empty....
Author's Notes: As usual, **the timeline is off a bit** due to the fact that the C.O. team gets killed in the first week of Days canon. --;;;;

For the record, **it's not clear whether Ienzo in BBS literally never speaks** (possibly due to grief over the loss of his parents), **or whether he's just extremely untalkative** and would at least, like, answer direct questions if necessary. **I use whichever theory best suits the story.**

Oh my gosh, I was really scared I wouldn't finish this fic in time! I'm way, way, **way** too addicted to my e-mail. DX I took drastic measures and ran off to the library all afternoon where I can't sign into any of my accounts, which was the only reason I got this done within the time limit. Yay libraries!

Lol, I wrote the omake because I didn't like leaving a cute fluffy fic on such a sad note.

*The Other Side of Memory*, a *Kingdom Hearts* fanfic by Raberba girl

**Aeleus/Ienzo Omake (Rough draft)**

"There you are!" Even exclaimed as Ienzo, coughing in the cloud of steam, stumbled out of the machine.

"About time," Xehanort said with some impatience. "Are the parameters accurate? I would have expected him to return at least two hours earlier."

"You make it back in one piece, little buddy?" Braig asked, and Aeleus reached out to steady the boy, examining him briefly.

"How is he?" Even demanded, and Aeleus nodded in reassurance.

"Well, that's a good sign, at least," Dilan said. "Where's your report, boy?"

Looking unhappy, Ienzo handed over the notepad, and the men all flocked to gather around it,
spreading some of the pages over a table so as to see them better.

Not quite all the men, though. Aeleus continued to rest a hand on Ienzo's small back, looking at him closely. "Did you meet yourself in the future?"

Ienzo nodded, and to Aeleus's surprise, the boy's eyes filled with tears, though they did not fall.

"Is he all right?"

Another nod, more vigorously this time.

"I see." The big man hesitated. He should not ask about himself, that would not be proper in this situation....

He was startled when Ienzo suddenly grasped the front of his uniform hard with both hands. "Ienzo, what is it?"

It took a long time. Aeleus watched the boy's face as Ienzo worked himself up to it, breath coming in small gasps. "Ae...Aeleus...."

The man's eyes widened, and powerful as he was, he felt himself growing weak for a moment. "Ienzo?"

"Th...Thank you...for...everything...you've done for me." Ienzo shut his eyes and exhaled a long breath, his expression relieved.

Aeleus watched him for a moment. Then he drew the boy into his arms, and Ienzo hugged him tightly. "Thank you, Ienzo," he whispered.

Ienzo patted a tiny hand against his massive back, and when they drew back again, they were smiling at each other.
Lights in Shadow: Vampire (theme 17) {Roxas & Xion}

Introduction: Apparently I'm addicted to theme lists, so I couldn't resist when I first heard about the 100ThemesChallenge group a year or so ago. XD Variation 3 was the list that looked the most interesting to me. I'd considered taking on the challenge for Kadaj, Riku, & their family, but after discovering that it's more difficult than it looks to finish theme challenges, I decided not to confine myself to a single topic. And I'm interested in so many challenges, I'm not going to stress about finishing most of them, I'll just work on them as I have inspiration. For this list, I'm leaving it open for any fanfiction, any artwork, and any original stories (though I don't post my original stories online, it's just for my personal satisfaction).

I know that my stories are very disorganized because more and more of them could fit into more than one series, so categorizing them can be problematic. This is why I'm trying to sort it all out on LiveJournal.... The "headcanon" entry is still under construction, but the "writing challenges" entry should be good, I've been careful to keep track of things there.

Lights in Shadow, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

List of themes by DavisJes, Variation 3 for the 100ThemesChallenge group on deviantART

17. Vampire (rough draft)

Roxas/Xion Day, 20 June 2013

Summary: She's not going to be able to just stand by and keep watching this for much longer.

O.o.o

He looked awful. Xion nearly cried when she saw poor Roxas that morning, shuffling into the Grey Area looking as pale and weary as if he hadn't slept in a week. He smelled a little, like he'd been too tired to shower, and there was a small bit of blood still crusted in his wild hair from the last battle he'd been in. She knew he'd been eating like a horse lately, because she was usually right there watching him do it - yet he looked thin and gaunt, his hips seeming sharper even through the thick fabric of his coat.

He came and practically fell onto the couch next to her, leaning his head on her shoulder and closing his eyes. "Mornin', Xi...."
"Good morning, Roxas," she whispered. After a moment, she lifted two fingers and touched them gently to his neck, right over a vein where someone with fangs could easily access his blood. He didn't make a flicker of response. 'Vampires are real,' she thought. 'Maybe not the kind in books. I'm sure Axel's right about that. But the kind who suck and suck and suck all the strength and life out of her best friend, getting stronger as he starts dying...those kind of vampires exist, and I'm one of them.' She was worse than a doll - she was a monster.

She let Roxas rest for a while, not knowing what else to do, but the morning drew on and Saïx started glaring at them and she knew they had to get to work. "C'mon, Roxas."

He didn't move.

"Roxas?" She shook him a little, and realized that he hadn't just been resting, he'd actually fallen into a deep sleep. "Roxas!" It took a while, and a lot of shaking, but she finally managed to rouse him. He sat still on the couch, staring like a zombie.

"Roxas...hey." She took out an Elixir and pressed it into his hands. When his only response was to curl his fingers around it a little, she leaned forward to kiss his cheek. His hands tightened on the bottle, and he blinked and finally focused on her.

"Take care of yourself, Roxas," she said softly. "Okay?"

"Mm...okay, Xion." He looked down at the Elixir, smiled a little, and put it in his backpack. "Thanks."

'You're not even going to drink it yet?'

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Uh...."

"Flaming pants, how'd it get so late?!"

"Well, you fell asleep...."
"Man, it might take too long to finish again.... Hey, Xion."

"Yeah?"

"If I can't make it to the clock tower, come hang out in my room when I RTC, okay? You guys never come anymore, I kind of miss you."

'We do come. But you're always asleep. And that's my fault.' "Okay, Roxas. I'll be there." 'This time, I'll just go straight to your room and wait until you come and see us before you fall asleep.'

"Don't forget snacks."

"I won't."

He gave her a tired smile and then went to go get his mission brief.

'I hate this,' she thought as she watched him leave. 'I hate seeing you waste away. It hurts just to watch.' "I have to do something," she whispered. "Whatever it takes, Roxas...if it'll save you, I will do it."

Author's Notes: There's a scene in the Grey Area, near the end of the game when Roxas is tired all the time, where Xion's worried about him and gives him an Elixir. (It's not a cutscene; you have to go up and talk to her before you start your mission.) It's cute and sad at the same time.

Themes like "vampire" are difficult for me, but it forces me to be creative and usually it turns out all right. ^_^; This drabble is sad, though...I don't like sad things. :(

Complete: 1/100
Luna Diviner: Figment {Saix, Axel, & Isa}

Luna Diviner: Figment
(rough draft)
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

For Isa/Saïx Day, 7 July 2013

Summary: No matter how different he is now, Saïx still can't quite forget the boy he used to be.
*temporarily incomplete*

o.o.o

"Are you kidding? We aced it," Axel laughed, waving his ice cream around for emphasis.

"That would imply that we didn't make it back to the portal with only a fraction of HP left, or that we'd managed to defeat more than seven Heartless before finding the boss, or that we hadn't taken over eight hours to find said boss...." I was leaning against the wall of the clock tower, trying to figure out how to write the mission report in a way that made us look good without actually lying. Today's had been no ordinary mission - it had been an assessment of sorts, and thus, a lot depended on the outcome. We couldn't afford to mess this up.

"Man, we kicked it into oblivion eventually, didn't we? And thanks to your OCD, we filled the whole mission gauge and opened every single stupid treasure chest, so YES, Isa, we aced it."

He still insists on calling me by my former name when we're alone, even though we've been Nobodies for two years now. On one hand, it bothers me just the tiniest bit - we're not supposed to feel 'bothered,' we're not supposed to feel anything, but sometimes I wonder. Anyway, it bothers me just slightly because you never know who might be spying, how word may get out. I don't want Axel to slip and call me 'Isa' in front of the others. We have to keep pretending - and he gets it, but sometimes it's like he doesn't get it enough. He 'worries' me sometimes, that empty detached Nobody version of 'worried.'

On the other hand...I kind of like it when he calls me Isa. It helps me remember our pasts, our plans, who we used to be. I used to take that kind of thing for granted, but...it's harder to remember now. My first loyalty will always be to him, though, and I know that his is to me. Nothing will
ever be able to change that.

I took a deep breath and sucked thoughtfully at my ice cream, which was starting to melt. I hate when it drips, I need to eat faster. "Okay, I'm going to write, 'Successfully defeated boss--' I put a Heartless categorization record in the footnotes, '--and used remaining time to complete extraneous mission objectives in a careful and thorough'--"

"Yup, that's perfect. Dazzle 'em with Vocab Power and we'll be good to go." He grinned at me. "This is why I always get you to fill out our joint reports."

"What do you do for our solo missions, bully Zexion into doing it?"

He laughed. "Nah, the kid fights back now, and flaming pants can he come up with some freaky nightmares...."

I frowned.

"Anyway, no, I just kinda scrawl out stuff and hope Vexen doesn't whine too much."

"I'm sure that impresses Lord Xemnas exceedingly," I said dryly.

Axel froze for a moment, then glared at me.

"Xemnas," I corrected quickly. "I'm sure that impresses Zebra-sama exceedingly."

Axel didn't let it go as easily as he had the other times. "You keep doing that," he growled. "That is not cool, Isa."

"Sorry, Axel," I muttered. "It's a habit." Kissing up to the Organization's top dog all the time, it's gotten hard to remember, when I'm alone with my best friend, that the groveling is supposed to be fake.

Axel suddenly scooted over and knelt up so that he seemed to loom over me. I think he forgot
about the ice cream in his other hand - I snatched the report out of the way before it could get stained by the blue drips.

"That's not my name," he growled. "I'm sick of you calling me that."

It was harder than it should have been. "Apologies, Lea," I said stiffly. The name felt strange to say. Maybe he had a point.... "Forgive me, Lea, for failing to call you by your original name, which is Lea, and I promise, Lea, that I shall from now on call you Lea, since you prefer the name Lea, and your real name is, after all, Lea, and I can keep going if you like, Lea, so just keep listening to me call you Lea to your heart's content, Lea, except that you don't really have a heart anymore but you still like to be called Lea anyway--"

He finally burst into laughter. "Apology accepted, Isa, which I call you because Isa is your real name, isn't that right, Isa...?" He settled down next to me - a little too close for comfort, our elbows kept bumping practically every time we moved - but I understood that he needed the reassurance. That was one of the many downsides to lacking a heart, that so much of what had once been instinctive now had to be remembered and deliberately acted upon.

"So, to pick up where we left off," I said, "it seems as if I'm the only one of us who gets any proper mission reports filled in. What would you do without me, Lea?"

"Be bored out of my mind, that's what."

We were inevitably late getting back to the castle, which I'm sure did nothing to boost our dubious assessment scores. Feeling like I was shrinking under the Superior's disapproving gaze, I silently handed over the report and then turned to leave with Axel.

"Where are you going?" Xemnas demanded in that deep, ponderous way of his.

"To the kitchen, because we're starving," Axel said with a defiant tone that made me wince a little. It's always been much easier for me to kiss up to the bosses than it's been for him.

"Don't think so, Flamesilocks," Xigbar chuckled. Why he should be one of the assessors rather than Vexen was a bit puzzling to me.

"Both of you will wait here while we deliberate," Xemnas intoned.
"Whaaat?!"

"Unless you wanna fail by default and be Dusked," Xigbar said with a wink.

"You people are crazy!"

I kicked his ankle as unobtrusively as possible, needing him to shut up. So much was on the line here, and he was an idiot if he thought this was helping.

We waited, feeling the minutes crawl by. My stomach felt tight with hunger, so I knew it must be worse for my energetic, careless friend. I took out the snack bar I’d never felt like eating on the mission and handed it over; he ripped the wrapper off and started to bite into it, then eyed me. "You got another one?"

"No, but it's fine, I'm not hungry."

He broke the bar in half.

"Really, Axel, I'm not hungry."

"Hearing you lie to me makes me want to punch you." He would have shoved the food straight into my mouth if I hadn't caught it in my hand first.

"...I'm not nearly as hungry as you are."

"Eat it, I don't wanna have to listen to your annoying stomach grumbles."

We were both drowsing by the time Xemnas and Xigbar came into the room again. I jerked a little in surprise at their entrance, Axel lifted his head off my shoulder, and we quickly got to our feet.

"Moonwolf wins," Xigbar announced. "You lose, Red. Toodles!"
We both blinked at him stupidly. "What?"

"Number VIII," Xemnas said gravely, "you are dismissed for the evening, and are to resume your regular duties on the morrow. Number VII, we have further business with you."

Axel and I still weren't moving. Both my body and mind felt numb. "Axel...and I...it was joint effort, the mission--"

"Ooooh, backtalk," Xigbar teased. With Xigbar, though, it was not wise to take chances even with his teasing.

"It's cool, Sai," Axel said quietly. He clapped his hand on my shoulder and opened a dark corridor, then he was gone.

I suddenly felt more alone than I ever had before in my life. My flesh seemed to creep, something was wrong.

"So," I said. I had to try twice before I could speak, my mouth felt dry. "What exactly is my status now, and what new duties does it entail?"

They did not answer at first. Their golden eyes seemed to glow.

_0.o.o.o.o_

My alarm clock woke me up as usual, but when I finally mustered the strength to roll over and look at the time, I found that it was thirty whole minutes past my usual awakening. "What...?" I reached out and shut off the blaring noise, then double-checked the settings. It was still set for the usual time. Somehow, I had slept through my alarm for _half an hour._

I was still so tired. My eyes hurt, too; there was this strange yellow tinge to everything, like I was looking through colored lenses. "Ugh...have to get up, Isa...."
The second time I woke up was because of Axel shaking my shoulder. "Oi, Isa!"

"Mrgh...." I peered blearily at the clock again. It had somehow jumped another hour and a half - I had never slept this late before, not even on vacation days.

"Man, I was looking all over for you, what the heck are you doing still in bed!?!" He looked ready to go, dressed in a fresh coat and with his hair perfectly in order.

"Ax-- Lea...ugh."

He was staring at me now. "Isa?"

"I'm so tired," I moaned. All I wanted to do was roll over, pull the pillow over my head, and go back to sleep.

"Isa, what's wrong with your eyes?"

"What?" I mumbled.

He was now bending over me, peering into my face from a disconcertingly close range.

"Stop that." I tried to push him away.

"What the heck did Xem and Xig do to you last night?"

I winced. "I don't...remember."

He gripped my shoulder. "If you didn't remember, you wouldn't be wincing."

It was coming back to me a little, in bits and pieces. I didn't want it to. It hurt. It still hurt, deep inside my chest where I couldn't reach. "Ax-- Lea...I don't...feel well...."
His eyes narrowed. He went over to my panel collection and dug out an Elixir, then brought it back to me. "Drink this."

He had to help me at first, but eventually I managed to swallow the whole bottle. I sat up in bed, feeling fresh and energized - yet that strange gold tinge still hovered at the edges of my vision, and the deepest ache lingered, as if it had settled in the empty space where my heart used to be. "Thanks, Lea."

He was watching me unhappily. "Your eyes are still yellow. And your ears...."

I frowned. "My ears?"

I wasn't expecting him to reach out and touch one of them. "Sorry, Isa, but I'm not digging the Legolas look on you."

"What in the worlds are you talking about?" I realized what he meant when he got me in front of a mirror. I stared at my reflection, one I only half-recognized. The eyes staring back at me could have been Xemnas's or Xigbar's, they were the exact same color. The ears were pointed, like an elf's. Not mine. They'd changed me.

"Axel," I said slowly.

"Yeah?"

"...I'm glad you failed the test."

One month later:

Meeting on the clock tower after work, ice cream in hand. Talking about the usual trivialities.

"You were in Halloween Town today, right?"
"Yes."

"How'd it go?"

"Well."

He laughed. "I can tell you're in a talkative mood today, Isa."

I wished he wouldn't call me that.

"Were you able to steer clear of Christmas Town?"

"That's not even an issue anymore, Axel."

He frowned. "You're doing it again."

"Stop being childish, Lea is gone. We are working to get him back, but in the meantime, I shall address you as who you are, which is, at the moment, Axel."

He kept gazing at me sullenly. I took a bite of ice cream, wincing a little at the excessively salty taste. Whoever had made this batch had not gotten the recipe quite right. "So," I finally said, "how many emblem Heartless did you eliminate today?"

"I don't know. I don't care."

I frowned. "You'd better remember for your mission report, at least."

"Isa, you're kinda ticking me off right now." Glaring at me, he crumpled his report into a ball and held it out as if threatening to drop it off the clock tower.

"You have no heart to get 'ticked off' with, and honestly, grow up."
He got to his feet. "I'm bored. I'm gonna RTC."

He was gone. Finishing my badly mixed ice cream alone seemed pointless, so I did not linger, either.

0.0.0.0.0

I woke up in the dead of night, sweating and shaking from more nightmares. I lay rigidly for a long time, then I finally managed to force myself out of bed and into the Proof of Existence.

Axel's Assassins were not as benevolent toward me these days as they used to be, but they did not make much effort to harass me as I crossed the room. I shook Axel's shoulder. "Lea. Lea."

He awakened reluctantly, looking up at me with a sort of disgruntled affection. "Can you, like, just not be a jerk to me so you won't keep having to come in and apologize at two in the morning?"

"...I'm sorry...."

"'S okay, Isa," he mumbled sleepily. "I just went to bed an hour ago, so leave me alone, 'k?"

"All right.... Lea, forgive me."

"Yes, I forgive you, but you're being annoying, okay? Go to sleep."

"All right."

"Okay."

"Good night."
"Night."

"...I'm sorry."

"Yes, Isa, I know."

**One year later:**

I'd never given Vexen enough credit. Organizing missions was difficult work.

Zexion and the new one, Number IX, were having a noisy disagreement in the library, so I moved to the dining room. I had been working for about twenty minutes when Axel came in with his meal. "Well, long time no see."

"Hello," I said absently, trying to concentrate. I had one finger resting on the rewards chart to keep my place; the pen in my hand hovered over Xaldin's mission report, checking off opened treasure chests and mission objectives. He was usually pretty thorough and his reports were among the easier ones to process, but I was still new at this job and the details were not second nature to me yet.

"Hey, Isa."

"Hm?"

"I was bored out of my mind again."

"What?" I said, wishing he'd be quiet and let me focus.

"What's with you not making it to the clock tower again?"

"What's with you being so obsessed with ice cream?" I grumbled.
"Um, hello, it's our thing we've been doing for the past three years? Go to work, come to Twilight Town, eat ice cream on the tower, because we're best friends?"

I sighed. "I'm busy these days, Axel."

"Too busy for me?" he said angrily, as if he could still actually get angry about anything anymore.

"I received a promotion, in case you forgot."

"How can I forget when you never shut up about it?"

"Are you pretending to be jealous or something?"

"Am I pretending to be jealous," he repeated in a scoffing tone.

"I should get you a promotion, as well...."

"I don't want a promotion! You know what I want, Isa? I want my friend back!"

I slammed my hand down on the table and glared at him. "Axel, how many times must I tell you that as long as there's a possibility of anyone overhearing us, you must call me by my proper name now. We're just as much friends as we ever were, but things have changed. We aren't children anymore."

"I liked you better when we were!"

"And don't be selfish, either. Promotions are not for your own sake - you ought to remember why we both need to perform well in this Organization."

"You know, SAIX, I'm starting to wonder about that. What's the point, anyway?"
I stared at him. He had to be joking, but he was not giving any of his usual indicators.

"I mean, all this hard work and skulking around, it's not fun at all and it's not even helping, anyway. We're never gonna get our hearts back at this rate. I'd seriously rather just hang out with you after work every day and put up with the rest. There's no point to living anymore...."

"...This is exactly what we've been fearing would happen. I know it's difficult to resist the sense of apathy, but you must, Axel. Our hearts were valuable. Anything we can do to get them back is worthwhile. It may not be 'fun,' but keep in mind that nothing is 'fun' for us, nor can it be until we are human again."

"It was fun eating ice cream with you in Twilight Town," he said quietly. "It felt weird that my feelings were so different than what they were supposed to be, but...I think they really were feelings, Saïx, even two years after we lost our hearts. But now, even those half-feelings are gone. All I wanna do these days is lie in bed and sleep until I die, and the only thing that makes me think it might be worth getting out of bed is remembering the taste of ice cream, and how we used to laugh as the sun set."

I sighed. "Why can't you just trust me and do as you're told, Axel?"

"Because I'm not you! Since when have I ever done anything anyone's told me to do?!"

"You used to obey me."

"I never OBEYED you, jerk. We were friends, partners. We did stuff together because we always agreed on everything, and even when we'd get mad and bite each other's heads off, we still had each other's backs, you know? We played to each other's strengths. But the way you've been ordering me around lately, like I'm some kind of robot you only care about because I'm useful sometimes, when the rest of the time you keep brushing me off like I'm annoying you--"

"Like right now, you mean?"

"Gah, forget it, Saïx!" He grabbed his mostly-uneaten food and stormed away.

I sighed and went back to work, but the encounter still weighed on my mind. He was right, we were supposed to be partners, yet we'd been clashing more and more lately, and not in a 'fun' way.
If I didn't know better, I would call it 'frustration,' the expressions on his face and the displeasure in my own-- not my heart, of course, but whatever part of me was left to formulate opinions. We didn't seem to be connecting as well as we had used to, and that was wrong....

Once I was comfortable with my new duties, I set about the task of raising up Axel as I had promised. It didn't take much longer than a month. I knew it was a good thing, so I didn't understand why Axel looked the way he did when we presented him with his own promotion. Actual delight or satisfaction would have been beyond him, but not only did he not even bother to feign it, he actually looked...displeased. He snapped off some angry, sarcastic remark rather than thanking us, so I was relieved-- that is to say, I was able to relax more when he eventually did set off on his first assignment, and when he returned successful. At least he wasn't going to fight me hard enough to break our alliance.

"How did it go?"

"Fine," he said. It was strange how blank his expression was, and how dull his voice. He was sprawled on his bed playing a video game without a trace of his usual exuberance.

I waited, but he did not volunteer more information. "Just 'fine'? There were no problems?"

"My mom would've burst into tears and disowned me if she'd been watching," he remarked.

I was not sure what to make of this. "I thought your mother was destroyed along with the rest of Radiant Garden."

"Yup."

"So...?"

"So no one was around to watch me become a monster. Just you and the bosses here at home, so freaking proud of their little pet murderer."
"To tell the truth, Axel, I don't really know what you're going on about. You had a job to do, and apparently you completed it successfully. What do you want from us?"

"What do you want from me?" he burst out suddenly. "I just killed someone in cold blood today, Isa! Walked up to him and slammed a flaming chakram into his chest! I watched him fall at my feet and die! Am I supposed to be jumping for joy now?!"

"Of course not. You're not supposed to feel anything, including joy or guilt."

"That's right! I have no morals now, but I do have superpowers, so I can get away with anything. You know what they called people like that in our old shows and comic books, Isa? They called them bad guys. I'm a bad guy now, Isa. And you are, too. Because you told me to do it, and now you're standing there looking at me like you're not disgusted with either of us at all. This is all just a game to you, just some way for you to manipulate your way to what you want so you can win. People's lives are just a bunch of chess pieces in your fun little egocentric game, right, Saïx?"

"...Sometimes, Axel, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Get out of my room."

I sighed and did so.

Axel dutifully carried out all his assignments, but something about his performance still made me uneasy. Since he seemed to get so volatile around me these days, I tried to avoid most direct contact with him while simultaneously observing him carefully. I finally decided that the best way to describe it would be to say that his personality was changing.... He finally started to act like the Nobody he was. His expression rarely changed (except when he was pretending to be angry with me), and his voice now contained little inflection. He went about unsmiling and speaking in a monotone. For some reason, this displeased me.

That, however, was a matter of personal preference; more alarming was the fact that he seemed to be eating less, and losing weight as a direct result. I noticed that he spent less and less time in the kitchen and dining room, and unless he was sneaking food when I didn't notice, he seemed to be falling into a habit of skipping meals. This would not do at all.

"Axel. You need to eat."
"I'm eating," he mumbled, eyes fixed on the TV as he took another potato chip out of the bag next to him and put it in his mouth.

"That is not food. That is nothing but sodium and grease."

"You're not my mom. Lay off."

*temporarily incomplete*

**Author's Notes:** Short version - I'm gonna make a note in the "Pairing Days" section of the sticky entry / "home base" post of my LiveJournal that this fic is incomplete, all right? For you guys on MMO and devART, the link is http://raberbagirl.livejournal.com/124065.html#pairingdays

Whenever I am able to finish drafting this story, you'll be able to tell when you check that section of my Web page.

Long version - Okay, so. I started writing this fic a year ago, and meant to post it on 7 July 2012. I failed to finish it in time. A whole year rolled around, and I realized that I now had a second chance to try to finish this fic and post it for Isa/Saïx Day. I FAILED YET AGAIN. :ohnoes: Isa hasn't even shown up yet, argh. I'm frustrated and super-busy, there's still way too much to write and no way I can finish it before midnight tonight (I try not to post things on Sundays); and though I would usually try to post it the day after my Sabbath, in this case, that is Saïx/Axel Day, which I have ANOTHER fic planned for, so it seems too much like cheating, especially since this fic has so much AkuSai in it already. orz Being addicted to Pairing Days is a pain.

So anyway, to sum up, this was intended as my Isa/Saïx Day 2012 fic, and ended up being my Isa/Saïx Day 2013 fic. It's also obviously incomplete, so I will indicate that in my LiveJournal so that you guys on FFN will have a way to tell when I actually do complete it, since it's very possible I won't update with the second half as a new chapter. (I think that MMO and dA readers will get notified, though.)

Ftr, I wrote that stuff about Axel's weight loss the other day (long after Fire & Moonlight: Eat [real edition]), but most of this story was written LONG before "untitled"!!! This fic and "untitled" share a similar concept as far as Saïx's 'initiation' is concerned, but...see, the method in the other fic was literal, whereas in this one, it's figurative.

As another way of saying it, KH3D was released on 29 March 2012; ever since then, I have not been able to stop thinking about what Xehanort did to Isa/Saïx; I wrote much of this fic in July 2012; the idea still kept turning over and over in my mind until I finally wrote an extreme form of it
as "untitled" in May 2013. But Figment really did come first even though it was published after "untitled," you know?

Infamousplot broke my heeeaaarrrrttt, theorizing that Saïx is the one who got Axel that horrible assassin job.... X(
For Kiryn, my dear little lenzo, from your loving pervy Even. ;p I think we had a slightly rocky start, but you've become a dear friend to me by now, and I've really learned and grown such a lot by talking with you. You are an inspiration. I hope you had a wonderful birthday!

Summary: Roxas meets a young woman in the woods and learns some more life lessons. Platonic Aurora/Roxas.

A/N: Semi-CatC universe. As in, makes reference to it, but one or two things don't fit.

"Dinner" here is the midday meal, not the evening one.

I'll forego the backstory on this one, except to say that Kiryn helped quite a lot until we finally settled on RoseRox. ^^ Though I still haven't quite discarded the idea of Riku/Rose....

Gah, yet more slang fail! DX All this time, I thought "noob/n00b" meant someone who doesn't know much about a certain topic/etc., but turns out that the term I meant was actually "newb," and "noob/n00b" is significantly different, more specific as well as insulting. orz Stupid slang. I'm used to picking up real vocabulary through context clues, but I am discovering more and more that when it comes to slang, context clues just get you in trouble. -.­.;;;;;;;;;;;;

O.o.o

It occurred to Roxas to wonder, after he had wandered this Enchanted Dominion place for a couple of hours without seeing a single Heartless, if maybe Demyx and Xigbar's laughter had meant something.

"Where's Saïx?"
"Hm? Oh...he's, uh, taking the day off. Having some fun with those three blonde chicks in Beast's village."

"Really? I didn't know Saïx could have fun."

"Heheheh."

"So is today a vacation?"

"I dunno, Xiggy, should today be a vacation?"

"For our Littlest Keybearer here? No way."

"Wait, it's Saïx who makes the vacation days, not you guys."

"Well, see, today it's my turn to plan vacations and not-vacations because I'm subbing for him. Yeah."

"Huh?!"

"Yup. Dem here's filling in for the vice-Superior today."

"Saïx let Demyx do his job?!"

"What, you don't think I'm up to it?"

"N...No, I just - I mean, I'd have thought he'd make someone else do it."

"Well, you thought wrong, 'cuz it's me. 'Cuz I'm awesome."
"...Okay. Where's my mission brief?"

"Uhhh...."

"You're goin' somewhere new today, kiddo."

"I am?"

"He is?"

"You know anything about Enchanted Dominion?"

"Ummm...."

"Great! What's his mission, Dem?"

"Hm. Let's send him after a giant Heartless."

"Heheh, and what kind of giant Heartless, bro?"

"A giant Heartless of awesome."

"Works for me."

"...Are you guys just making this up?"

"Are we what?"

"I am insulted!"
"Fine, whatever. See you guys later."

"Have fun, tiger."

"Hee, I love newbs."

Thinking over this morning’s conversation, Roxas concluded that he probably should have checked with Axel first. "I hate being dumb...." He had the feeling that most people his size knew a lot more than he did. He wondered if he would get to be as smart as Axel once he was that tall.

"It must be something wonderful...it must be something grand...."

Someone was singing. Roxas was curious (and bored, and had nothing better to do - he was pretty sure now that there was no giant Heartless, and no un-giant Heartless, either). He went to go find the singer.

She was really pretty. She looked like she was a few years older than him, with long curling golden hair. She seemed to be singing to herself and an entourage of forest animals, who followed her around as she picked plants and put them in a basket.

The animals saw Roxas first. Several of them surged over to intercept him, the birds fluttering around his head with warning calls and the doe looking like she was debating whether or not to kick him. "Who?" the owl demanded.

"Umm...I'm Roxas."

The girl was now watching him curiously. "Hello."

"Hi."

They looked at each other some more. "Are you out here searching for your true love?" she finally asked.
"Huh? No, I'm looking for a Heartless. Sort of."

She smiled a little and rose to her feet. "I'd know if there was great darkness in your heart.... I suppose you mean to destroy it, then."

"Yeah. Have you seen it? Have you seen any?"

"Not in the woods - they prefer to manifest where there are more people. But we haven't really had a problem with the Heartless since that boy came along and set the worlds to rights." She was close enough to touch him by now, and she did so, raising a hand to rest against the side of his face. "You remind me of him," she murmured. "Or perhaps...you remind me of someone else...someone whose heart was full of light like yours...."

"Did he wear red?" Roxas suddenly asked.

"Hm? Not the one I'm thinking of, that doesn't sound quite right."

"Oh. Okay."

"By the way, my name is-- Well, it's Aurora, but I prefer to be called Rose."

"Hi, Rose."

"Hello, Roxas." She smiled at him, and he smiled back a little uncertainly. "Where's your horse?"

"My horse? I don't have a horse."

"Really?" she said with interest. "I thought all men had horses."

"None of us in the Organization do," Roxas mused, "but maybe this world is different."
"The Organization?" she asked curiously.

'Oops. Change the subject, Roxas.' "What are you doing out here? Are you looking for your true love?"

"Oh, no, I've already found him," she laughed. "As well as two new families and enough nosy, bossy servants to drive me mad.... This is the first time I've managed to sneak out alone in ages."

"Huh. I've never had a problem like that with my servants, they just kind of wander around trying to catch people in Duel Stances and waiting for me to give them orders."

"I see," she said politely.

"...Well, I hope you have fun, um, picking flowers."

She laughed. "It's actually the leaves and stems I need. Aunt Flora recommended them, she said they would be good for the baby."

"Baby?" Roxas said interestedly. That was one of those words Axel would never explain to him and Xion, he just kept telling them to eat their ice cream before it melted. "What's a baby?"

She looked delighted. "So there is someone else who didn't know! I was sure there had to be."

Roxas felt his face lighting up. Yay, someone else who was dumb. This was excellent.

"A baby," she explained, "is a very, very young person. They're quite small, and most of the ones I've seen have been very cute, too. They eventually grow into children, and then into adults."

"Ohhhh," Roxas realized. "So, like, those really tiny people who aren't dolls and cry a lot and can't talk or walk...."
"Yes, those are babies. I'll be taking care of one soon."

"Really? Where do you buy them from?"

"I don't think you buy them...I'm pretty sure I already have one." She pressed the front of her dress flat against her body. "See?"

Roxas stared at the small but noticeable bulge right where her stomach was. "That's a baby?"

"It's inside. Apparently, Phillip put it there.... Aunt Flora said that babies are brought by storks, and Aunt Fauna said that they're sent down from heaven, but Aunt Merryweather took me aside once and told me a different story...it's the one I'm most inclined to believe, though."

"Really? What was it?"

Rose moved along, gathering more plants and recounting the story to Roxas as they were trailed by slightly bored, but still dutiful forest animals.

"Ohhhhhhhhh," Roxas said at the end of it. "That explains a lot." He thought a moment. "I wonder if Axel is my father." He hoped very much that Larxene wasn't his mother, but he couldn't think of anyone else. He shivered and tried to change the subject. "Why do the animals follow you around all the time?"

"Oh, they've always been my friends."

"Really?"

"Yes, they like it when I sing to them." She demonstrated. "Unbelievable sights, indescribable feeling: soaring, tumbling, freewheeling through an endless diamond sky...."

The creatures perked up happily, and the birds fluttered in a way that was almost like dancing. "Cool," Roxas said.
"Why don't you try?"

"Me?"

"Yes, go ahead."

Roxas eyed the entourage doubtfully. "Unbelievable sights, indescribable feeling: soaring, tumbling, freewheeling--" The birds seemed to stumble in midair, the rabbits were practically rolling over with mirth, and the deer staggered gracefully sideways. Roxas could have sworn they were all laughing at him. "I'm that bad?"

"Oh, no, dear, you sing wonderfully. It's just that that doesn't seem to be your song."

"My song?"

"Yes. Everyone has at least one song - what I sang just now was one of my friend Jasmine's. It sounded so strange when you tried to sing it, though, since you haven't found your own yet."

"Oh. What's my song?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Let's try to find it."

"Okay."

They both waited. "Well?" she finally prompted.

"Uh...so would it be, like...in a treasure chest or something...?"

"You have to sing what's in your heart, silly."
Roxas suddenly felt cold. "...What if someone doesn't have a heart?"

"Oh, everyone has a heart."

"Some people don't...."

Rose looked at him for a while. Then she smiled and laid her hand over his chest. "Roxas," she said softly. "I know that you can't just look inside and see it. But don't you feel it? Every time you watch a beautiful sunset, or laugh with the people you love?"

Roxas thought about this. "So, if I have a heart," he said cautiously, "how do I know what's in there so I can sing it?"

"Just sing what you feel, Roxas."

"...Hm." Well, he wasn't supposed to be able to feel, but he kind of did anyway, so there was no harm in trying, right? "I like ice cream. Axel is my best friend. Xion is, too. I got a dog for Christmas."

The animals were falling about again.

"It ought to rhyme," Rose explained gently.

"What's rhyme?"

"It's when the endings of the words sound the same. Like this: I know you, I walked with you once upon a dream. I know you, the gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam. See? Dream and gleam sound the same."

"Ohhhh." Roxas thought some more. "I like ice cream, and Axel is funny. Xion is my friend and gave me a puppy."

"Much better," Rose praised. "Just keep on practicing, and someday, when you're wandering"
through the woods, the beautiful sound of your voice will draw your true love."

"Oh." Demyx could sing good, but he didn't have a true love. Maybe only Somebodies could find them. But, no, all the stuff Rose had said about hearts.... "Do you have to have a true love?"

Rose looked a little blank. "Well, you know...none of my fairy aunts have one, and they all seem happy. Perhaps not."

"Do you like your true love?"

It looked as if a sunrise was breaking over her face. "Oh, yes. I love him more than anyone in the world."

"Wow."

"He is so sweet and clever, and strong and funny and brave...."

They both looked up at the sound of a distant cry. "Rose!"

Something was pounding the ground, rapidly approaching. The Keyblade appeared in Roxas's hand, but Rose seemed perfectly unperturbed. "We're over here!" she called.

A figure on horseback soon came bursting through the trees, pulling up nearby.

"Hello, Phillip dear."

"Darling, you could have at least waited for me to come back," her husband said reproachfully, swinging down and striding over to put his arms around her. "You know I'd prefer to keep an eye on you out here, especially when I now have two loves to worry over instead of one."

"We're perfectly all right," she said, kissing him. "I made a new friend - this is Roxas. He's learning how to sing properly."
"The words have to rhyme," Roxas stated, not sure what else to say.

Phillip laughed. "That does help. I say, aren't you hot, wandering around out here in that coat?"

"Um...well, I'm used to it... I'm looking for a giant Heartless. Or even some regular Heartless, that'd be good."

"Well," Phillip said, "we haven't had much Heartless trouble for a while now, but if you like, you can accompany us back to the castle and look through the Menace Reports. The villagers would certainly appreciate any help with that very much."

"Before that, though," Rose added, "I would be delighted if you joined us for dinner. I'm sure my aunts would love to meet you."

"Well...okay."

Both of the kids were running late, so Axel was hanging out on the clock tower by himself when Roxas finally showed up. "Hi, Axel."

"Hey, Rox." He frowned a little. "What the heck happened to your coat?"

"Flora and Merryweather had a fight," Roxas explained, looking down at the pink-and-blue-splashed garment. "I tried to stop them, but Fauna kept hugging me and calling me 'Ven Dear' and feeding me cake, so I got distracted."

"Ooookay."

Roxas sat down and unwrapped his ice cream. "Hey, Axel?"
"Yeah?"

"You don't have a true love, right?"

"Uh...not really...."

"Is it because you can't sing good?"

"Huh?"

"Or rhyme?"

"What?"

"And I have some more questions about putting babies into girls, too."

Axel choked on his ice cream and nearly fell off the clock tower. "Flaming pants, I'm gonna need something stronger than ice cream.... Luxord, where are you when I need you!"
As If It's Too Much Work: Drift {Xigbar & Demyx}

As If It's Too Much Work
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

For Demyx/Xigbar Day, 2 September 2012

Summary: Collection of drabbles and one-shots about Xigbar & Demyx; no slash. Includes AUs.

Introduction: A conversation way, waaaaaaaayyyyyyyyy back (maybe even a year ago?) made me want to write about Xigbar & Demyx together, and I started looking for a suitable challenge for them. I wanted a short one, so I finally settled on the "12_fics" LiveJournal community. However, when I did finally get motivated to actually start writing it (thanks to my Pairing Days obsession *sigh*), I started coming up with plot bunnies, and eventually realized that it didn't really make sense to take on the challenge anymore.... I already had the plunnies in this case, so trying to make them fit the prompts would be stupid because the main reason I do challenges is to be inspired by the themes.

So this is not gonna be a challenge response after all, it'll just be a regular series. At the moment, it's about nine installments long, but I've learned to not consider that kind of thing set in stone. *COUGHSTEPSIBLINGSCOUGH*

I could not think of a title, argh. It was a choice between the one up there and "untitled." -.-

Drift

Summary: Demyx isn't sure how he ended up as a merman, but whatever; he's content to just drift. Heh, "as if" he'd be allowed to.

0.0.0

He woke up with Relena's name on his lips, but once his eyes were open, he realized that he wasn't frantic about her like he'd been when he thought the monsters were going to get her. In fact, he wasn't really worried about her at all. Actually, he didn't care about a single thing at the moment, including the fact that his legs had mysteriously disappeared and been replaced with a dolphin tail.
he had no idea how to move.

So he just lay in the water and let the currents slowly carry him where they willed, and was not particularly concerned as he was turned gradually more and more head-downward. He thought in a detached way that it was peaceful down here, and he should have thought of becoming a merman sooner.

Why was he a merman now, anyway? And where was this place?

A black cloud suddenly formed in the water nearby, and someone swam out of it. "Aha! There you are, guppy. I have proof now, the Fancy-Schmancy Newbie Location Device needs tweaking."

"I'm not a guppy," he said vaguely. "I'm a guy. Well, I was." He looked at the tail. "I think I'm a merman now."

The stranger laughed and swam closer, dark hair streaming out behind him. "Haven't got the hang of this swimming thing yet, huh."

"Um...I never tried." Experimentally, he flapped the tail. "Hey, it moved." He was now more upside-down than ever. It was getting a little uncomfortable. In a weird way, he figured it was good that his body could still feel, because he himself felt...nothing. Like his heart had become a big blank.

"Give the kid a prize, he moved. Maybe we can teach him how to change directions next."

"How do you change directions?" he asked obligingly.

With some coaching, he managed to get himself upright, where he hovered uncertainly. "So...are we done now?"

"Why, you busy?"

"Uh...no."
"Running late?"

"No. Wait, yeah. I was supposed to bring the groceries back before 2:00, because Mom needed to start cooking before Uncle Baralai and Aunt Paine come, but...huh, I guess it doesn't matter now. Mom can't cook when she's dead. And there's no one left to cook for, anyway. Except me, I guess. Unless I'm dead, too." Which would actually make sense, seeing as how the last thing he remembered before coming here was those monsters tearing open his chest. He looked at the guy. "Is that why I can't feel anything? Because I'm dead?"

"Can't feel when you don't have a heart to feel with, kid."

"So they did eat it. Rotten punks."

"Want revenge?"

"...I dunno. Not really."

"Heh, let me put it this way: would you want revenge if you could still feel?"

He thought about this. "I want my heart back."

"Awesome, so do the rest of us." The guy held out a hand. "Whaddaya say? You'll join us, so we can all work together to get those hearts of ours back?"

Hm. Work didn't sound like a good thing. "Nah, that's okay. I'll just float here."

"Oh, come on, we have cookies."

Cookies were good. "Okay."

The guy blinked. "Wait, what?"
"You said you have cookies, right? I'll come with you if you give me cookies."

That made the guy laugh a lot for some reason. "I like you, kid."

"Oh."

"What's your name?"

He told him, spelling it out when the guy asked.

"Well, kiddo, not anymore, because it's my turn to choose the name, and I pick...Demyx. You look like a Demyx."

"I do?"

"Sure."

"What was wrong with my old name?"

"It didn't have an X in it."

"Oh. What's your name, then?"

"X, i, g, b, a, r: Xigbar."

"Too complicated. I'mma call you Xiggy."

"Heh...why not."
Xigbar opened the black cloudy thing again. "C'mon, Dem. Don't mind the darkness, it won't kill you."

"Oh. Good."

"Don't be scared."

"I won't."

"That was a joke."

"Oh."

"Laugh, kid."

Demyx laughed. "...If I get my heart back, will jokes be funny again?"

"Probably. Let's test it when we're people again."

"Okay. It's a promise."

Xigbar stared at him for a second. Then he smiled a little. "A promise, sure."

They entered the dark corridor together and vanished without a trace.

Author's Notes: The original plunny was "Dem's early life in the Org," but when I started writing it from the beginning when he first became a Nobody, the story just kind of ended once he and Xig
went to the castle. So I was like, "...Fine, I'll just post this to launch the series on September 2nd and then write the real story later." Sorry this initial fic isn't great, I've got some AUs and stuff planned, but I wanted to post SOMETHING for DemXig Day. *sweatdrop*

Lol, Gippal and Demyx (and Zack X3) have the same Japanese voice actor, and the English voice actors of Gippal & Baralai are brothers, so I guess that Gippal is Dem's dad in this universe. XD
Modern Love {Axel & Roxas}

Modern Love
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

**Summary:** Roxas is never going to figure out life, ever. (No slash.)

**A/N:** Man, the "Modern Love" theme for *Fire & Moonlight* is freaking hard! DX This is one of the failed ideas. The real version will probably use the same interpretation, but it kinda needs to involve Saïx in some way, shape, or form. *sweatdrop*

In most of my fics, the CoM team survives at least a few extra months, because writing the Organization is not nearly as fun without them. :(  

0.0.0

"Hey, Axel?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm kind of confused about something."

"You say this like it's a new thing," Axel chuckled, taking another bite of ice cream.

"Uh-- So, I just wondered why we're the only ones I know about who have a boyfriend *and* a girlfriend."

Axel swallowed wrong and choked on the sea-salt suddenly burning his throat.

"Well, I guess Xion has two boyfriends, but it's still different."
"Wait, what?"

"Or...would you be a manfriend, not a boyfriend? Because you're grown up? Except I've never seen 'manfriend,' I've only seen 'boyfriend'...are you allowed to be a boyfriend, Axel, or can you only be a friend?"

"Did Xigbar and Demyx get hold of you again?" Axel demanded, already starting to go into Beatdown Mode.

"...I messed up again, didn't I."

"Roxas, tell me what you are talking about!!!"

Roxas gave a very long sigh. "Axel," he asked mechanically, "what is a boyfriend and a girlfriend, because I guess it doesn't mean 'friend who is a boy' and 'friend who is a girl.'" He threw his arms up in frustration. "I hate this! I thought I'd figured it out by myself this time! Even when I'm smart, I'm still dumb."

"Roxas Number XIII Key of Destiny, I need some backstory now before I flip out more and start setting things on fire."

Roxas pulled out a book titled Modern Love. "Marluxia gave me this, because he said it'd make me a man. I'm sick of being a kid, so I said okay, but it didn't work."

Axel plucked the book out of his hands and started scanning through it. If he was a Somebody, he would have been in danger of fainting from horror. "Flaming...pants, Roxas, how much of this have you read?"

"I dunno...ten pages, maybe? Reading's hard."

The book immediately turned to ash in Axel's hands. "Roxas, Marluxia is a troll. Never listen to him."

"What's a troll?"
"Someone who thinks it's amusing to make my mentoring life miserable."

"You have a different life?" Roxas said in confusion.

"Well...not really, come to think of it...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: The "Modern Love" theme has been plaguing me for ages, I still haven't come up with a suitable plot bunny for it yet. I do know that I want it to be a book title and for there to be amusing awkward, but that's it. This morning, I guess Roxas got impatient or something and started playing the scene out, giving me dialogue and stuff, but...not a trace of Saïx, so I rejected it as an F&M drabble. However, today I worked at the job where I have a lot of time to write, so just for the heck of it, I scribbled out this Axel/Roxas version in my notebook. I still need some kind of Axel/Saïx version, though. --
This Kind of Love: Weapon (theme 54) - Axel & Saïx

This Kind of Love

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Summary: 100 platonic pairings from Kingdom Hearts. For the "Other Kinds of Love" theme challenge on DeviantArt.

Introduction: This fandom has way way way way too much romance. Romance is not the only kind of love, yanno. I decided to combine this undertaking with my desire to write for a 100-theme challenge where I'd do all of my own and my friends' favorite KH pairings (not trios or groups, ftr), request pairings, and crack pairings that are not included on those lists. I won't write pairings involving characters from The World Ends With You or Dream Eaters or, unfortunately, Vincent Valentine; or obviously characters I'm not familiar with (such as those from Final Fantasy VI, etc.). Or anyone from The Nightmare Before Christmas. Otherwise, you can ask for anything KH/Disney/...maybeFF, and I'll try my hand at it; hopefully I didn't forget any other characters I can't write.

There is absolutely no way I should have started this series now, before finishing even a single one of my other challenge series. But I loved this first story so much (when I was drafting it; I don't know how I feel about it yet now that it's complete) that I couldn't resist. I'm setting the goal at 10 for now, but I can't imagine not at least trying for the full 100. *wince*

Heh, I'm already breaking at least one of the "rules," but not the most/only important one, so it's okay.

Weapon (Theme 54) - Axel & Saïx [rough draft]

Summary: Out of twelve opponents, he just HAD to end up with this one, didn't he. SPOILERS for Dream Drop Distance.

A/N: Takes place during a theoretical Kingdom Hearts III.

0.0.0
Do you know what it feels like, being forced to fight someone who was once your best friend? It feels like there's a knife sitting in your heart, even if you're not supposed to have a heart. And I do have a heart now, apparently had one pretty much all along, and I can feel it bleeding even more than my flesh is bleeding as I'm fighting for my life against the guy who once had my back.

"You're getting slow, Sai," I taunt. Routine, automatic response to the fact that that last strike of his only missed me by a hair's breadth. "The old man's pace bogging ya down?"

No reaction. I might as well have not said a word. Which means it's definitely not my snarky, always-has-a-snappy-comeback Isa inside that body which happens to still have his face.

Xehanort is going to burn.

...Twelve of them. Twelve of these yellow-eyed clones, and even with those odds, I still get pitted against this particular one. Is it really just coincidence, or are they doing this to twist the knife? Maybe it's nothing more than a battle tactic, better chances of defeating an enemy when you toss the opponent at him who'll be the hardest for him to fight.

It's not going to work. This guy, this not-Isa, I'm going to rip him to shreds, because he's standing between me and the one who took the real Isa from me.

"Axel!" Sora shouts.

Okay, now what is that supposed to mean, exactly? 'Axel, look out behind you!' or 'Axel, I've got a plan!' or 'Axel, I need help!' or 'Axel, duck so you won't get caught in the line of fire when I blast him!' or what?

No time to find out, because that split second of hesitation costs me. Isa - not Isa, Saïx - moves like lightning. What I said earlier was just blowing smoke, because he hasn't slowed down at all, he's gotten faster. I bet he cheats by time-jumping or something, apparently they can do that now.

In any case, he's got me; hand hurts from the Keyblade getting knocked out of it, wrist hurts from the bad angle I'd tried and failed to block that new weapon of his at, back hurts from slamming against the ground, heart hurts most of all because I'd rather be burned alive than die like this. With him kneeling over me, I can't get free fast enough, and the blade's coming down, I can't help shutting my eyes because I don't want the last thing I see to be how perfectly composed my best friend's face is as he bashes my head in.
Earth-shattering impact. I'm dead now. For real this time, I guess. Killed by best friend. The universe hates me.

Except you can't keep raging at the universe when you're dead, so I open my eyes again and wow, he may have gotten faster but his aim kinda sucks, this close range and he missed. I have just enough time for the thought to start forming in my head that I should try to escape before he can lift the weapon again, but now his other hand's slamming down on my right arm to pin me; too late. Universe still hates me. Maybe I at least have a chance to re-summon my Keyblade, maybe I can--

"No," Saix hisses, the first time I've heard him speak since I became human again. "Not for this."

"Come again?" I ask conversationally. Keyblade handle materializing in my grip. Not so useful now that I can barely move my arm, though. Silver-blue weapon rising again, maybe before it comes down I can punch him with the arm he's not pinning, I start swinging but he's so dang fast, fist meeting nothing but air and another crash that reverberates through my bones--

Thank God for bad aim. Again.

"You won't use me for this!!!" he screams. And suddenly I couldn't move even if I didn't have a berserker weighing me down. Because he's not completely expressionless anymore.

...Well, he is. Saix is.

But there's another face looking at me too, now; like Isa's ghost - scarred and older, not the teenager I remember, still Saix's face except...Isa's green eyes...the horror that the real Isa would be feeling if it really was him trying to do this to me...it can't be. It can't be, I'm not going to hope, I'm not going to hope, because if I'm wrong, if I'm just freaking hallucinating this because I want so much for it to be true--

"Lea," he whispers. "Run."

Um, still can't move, but whatever, I don't care, it's you, you're still in there, flaming Kingdom Hearts you're not dead you're not dead you're not dead I'm going to kill him but first I'm going to try really hard not to cry because it's been so long, I didn't realize how much I missed you, I didn't realize how freaking much I actually, really did miss you until now when it's actually YOU and all
along it can't have been you because you wouldn't have hurt me the way Saïx did and you're hurting me now but that's only because I'm just realizing how much everything I'm remembering now must have hurt you all those years if it really was you in there listening to everything I said to Saïx as if I was saying it to you but I wasn't, I didn't know, but I should have known, I should have understood, I hate that--

"So you still exist?" he hisses. Saïx hisses. There's two of them, that blank face now twisting a little in displeasure, speaking in a voice that sounds almost like Xehanort's; the ghostly one of my friend, emotions roiling across it as Isa struggles to hold him back. "Stop resisting, you are at the end of your strength."

"You underestimate me," Isa tells him with a fierce grin, and I realize that he's been saving what was left of that strength, gathering every scrap of it, lying quiet all this time, through everything he had to endure for however long it's been, just so that he would be ready for this moment. So that he could give me this chance.

...He's sacrificing everything so that I can live, and I'm such an idiot that I can't even move because it's taking everything I have to not burst into tears.

You know what, screw it. I won't have to hold back tears if I'm already bawling. So I might as well drop that distraction, because shoving him off me and running like heck is kinda more important at the moment than keeping up the Flurry of Dancing Flames' dignity.

Luckily for my dignity, Riku saves me before I can even attempt to cry, Barrier Surging Saïx to the side so I can jerk free and scramble to my feet. "Axel, the portal's open, let's go!"

"But--" Isa. Isa Isa Isa, he's back, he's still here, he's alive, and now I'm supposed to just leave him????

Except I can't see Isa's face anymore, it's just Saïx now, roaring as he starts going Berserk, oh no you don't I'm beating your stupid face in until you give me back my friend, except, oh, wait, that'd be beating Isa's face in too, hmmmm, how to do this--

"AXEL!" Riku's not the only one shouting at me now. Sora's jerking at me, Aqua's getting in my way, they're dragging me back and no, no, no they are not going to do this to me, not now just when I'm finally, FINALLY so close--
"Lea," Riku growls, catching my attention for a second because these doofs almost never call me by my real name. "Lea. You have to. He wouldn't want to be the reason you stay and die for nothing, when you had the chance to live."

"Come on, Axel," Sora pleads urgently.

I can see King Mickey in the distance, holding off Xehanort but he's having a hard time of it and he won't last for long....

"Get him out of here!" Roxas bellows. Saïx is in full Berserker mode now, completely lost in the moonlight. Even when we were still Nobodies, I was never able to reach him when he was like this. His eyes, swallowed by mindless gold, are fixed on me. The only reason he's not trying to rip me to pieces is because Rox and Xi are blocking him, and he'd have to tear them up first before he can get to me. "MOVE!"

...The days when Isa was my only friend are long over.

The strength drains out of me. "I'm coming back," I manage to say as they're suddenly able to get me moving.

"Of course," Aqua snaps.

"We all are," Sora says in a Duh voice. "Once we've got the last Key."

It's really Riku who persuades me, even though he doesn't say a word; all I have to do is see the pain in his eyes. He knows. He's been through this before. He would rather die than have to watch his best friend get killed because of him, and recognizing that on his face is the only reason I'm able to turn my back on Isa now, the only reason I can run from this battle empty-handed.

I do take one last look, though, before we disappear. The moonlight's at an ebb, Saïx can barely move, slumped there with only just enough strength to look up and meet my eyes. "Isa," I call to him. "I promise. I am coming back for you."

There's a flash of green behind the gold, and he smiles.
Author's Notes: ...I'd wanted to save this for my massive story/chapter update hopefully later this week, but...I felt like I had to post it now. I wrote it last night at, like, 2:00 in the morning because I kept getting eaten by plot bunnies for half the other fics I'm writing and I couldn't sleep, and if I could choose a single scene to have in a future game it would be something like this, but it's stupid fanservice wish fulfillment so I hate it but at the same time I want something like it so much and I hate AkuSai angst and whhhhhhhhhhhhhyyyyyyyy can they *never - be - happy* and this scene has been playing in my head a lot until I finally realized yesterday that I could actually write it out and not have to wait for it to ever actually happen and I'm coming down with a cold or something but I have to work tomorrow and it seems like I've been constantly hungry the last couple of days but I hate eating and I get too sick to eat and today was supposed to suck because I was going to a horrible school with an upset stomach and only three hours of sleep but it actually went pretty well and I wrote some of a SaiJaz story before school and during conference but now my feet hurt and I'm so tired and I feel awful and I want to go to bed and gaaaaahhh, I love my OTP so freaking much and I hate how my fluffy happy-ending version of it seems like it will never be canon and in hindsight I think I recognize what this was probably subconsciously inspired by and Axel refuses to do past tense in first person and I fail at titles and I think this is the first time I've written Saïx, Saïx (not Isa), in a negative light, and it felt weird. *headdesk* *too tired to sit back up*

Complete: 1/10
"Sora? Can I come in?"

"Yeah...."

Kairi carefully opened the door. Sora was sitting on his bed, surrounded by books and papers and writing instruments and a calculator, but he wasn't actually working. He was staring out the window, and the only thing in his hand was the scroll Kairi had brought him from the King. She smiled sadly and went to sit on the bed as well. "I know it has to be hard."

"I'm going," he said helplessly. "It's not like I would ever not go. It's just...I just...thought...."

"You thought it was over," she said softly. Safe home on the Islands, reunited with the family he'd been separated from for so long, just starting to catch up on all the schoolwork he'd missed - just when he'd started settling back into a normal life. But now this. Sora and Riku both, it was almost like they were fated for something beyond the ordinary, adventures with greater joys and deeper pains than anyone else from these islands could even imagine. Not an interruption, but a transition to a greater calling from which they could never truly turn back.

Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It's just.... "Sora," she said. She felt bad for asking, and she knew what he would say, but she had to make sure. "How much of it is because you want to, and how much is because you feel you have to?"
He didn't answer as quickly as she expected. Finally, he spoke. "Does it matter?"

She waited.

"If I'm gonna do it either way...does it matter how I feel about it?"

"It matters to you," she said softly. "How hard is it to smile?"

"...Right now?"

She held out her arms. "Then don't. You don't have to smile for me if you'd rather cry instead."

He didn't cry. But he did lay his head against her shoulder and rest in her arms for a long time.

The next day, when she set that star-shaped charm in his hand and promised to be waiting for him when he came back, he met her questioning look with a smile, and the pain behind it was gone.

Author's Notes: This was my attempt at a Sora/Kairi Day fic for September 17th, but I got writer's block close to the end and didn't finish it in time. :/

...Holy cow, this drabble was lame. SoKai may be my KH canon OTP, but I think I kind of hate them in fandom. DX

Complete: 3/10
**This Kind of Love: Riku & Naminé**

*This Kind of Love*, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Riku & Naminé (rough draft)

*For Riku/Naminé Day, 8 December 2012*

**Summary:** There are a lot of things Naminé has never experienced before, and only one person around to teach her.... Platonic fic for Riku/Naminé Day.

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It was getting hard to draw...her eyes hurt. She had been staring at white pages in this white room for so long, she was starting to lose focus. Her hand ached. 'Can I...stop? Or will DiZ...?' No. Better keep going. He usually came to tell her when it was getting late and she needed her rest so that she wouldn't wear herself out and become useless.

She finally did hear approaching footsteps behind her, but was startled to turn around and find that it was not DiZ, but a figure in a black coat. "Oh - hello, Riku. I'm sorry, I wasn't able to get much done today, either...."

He tilted his head as if to survey all the papers on the floor, some full drawings, but many more crumpled failures. "That's all right. I know you've been working hard." He stepped up to lay his palm against the glass behind which his best friend slept. "Still snoozing, Sora...?"

Naminé respectfully gave him a moment. He soon sighed and turned to face her again. "Come on. It's getting dark."

"I'll try to do better tomorrow...."

"Don't worry about it. You're doing a great job." His tone was not particularly bright, but she saw respect in his expression, and it seemed to warm her a little.
"Thank you, Riku. That...means a lot to me."

They walked back to the main part of the mansion in silence, she clutching her sketchbook and he most likely brooding. "Are you back for the night, or are you going out again later?" she ventured once they had reached the warm brown walls.

"I'm staying in tonight...I've hit a dead end for now, and I'm tired."

"Oh." She wasn't sure how to tactfully say that she would be glad of his company. "I hope you're able to rest well."

"Mm."

In the kitchen, she watched him surreptitiously as she put together a sandwich. He was cooking some meat on the stove, with a pot of water standing by. It smelled delicious. "What are you...making?"

"Just pasta. I don't feel up to trying anything fancy."

To Naminé, anything involving the stove was 'fancy,' but she had an idea she probably should not tell him this.

"Do you want some?"

"Umm...."

He smiled a little. "I'm making more than I can eat in one sitting, anyway. You're welcome to the rest."

"Oh...all right, if it's no trouble."

"Absolutely none."
She began to watch more openly as he set the cooked beef to drain. He noticed, and chuckled again. "You want to help?"

"I...."

"Here, dump this pasta in the colander and rinse it off."

"Okay," she said, relieved to not be making him do all the work after all.

He let her pour the tomato sauce in, too, clicking his tongue in regret when she accidentally splashed a little on her dress. "Sorry about that. You need to go clean up?"

"I'll be fine," she assured him. It wasn't like anyone around here would care what she wore, as long as she kept doing her job.

"Okay...."

As they waited for the pasta to finish cooking, an awkward silence began to stretch out between them. "So...where did you go today?" she finally asked.

"Neverland. Kind of a pain, people are hard to track there...."

"Really?" she asked politely. She had an idea that 'track' meant 'look for.'

"Yeah. Because of the pixie dust - a lot of them can fly, and you don't leave traces behind when you're in the air."

"Oh." She wondered what it was like to fly. "So you don't like it?"

He tapped his fingers thoughtfully. "Well...it's a fun world, actually. I think I'd like it better if...." He sighed. "If my life was normal."
"Oh." She wondered what a normal life was like, too. She was pretty sure that hers was not, if the other young people in Twilight Town were anything to go by.

Riku seemed to be studying her. Then he smiled. "I'll take you there someday, Naminé."

She looked at him in surprise. "To Neverland?"

"Mm hm. I think you'd like it."

She found herself smiling, too. "I'd like to go there." She'd like to go pretty much anywhere that wasn't here, actually.

Eating dinner was kind of fun with someone to talk to. She actually heard Riku laugh once or twice - he had a nice laugh. She wished he'd do it more often. "You have a nice laugh, Riku."

"Huh? Oh...."

She'd never seen Riku look uncomfortable like that. He usually seemed so unruffled, like he always knew what he was doing.

"I guess I am a pretty gloomy guy. Sorry."

"No, not at all! I was just thinking...I'd like to hear your laugh more often."

He smiled a little and ducked his head more than usual to take another bite of pasta. She noted curiously that his face seemed to be a little red. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah...man, it's weird hanging out with a girl again. A not-evil one, anyway."

"You don't like it?" she asked apprehensively.
He sighed and shook his head, but he was still smiling. "It's just that you're so li-- So easy to--"
He blew out a frustrated breath at his difficulty articulating. "I just feel all big and clumsy around
you. I...don't...know how to be nice."

"I think you're really nice."

"Man, Naminé...stop complimenting me, I...you're...gonna give me a big ego again."

She ducked her head and was afraid to say anything else. Until, after silently finishing the meal,
Riku got up and washed the dishes and then came and laid a gentle hand on her back. "Naminé."

"...Yes?"

"I like hanging out with you, you know. You're a sweet girl."

She was afraid to look at his face, but she was desperate to see if he really meant it - he did. "I'm
not bothering you...?"

"No way. You just...." He looked thoughtful as he chose his words. "You...make me feel better
than I think I deserve."

She wasn't sure what to say to that.

"...Come on."

"Where are we going?" she asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Uh, my room...just to hang out, I won't try anything," he said, a little nervously.

"Try what?"
"Never mind...." He was doing that strange red-faced ducked-head smile again. "Man, you're funny...." Then he suddenly stopped, as if something had occurred to him. She waited patiently. He turned to look at her and said in a serious tone, "Naminé. Don't go anywhere alone with a guy, okay? Like if you're in town or something. You'll be safe with me, but...random guys you don't know...it's safer if you stay in the open where there's a lot of people, okay?"

"Okay. Why is it dangerous?"

He gave a helpless little laugh. "Man, I am so not ready to explain birds and bees to a girl old enough to date me...."

She kept looking at him in utter perplexity.

"Tell you what - ask DiZ about it tomorrow. I wanna be there to get a picture of his face."

"Riku," she said helplessly, "I really actually don't know what you're talking about at all."

"I can't decide if that's a good or a bad thing...."

His room was cleaner than she expected - not too dusty except in the corners, the few personal items in it arranged tidily, the sheets scented faintly from laundry detergent. "What's this?" she asked curiously, picking up one of the items on the dresser to inspect.

"Huh? It's just mouthwash. I'd put all that stuff in the bathroom, but either Dusks or Heartless keep getting into it, and it's easier to keep them out of my stuff when it's all together."

"Oh. What's this one?" The colors on the bottle were pretty.

"Hair gel.... Hey, let's, like, not sort through my grooming stuff, okay?"

"Oh." She looked at him unhappily as he took the hair gel out of her hands and started shoving all the pretty bottles and things into a drawer. "I'm sorry."
"No problem. Man, Naminé, you make me feel like I kicked a puppy or something.... I'm not mad at you okay? It's just...um...feels weird having a girl go through my stuff like that...."

"I won't do it again," she promised. She backed up to the middle of the room and stood with her hands clasped together, determined not to touch anything else.

He seemed to watch her for a moment. Then he grinned a little and shook his head. "You know what, whatever; just look at whatever you want."

"Oh...no, I'm fine."

He blew out a breath. "Man, I'm an idiot.... Here, sit down." He took hold of her shoulders and gently steered her into a chair. "Just make yourself comfortable, all right?"

"Okay...."

"...."

"...."

"Here." He went over to pull something out of a drawer in the nightstand. "You ever seen one of these before?"

He put it into her hands, and she stared at it. "Um...."

"Heh, I take that as a No. It's a DS. I brought it along because I thought I'd need to kill time, but I've barely touched it.... Hey, this is the On switch. Slide it this way."

"Okay...." She nearly dropped the device when it suddenly lit up and made a dinging sound.

"Heh, easy. It's gonna flash lots of colored lights and pictures and make noise, okay?"
"Okay...."

He edged his blindfold up slightly and then helped her make the words and pictures change, and when he noticed her wincing, he turned the volume down so that the noise didn't grate on her ears so much. They eventually got the screen to show a picture of a boy standing on a beach.

"So you can make him walk around by using those arrows, see? Try it."

"Me?"

He chuckled. "Yes, you. Let's see if you have any latent gaming talent."

"Huh?"

"Press an arrow button, Naminé."

It helped when he scooted over behind her and put his arms around her and his hands over hers, pressuring her fingers to hit the right buttons at the right time. "Ohhhhh." She knew how to get the boy to move around now. She made him jump onto a ledge. "Look, Riku! He jumped."

"Good job, Naminé!" He looked amused for some reason. "Here, let's jump one ledge higher and try to grab that star."

"The star?"

"They give you extra points."

"...Points?"

Eventually, she was able to do it all by herself, pressing the buttons so that the boy in the 'DS' walked and ran and jumped around, collecting things from the tiny beach. Riku leaned over her
shoulder to watch, praising her whenever the numbers in the corner went higher.

"What does that mean?" she asked apprehensively when the screen blacked out after making bright flashes.

"Means you finished the training level. Come on, let's go kill some monsters now."

"Kill monsters?" she said in alarm.

She was surprised to realize, a while later, that getting to bash ugly, mean creatures with a weapon until they disappeared and stopped hurting her gave her a feeling of satisfaction. "Look, Riku. I killed eleven of them." Bash, bash, bash, poof! "Twelve. I killed twelve."

"You're doing great, Naminé. Now, stop here and drink another Potion and use the save point, the boss is in the next area."

"Boss?"

IT WAS SO SCARY. She squealed and tried to shove the DS at Riku, but he only laughed and tried to give it back, and when she wouldn't take it, he put his arms around her again so that the two of them fought together.

"No! No no no Riku he's hurting me he's--"

"Calm down, just move out of range and aim the next one at his-- Oooh, hold on, don't tense up like that, I can't move your fingers--"

"THAT'S THE--"

"Jump, Naminé!"

"Aaaaahhh!" She couldn't understand why he was laughing.
GAME OVER

She stared at the screen. She was dead. No, the boy was dead. She'd let him die.


She looked, feeling like she wanted to crawl into a hole and never come out so that she would never have to hurt anyone else ever again.

"Look. I'm loading from the last save point. This is what save points are for."

She stared. "He's back," she whispered.

"There's always a second chance, Naminé," Riku said softly. "And a third, and a fourth, and however many you need. Come on. Let's beat this guy together."

She let him put his arms around her again, and she breathed deeply, and this time she trusted him. The boy was alive after all. Riku was guiding her. It would be all right - there was nothing to be afraid of.

"R-Riku--"

"It's okay, try a Blizzard spell to counter it next time."

"Huh?"

"I'll show you in a-- Whoa, Dodge Roll Dodge Roll Dodge Roll, good, yeah, if you keep doing that when the light starts shining over his hand, it's harder for him to hit you. OOH, he's open, go for it, quick before the shield regenerates!"

"What?"
He laughed. "Well, at least it's easier to press buttons when your fingers aren't all stiff...."

"I'm hitting him."

"Good, Naminé. Ooh, Dodge Roll out of there now, we have to circle around and try again once he's unleashed that."

WINNER!!

"Riku...it says I beat Level 1."

He smiled and held up his hand. After a minute, he reached for her hand and slapped her palm against his own for some reason. "Awesome, Naminé."

She felt so good. She had never felt so incredibly good in her life before. "I beat him," she whispered. "He tried to hurt me, but I beat him and he's gone. He can't hurt me anymore."

If she was so happy, why was she crying?


It was...just...being here with him...having someone who was kind to her, who helped her and was patient with her and didn't hate her.... But she didn't know how to say it, all she could manage was, "I like video games."

After a moment, he smiled a little and hugged her. She wrapped her arms around him and decided that she liked being held, too.

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Author's Notes: Ftr, I don't actually approve of video games in general (huge time wasters, if
nothing else!!! XD), but I did notice some interesting...parallels, while playing FF and KH RPGs.

The RikuNami in this fic is definitely platonic, but seeing as how the two of them lived together for an entire year, both lonely and with no one else for company, I can't imagine that they wouldn't be good friends by the time KH2 starts, so it's easy to see it possibly turning to romance someday. (Or not. I honestly don't care. XD) I don't mind them as a couple in other universes, and they make a nice default pairing to fall back on. And for me, RikuNami would have a happier ending than SoNami, since I firmly ship SoKai.

Anyway. That's my two cents. I like RikuNami (Riku's my favorite pairing for Naminé, which is kind of dumb since RepliNami is my favorite for poor Repliku), but I wanted to specifically try them as a platonic pairing for RikuNami Day. And if I was gonna do that, I figured why not toss it into the TKoL series. XD (Man, I haven't even been using the prompts at all. *sweatdrop* Whatever; I'll use them for another series or something.)

Hand-writing the beginning of this fic (about a page) felt like pulling teeth (Riku didn't want to be shipped in a Pairing Day fic at first, even platonically XD), but for the rest of it which I drafted on the computer, it flowed quite well. The pairing worked a lot better than I expected, so I like it even more than I did before. ^^

Complete: 4/10
Bound by Fire: Axel, Roxas, & Xion

Bound by Fire, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Part 4 of 6 - Axel, Roxas, & Xion (rough draft)

- 29 September 2012, North American anniversary of Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days

-  

Summary: In which Axel, Roxas, & Xion get their beach day.

A/N: Kind of like a canon-based "What if?" scenario, since obviously they never got to go to the beach together in any of the games yet. :( 

Prologue

"Pleeeaaase pretty please, Sai?"

"What are you, a first grader?"

"Ommnne little day off, just one teeny tiny day! That's not much to ask, is it?"

"In fact, it would be an extreme favor, considering that you just had a vacation, and Xemnas has been getting on my case, and Xigbar and Demyx's fiasco last week set us back, and your precious Keybearers have been slacking off, and I'm up to my ears in giant Heartless reports, not to mention that we're losing manpower even as our workload is increasing--"

"You do realize I'm taking you out, too, right?"

"...."

"I know you hate my kids - which is why they hate you back, by the way; and have I reminded you lately that you're a heartless jerk and a moron? - so I thought all three of you'd enjoy yourselves
"more without each other's company."

"...."

"Unless you want to go to the beach with us."

"...We can't afford another vacation day."

"Xemnas-sama probably thinks we can't afford keeping that Chihuahua you've been hiding in your room, either. I wonder why he hasn't tossed her into the Void yet? Oh! That's right, because he doesn't know about her! YET."

"I hope you get eaten by a Kraken."

"Be ready to leave as soon as I've got dinner for the kids. I'd recommend you obtain some jeans before then, you're gonna look like an idiot where we're going if you show up in uniform."

"Hmph."

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"Really?!" the Keybearers exclaimed in adorable unison, Xion leaping to her feet and Roxas dropping his ice cream. He didn't seem particularly upset about this. "We get to go to the beach?!"

"Yep."

They stared at him, wordlessly beaming in the way that always made Axel feel ridiculously awesome.

"We're going shopping first, though."
"Huh?"

"Why?"

"Well, do either of you even own any clothes other than your uniforms?"

"I've got that black and white and tan thing," Roxas offered.

"Roxas, you're gonna be running around in acres of sand and seawater."

"...Okay?"

Well, guess it made sense that these little doofs thought it was normal to do things like get sent to Agrabah in full-length black coats and boots. "What I mean is, you're gonna need something more occasion-appropriate to wear. So! You guys done with your ice cream yet?"

Roxas looked down at Station Plaza where his ice cream had fallen. Xion hurriedly knocked the remainder of hers off against the ledge, then stuck the stick in her pocket for future disposal. They both smiled at him.

"All right, then, let's hit the shops."

The kids' reactions to swimwear were pretty much exactly as he predicted.

"What? I can't go out in this!" Roxas protested from behind the dressing room partition. "This is like underwear with pictures on it."

"Roxas, the fabric is different, it's supposed to be worn in water. That means it's okay to let girls see you in it."

"How does the cloth have anything to do with whether I can wear it outside or not?"
"...Come to think of it, you kinda have a point."

Xion came out of the ladies' section, still wearing her coat.

"Something wrong, Xi?"

"No," she said self-consciously.

"What happened to the swimsuits you went to try on?"

"...I'm wearing one," she muttered.

"Under your coat?"

"Where else?"

"Xi, you're supposed to wear them by themselves."

"No, I'm not!"

"Xion--"

"Axel, they show my skin!"

"That's kind of the point...."

He eventually coaxed them into T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. They surveyed each other unhappily, Xion crossing her arms protectively over her chest and subconsciously posing even girlier than usual, Roxas restlessly tugging at the ends of the sleeves as if he thought that would make them stretch longer. "Your legs are really white," he observed.
"Your arms are really skinny," she realized.

"...."

"...."

"You both look great," Axel said reassuringly, even though what he really wanted to do was laugh.

They kind of rounded on him. "What about you, Axel?"

"Me?"

"I wanna see what you look like in beach clothes," Xion said interestedly.

"Urk...." Having no particular interest in showing off the distinctly countable ribs Saïx kept bugging him about, Axel came out in a T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops as well. He raised an eyebrow. "Well?"

"Your legs are really white, too," Roxas noticed at once, as if he was doing a study on Organization member leg colors.

"And your arms are really skinny," Xion noted in a 'Yay, my friends have something in common!' tone.

Axel resisted the impulse to facepalm. "Well, that's what happens when you wear the uniform practically 24/7 and ignore Saïx's protein-nagging. Man, we're gonna look like idiots tomorrow, aren't we.... Whatever. Okay! Now that we're all suited up, let's head home for some chow and get to bed before 11:00 for a change. Beach days are worth being well-rested for, heh."

The next morning, Axel was awakened before the time set on his alarm clock, even though he'd been careful to not actually set his alarm. "Whyyyy?" he moaned, pulling a pillow over his head and burrowing farther into the covers.
"But...isn't it Beach Day today?" Roxas said worriedly.

"There's a vacation notice in the Grey Area and everything," Xion added.

"It's not even 7:00 yet! Go back to sleep!"

When Axel woke up for real an hour or two later, he found the kids munching on Pop-Tarts and playing Monopoly at the foot of his bed. "I landed on Free Parking," Roxas was proclaiming triumphantly, "again!"

"No fair!" Xion shrieked.

"Sssshhhh! You'll wake up Axel!"

Axel stared. "Where in the multiverse did you even find that game, much less--? You know what, never mind, I don't want to know."

"Axel!"

"Yay, you're up!"

Axel blarghed through his morning, trying to fend off the kids' enthusiastic impatience. Eventually, however, they were all dressed and fed and packed and ready to go, and came strolling out of a dark corridor into Twilight Town. "Can we ride a train, Axel?" Xion asked suddenly.

"Oh yeah," Roxas realized. "We've never actually gotten to ride a train, even though we've been here a billion times. And the times when I jump up on top of the tram until the driver stops and comes out and yells at me don't count."

"Have you ever considered actually paying the fare?" Axel asked in amusement.
"What's a fare?"

Life Lesson Number Six Billion Nine Thousand Two Hundred Seventy-Eight, or so it felt to Axel. The kids seemed to like it, though, talking to a clerk who was not a Moogle and getting to use munny for something other than synthesis material. "So," Roxas said as he looked happily at his shiny new ticket, "if I show this to the train driver, he'll let me inside the train this time?"

"They're called conductors, not drivers, and yes."

"You're really good at train riding, aren't you, Axel," Xion said admiringly.

He laughed and ruffled her hair. "It would be really, really lame if I was bad at something like that."

"...I'm not lame, am I?"

"You're making it really hard to not glomp you and squee, that's what you are."

"What does that even mean?"

They acted more like excited six-year-olds than teenagers (if you could even call these memoryless infant Nobodies teenagers...), moving from window to window and car to car, exclaiming over everything that breathed or moved or sparkled.

"Cool, I've never seen this part of Twilight Town before."

"Hey, look, the little girl on that other train is waving to us!"

"Oh, a food cart! Score!"

"Axel, that guy has his finger in his nose, I thought you said that's bad to do where other people can see."
"*gaaaaaasp* THEY HAVE ICE CREAM."

"Rox, you eat ice cream every da--"

"I'M GOING TO BUY SOME ICE CREAM FROM THE FOOD CART."

"...Knock yourself out."

Roxas happily came back with three bars of sea-salt, which he distributed before gluing himself back to the window. "Hey, Axel? If the sun sets red because red's the color that travels farthest, would it set blue or green or something when you go close to it? And how come blue and green can't go as far as red, anyway?"

Xion looked surprised. "Colors can get tired?"

Axel threw up his hands in amused, exasperated resignation. Which he wasn't complaining about, since it was, after all, a feeling. "Looks like the time has now come to explain how the universe works. Dang it, Sai was the one who wanted to be a teacher, not me...."

By the time Roxas and Xion had learned what the sun was made of and how it lit up Twilight Town and the definitions of words like "rotation" and "revolution," the train was pulling into the Gulfside station. They scampered out and immediately looked up at the sound of seagull cries overhead. "What are those?"

"Birds," Axel teased.

"I KNOW they're birds! I've just never seen them like that before...."

"They sound sad," Xion said.

"They're not sad, they're hungry. Don't feed them unless you want to get mobbed."
"But...if they're hungry...!"

Axel grinned. "Well, fine, then; try it." Then he took cover and laughed as he watched Xion and Roxas getting chased around the station platform by greedy seagulls.

"Axeeelllll!"

"I did warn you."

Apparently he wasn't used to it yet - it was incredible how much they didn't know or hadn't thought of. That if they didn't strip down to their swimsuits before going in the water, their only clothes would be soaking wet and they'd have to RTC like that; the fact that flip-flops did not tend to stay on one's feet when one went cavorting in the ocean; the folly of touching jellyfish, no matter how invitingly squishy they looked; and on it went.

"You can make a castle out of sand?"

"Well, you know. Not a real castle."

"Soo...a Nobody castle?"

"You're joking right?" Axel said warily (it was usually hard to tell), and felt actual relief when they grinned at him. (Again with the feelings; what the heck was up with this lately?)

"It doesn't really look like a castle," Xion said critically when they had finished. "More like a sand pile."

"With shells stuck on it," Roxas added helpfully.

"Yeah, well, I never said I was an expert sandcastle-maker, okay?" Isa's castles were the ones that always looked like they could pose for magazine covers. "This is just how people make sandcastles. They only actually look like castles if you have this thing called talent."
"Can we make sandhouses, too?" Roxas wondered. "Like the houses in Twilight Town?"

"Or sandtrains," Xion offered.

"SandKeyblades...."

"SandHeartless...."

"Guys, it's sand. Make whatever you want."

They suddenly looked interested. "Can we make a sandAxel, too?"

"Hey, where are you going with this?"

Of COURSE it ended up as a sand-fight. They ran around pelting each other with balls of damp sand and laughing at the top of their lungs, until they ended up too far out in the water and Xion tripped, splashing full length into the ocean.

"Xion!" Roxas stooped to grab her and was bowled over by an incoming wave. "Gaaahhh! It's cold!"

Xion laughed. "Your hair looks funny when it's wet, Roxas."

"His hair always looks funny," Axel chuckled, scrubbing a hand through it.

"It does not! Yours looks funnier."

"Hey, I comb my hair, for one thing; and do you even know how much time I spend gelling it every morning?"

"I like it better without that goop," Xion said, and the two of them suddenly knocked Axel over as
if they had planned it.

He came up sputtering, hands poised over his head in a horrified sort of way. "My haaaaaiiiiir!"

Roxas laughed. "Now you look like a girl."

"Hey!" Well, at least he could swim now without worrying about the 'do. "Rox, Xi, come out where it's deeper, I need to teach you guys something else."

They both picked it up shockingly quickly, first paddling and then stroking in wide circles around him like they were fish. Must be something to do with the original Island-dwelling Keybearer....

"This is fun."

"I like swimming."

"Yeah."

"Okay," Axel said a little worriedly, "which means that our next lesson is about these things called currents and undertows...."

He tired much faster than they did, what with his fire element not reacting so well to his body being submerged for so long. He actually needed their help getting back to shore, which was kind of humiliating. "I'm not actually a loser, you know...just really lazy...."

"Okay, Axel," Roxas said with a grin.

"Do you want some ice cream when we get back to the beach?" Xion asked, in the same tone little girls used when speaking to their baby dolls.

"...You guys are enjoying this, aren't you."
Not that he minded much when the three of them were lounging together on their beach towels, licking at their usual desserts in this very not-usual setting.

"You were right, Axel," Xion said happily. "The beach is really fun."

"Yeah. We have to come here again," Roxas said, as if it was already a done deal.

"Might not be easy, but I agree," Axel said. Sitting in the warmth of this sun and this friendship, with the best taste on his lips and his two favorite people for company.... Fighting to hold onto this for as long as he could might be difficult, but it would always, always be worth it.
Bound by Fire, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Part 5 of 6 - Axel and Xion: Pastoral Mission (rough draft)

For my dearest Taliax. X3 You've been such a joy to talk to, my love, and we connect so
delightfully in so many ways. (We also seem to have a bad habit of squicking each other out. XD
We really ought to stop that....) Thank you for your sweetness and optimism, it means a lot to me!
^^

Summary: Axel & Xion have a shared mission in a musical world.

A/N: Random canon, I guess. Ignores Dream Drop Distance. Makes reference to other fics like
Fire & Moonlight and CatC, but doesn't necessarily take place in those universes.

Shared missions were the best, at least when her partner was either Axel or Roxas. She didn't care
where they were assigned in those cases, but of course some worlds were always better than
others. "Do you like it when we get to see new worlds, Axel?" she asked curiously as they
traversed the dark corridor.

He shrugged. "Dunno. Places like Neverland were cool the first time, but I kinda had my fill of
Wonderland before we'd even been there ten minutes."

"I don't blame you," she giggled. "I think getting to fly is one of the best things there is, but
Wonderland...um...is hard."

"You can say that again. I remember the first time me and S-- The first time I was assigned there.
We got stuck wandering around for hours, didn't get back 'til nearly midnight...I'd fallen from
inside an upside-down house into random trees about fifty times by then, and my partner'd lost his
patience and gone berserk...multiple times...." 

"How can we lose our patience if we don't have any emotions to get frustrated with?" Xion
wondered teasingly.

"Right," Axel laughed. Then added more seriously, under his breath so that she thought she might not have been supposed to hear, "Though sometimes I wonder...."

The corridor ended atop a gorgeously green, grassy hill, overlooking a colorful rolling landscape.

"Ohhhh," Xion breathed, awestruck, "it's so beautiful here."

"This is a pretty world," Axel said thoughtfully. "I figured you'd like it, Xi."

She glanced over at him curiously. "You make it sound like you brought me here on purpose."

He winked. "Well, I did pull a few strings."

"Really?!"

"Yep. Saïx was gonna pair me with Xaldin instead, but I convinced him you'd be better for the job."

She gulped. "I'd better work hard, then...."

"Relax, Xi, it's just recon. You'll do fine."

Xion yelped as something snuffled in her ear. She spun around in a panic, pressing her hands protectively against her head.

The - CUTEST - little - tiny - flying - horsie - was hovering there in the air, looking at her curiously. So were several chubby naked winged babies, but they were far less interesting than the adorable horsiiiiiiiiiiiiie!
"What is that!?" Xion screamed in delight.

"A baby pegasus."

"Aaaahhhhh!" Xion glomped the creature, which brayed in alarm, struggled free of her arms, dashed higher, gazed down at her uncertainly, then suddenly swooped back and licked her cheek before flying away. "AxeeeeeIllllll!!!!!!"

"Yeah, I saw it," he said in amusement, pulling out a bent and battered notebook. "Observed one pegasus foal and four cupids of assorted hair colors. There, easy."

"And they expect me to analyze that?!" Xion said in rapture, smiling broadly as the cupids started plaiting her hair. "It's too cute to analyze!"

"Hm," Axel mused. "Inhabitants appear to transport themselves via natural aviation. Possibly the terrain is unstable and therefore less suitable for ambulatory transportation."

Xion snorted and tapped one foot against the ground. "Feels stable enough to me."

"You wanna give the analysis a shot, then?" Axel challenged.

"No!"

"Thought so. Ahem." Axel pretended to scribble more notes. "The outrageous hair colors leads one to believe that either the locals contain anime chromosomes in their genetic structures, or else they use hair products similar to those endorsed by our Organization--"

"I think you're just making all that up."

"Of course I am. What's the fun of doing recon in a world like this if you have to do it properly?" Axel shoved the notebook back in his seemingly bottomless pocket and then flung himself down the hill. "Wheeew!
Xion burst into laughter. "You are ridiculous!" she called down to him. Then lay down and rolled in his wake, yelling "Wheeeeee!" This was incredibly stupid. And also super-fun.

At the bottom of the hill flowed a stream, along which flower petals steadily floated by. Xion and Axel were drawing the attention of more and more cupids, who circled them with great interest before darting off to whisper eagerly to each other.

"You think they're planning something?" Axel wondered idly.

"I don't know. You're the expert on this world, right?"

Axel snorted. "I wish. This place can be weirder than Wonderland in its own way."

"Really?"

"Yeah." He winked. "WAY more fun, though."

That's when the flutes started up. The Nobodies looked over to find several of the small humanoid creatures playing an inviting tune, obviously wishing to draw them farther along.

"Where are they taking us?" Xion murmured, following the call with some hesitation.

"Probably somewhere involving fermented fruit juice and blatant matchmaking, but don't worry, I'll keep an eye on you."

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MORE HORSIES. AAAAHHHHHHH. Big ones and tiny ones and flying ones and ones that were half human, and XION WANTED TO FETCH ROXAS AND LIVE HERE WITH HIM AND AXEL FOREVER AND EVER AND EVER. "This is my favorite world," she declared, cuddling two happily nickering foals in her arms.

"I admit the pros outweigh the cons," Axel said distractedly, backing away from yet another group
of centaurs eagerly brandishing goblets of wine at him. "No thanks, ladies, please! I swear that was just a one-time thing back then, really, I'm not interested, Xi's underage and we're on the clock and Sai'll kill me if he finds out I've been drinking...."

"What's wrong with drinking?" Xion wondered in confusion.

"...Number XIV, do NOT touch anything here that's not water. Orders from your sempai."

"Um, okay," she said uncertainly. Then squealed as a centaur seized her around the waist, cuddled her almost exactly like she'd been cuddling the foals, and passed her off to someone else.

It turned out to be some sort of dance, which got wilder and more fun as the music gradually reached a crescendo. Xion whirled amongst flowers and arms and hooves and colorful long hair, feeling breathless and elated, awestruck at the skill with which the dancers moved and avoided injuring anyone. There seemed to be patterns, too; shifting and subtle at first, but more and more noticeable as the music flowed on.

At one point, Xion thought they were dancing in a large circle, but then everyone suddenly broke off into partners, except that all the partners were constantly changing hands. Then the brawny blue-skinned centaur into whose arms she had landed spun her around and down, and suddenly Axel was holding her. He looked flushed and just as breathless as she felt, his hair in wild disarray, but his green eyes were shining in a way she wasn't used to seeing on him - full of joy and lacking in his usual burdensome cares, more sincere and passionate than any Nobody's eyes should look like.

"You're beautiful," he whispered to her unexpectedly.

She stared. "What?"

For a moment, he looked startled, then smiled a little sheepishly and let her regain her feet, though his hands rested affectionately on her shoulders. "It's hard to describe.... Your eyes are sparkling right now." He raised a hand, hesitated, then pulled off his glove so he could trail his fingertips down her cheek unhindered. "I wish...that smile of yours could somehow last forever."

She rested her palm against the front of his coat. "You know...I was just thinking that about you, too. You look nicer than you ever did before."
"Oh, thanks," he snorted.

She shook her head, grinning. "No. Come on, Axel. Your eyes are sparkling too, you know?"

He studied her thoughtfully. "This really is a great world, isn't it."

"I told you it was my favorite," she reminded him with a smile.

He grinned back. "Even better than Twilight Town?"

"Well...."

"We should bring Roxas here next time."

"Yeah." If she could have both her friends here, seeing them so happy, being so happy together with them.... That was all she wanted. She knew that was all Roxas wanted, too. Axel was more complicated, harder to understand, but that clarity in his eyes now, so much easier to grasp than his usual guarded expressions....

Axel let out a long sigh, then dutifully dug out the notebook again. "Inhabitants seem to engage in a ritualistic dance, the purpose of which I theorize might relate to--"

Mischievously, Xion yanked the notebook out of his hands and tossed it into the air. It never reached the ground, since a couple of overeager pegasi foals got to it first.

"Hi, Saïx," Axel mused idly as he watched, "sorry I don't have a mission report for ya this time, but see, these baby rainbow-colored flying ponies ate my notes, I hope you don't mind."

Xion giggled. "Saïx isn't as mean to you as he is to everyone else, I'm sure you'll be fine."

"True. He'll still be ticked, though."
"Axel?"

"Yeah?"

"Why is Saïx not as mean to you as he is to everyone else?"

"Probably because I have insane amounts of blackmail on him. C'mon, let's go see what's going on over-- Whoa!"

Xion shrieked in surprise as something huge and black came flapping out of nowhere right behind her. "A-Axel! I-It's a...! It's a...!" Not another foal, definitely. The foals actually came cavorting joyfully all around the large black pegasus, which towered over Xion and gazed down her with frightening crimson eyes. "I wasn't hurting your babies, I promise," Xion whispered.

"Hey," Axel started to say in alarm, summoning his chakrams.

The pegasus lord suddenly seized the shoulder of Xion's coat in his teeth and tossed her onto his back as if she weighed no more than a sash. Then he took flight.

"XI!" Axel yelled. Then emitted a decidedly less impressive sound as another adult pegasus - this one female and white as a cloud - head-butted him in the back and then caught him with one powerful wing as he lost his balance. "Urgh, wait a sec," he gasped, trying to get his breath back. She nuzzled his face affectionately, nearly knocking him over again, then knelt. Unsteady from her playful aggression, he sprawled half across her back; she effortlessly adjusted his weight distribution with her wings, then took off after her mate. "WAIT!" Axel shrieked, clinging on for dear life. "Argh, flying is so not my thing!"

After a while, though, he got used to it. Flying on pegasusback was decidedly different from gliding on pixie-dust, but...once one became accustomed...it was quite enjoyable in its own way. Didn't have to expend all that concentration on the mechanics, though the nervousness of being so high aloft was exacerbated by having to trust a non-human creature he'd only just met. "Hey...Snowball...be nice to me, okay?"

She wasn't.

To his relief, Axel could see Xion in the lake below, looking perfectly fine still astride the black
pegasus. Axel's own mount began to descend as well. "Whoa now, Snowball, we're going kinda fast. I think, um, hey, whoa, whoa whoa HEY--!"

Then at the last second, she flapped mightily to slow down and entered the water with barely a ripple. Axel, however, couldn't keep his hold, and tumbled headfirst into the lake.

He surfaced in a flail of limbs and splashing water. "Gaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh! Cold and wet and cold and waaahhhhh, Flurry of Dancing Flames is not happy!"

Snowball nickered smugly.

"I totally saw that!" Axel tried lobbing a wave at her, but then just stood there with his arms wrapped tightly around himself, shivering. He felt sick.

"Axel!" Xion was craning anxiously over the black stallion's shoulder as the pegasus leisurely waded over to the red-haired Nobody.

"X-X-Xion-n-n...."

She hastily dismounted and swam over to him, shoving him toward the pegasus as best she could. "Are you okay?"

"N-N-No...."

Somehow, she got him up on the black pegasus's back, then swam around to the other side and gently pushed Axel's waterlogged spiky locks out of his face. "Will a Potion help?"

"C-Couldn't h-hurt," he said through chattering teeth, too miserable to care how ridiculous he must look, flopped over the horse's back like so much luggage.

"Hey, his element is fire," Xion lectured the lady pegasus. "Don't go dumping him in water like that again, okay?"
Once the black pegasus had reached land, Axel tumbled off onto the shore, then grinned weakly as the female came up and nuzzled him apologetically, her warm nose comforting the damp flesh of his cheek. "'S okay, Snowball," he murmured with a small smile.

"Her name is Snowball?" Xion wondered.

"No clue. Not like she can tell me or anything."

"I thought it was an odd name! She's beautiful, Axel, you can't go calling her after that little yappy dog in Twilight Town!"

"What would you name her, then?" Axel challenged, still huddled and shivering.

"I dunno. Something graceful and elegant. Like...Rumalia, or something."

Axel snorted in amusement.

"What's wrong with that?!"

"Oh, nothing. Just that 'Rumalia' happens to be a certain Somebody's name...heh, though he's such a fruit, he probably wouldn't care if he's got a girl pegasus named after him."

"Rumalia," Xion mused, "Rumalia...oh! I get it." Axel didn't answer, and she frowned, looking at him more closely. "Are you really okay, Axel?"

"I'm fine...."

Xion thought a moment, then crawled closer and draped her arms around his shoulders.

He laughed. "Trying to warm me up?"
"Yes."

"I appreciate the thought, Xi, but you're soaking wet yourself."

It was true. She could still feel tremors going through his body as she held him. "Hm." She herself was quite comfortable, though. It was a beautiful day, and the sun was warm. "I wonder...."

She closed her eyes. She could feel the sun's rays on her cheek, almost see them if she concentrated. Like waves, almost. Sort of. If she could...sort of guide the light...gather it up from around them and focus it all on Axel...maybe the light's warmth that it carried could....

After a long time, Xion, who felt like she'd fallen into a doze, was startled awake when Axel cleared his throat. "I was gonna go squawking 'How'd you do that!?' like an idiot, but...heh, guess those light powers of yours aren't completely useless."

"Me and Roxas helped during that power outage," Xion grumbled, settling down beside Axel again. She smiled a little, mollified, as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"I know, I was joking. It's just that when the chick ahead of you two can blast everything with lightning - after she rips it apart with daggers, that is, - and the guy before her slings around a giant honking scythe, and the guy before him can play with the space/time continuum like it's Play-Doh, and on down the line - hearing you two going 'We wield the power of light!' sounds kind of lame."

"It is not so lame," she pouted.

"It is lame. Adorably lame. Then when the bad guys are standing there laughing their heads off at you two doofs, you can take 'em by surprise with your magical powers of coat-drying."

Xion smiled, pulling off her glove to touch the fabric of Axel's coat. Sure enough, it wasn't even damp anymore. "You feeling better?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Xi." Axel flopped back onto the grass, smiling idly up at the sky as he crossed his arms behind his head. "This really is a great world...."
"I'm glad you brought me here," she said, wishing she could take off her heavy boots.

Strangely, a gentle shower of pink petals began drifting down around them. Shielding her eyes, Xion frowned up at the tree boughs over their heads, where a group of dreamy-eyed cupids were watching them, shaking blossom-laden branches. "Um, what are you guys doing?"

"Oi," Axel called up, "she's only fourteen - fourteen WEEKS, not years - so you better not be getting any funny ideas."

Xion stared. "What does my age have to do with falling flower petals?"

"You don't watch enough movies...which in this case is a good thing." Axel climbed to his feet and grinned, holding out a hand to help her up. "C'mon, Xi, let's go find some unicorns for you."

Xion gasped and scrambled to her feet as well, realizing too late that she'd completely forgotten to accept the help. "There are unicorns here, too?" she asked eagerly.

"Yep. Little baby ones, all sorts of colors--"

"Squeeeeee!"

"Heh, I knew you'd like that."

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Author's Notes: "Snowball" was...rather OOC, I think. *sweatdrop* Maybe she's only maternal and decorous with her own family.

"Rumalia" is Infamousplot's theory on Marluxia's real name. I rather like that one.

Lol, the manga has given me the impression that flying is not exactly Axel's forte. XD
The power outage thing was a reference to my fic *When The Lights Go Out*.

Thanks to *Stepsiblings*, apparently my headcanonXion is now a pony lover in addition to being a dog lover. *sweatdrop*
Beyond the War: Vacation Notice {Lea, Isa, Roxas, & Xion}

Bound by Fire & Moon Light
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Summary: After Xehanort's final defeat, Lea, Isa, Roxas, & Xion start a new life together. Platonic/family AkuSaiRokuShi; one-shot series. (And yes, I know how dumb the title is. ^^;)

Vacation Notice (rough draft)

Summary: Axel, Saïx, Roxas, & Xion start a new life together after KH3.

A/N: Lol, this is my post-KH3 headcanon for them. XD There will be more where this came from, this is just an introduction.

o.o.o

There had been a big argument about Radiant Garden vs. Twilight Town, before Lea finally threatened to flounce off to Wonderland and sulk so that no one got what they wanted. Even then, though, it just turned from yelling and borderline boss battles to whining.

"But Axeeelll, we used to go to Twilight Town every day!" Xion insisted.

"I don't wanna leave," Roxas pouted, artfully enough that, even as a teenager, he still seemed cute rather than like an oversized toddler.

"They're doing it again," Isa stormed. "Don't look in their eyes, that's exactly what they want."

"I'm not looking," Lea grumbled, holding the strategy guide so close to his face that he actually couldn't read it anymore.

"Radiant Garden's all, like, rickety."
"That ninja girl keeps picking on me."

"It's our home," Isa growled. "Don't you want to see your family again, Lea?"

"I haven't seen them in ages...."

"You're frightened."

"What?! No I'm not! Nobodies don't have hearts, we can't--"

There was a long pause. Then the kids started giggling, and Isa folded his arms and looked away, not smiling but not frowning, either.

"Being human is hard to get used to," Lea amended ruefully. "Okay, fine; I'm scared that Mom won't recognize me or that she'll...or that she'll hate me...." As if she would be able to look in his face and somehow see evidence there of all the horrible things he'd done while her heart had been wandering in darkness. "But who cares! Why do you want to go back to the Garden so bad? The University's a wreck."

Isa gestured violently as he spoke. "I lost everything at age 15, everything except my best friend. We watched our families be consumed by darkness, we literally watched our world crumble, we were nearly lost to darkness ourselves, I've spent the last ten years trying to get my life back. I want to see my home restored and I want to see my mother again and I WANT TO GRADUATE COLLEGE, LEA, BECAUSE NORMAL PEOPLE GET TO GROW UP AND GO TO SCHOOL AND GET THEIR DIPLOMAS AND WE ARE NORMAL NOW."

Lea glanced at the younger two and told them conversationally as he pointed at the ex-berserker, "For the record, kiddos, this is not normal. Just so you know."

"Okay," they chorused readily.

Isa made a sound of disgust. "Never mind. I'll go without you."
Lea grinned. "No, you won’t."

Isa didn't say anything.

Lea and Roxas and Xion waited.

Isa still didn't say anything.

They waited some more. Lea started feeling sorry for him, and the Keybearers began to get bored.

"...I hate you."

"Well, I don't hate you, Isa." Lea held up a hand to get the kids' attention again. "Hey. Rox, Xi. Four years in Radiant Garden, okay? Then we'll go to Twilight Town."

"Four years--?!"

"Three." Isa said in a low voice.

Everyone looked at him again.

Isa said to Roxas and Xion, "It's still more than double your lifetimes, I know. But truly, compared to the rest of your lives, it's not very long at all. Please trust me."

They gazed at him, Roxas with a frown, both with eyes full of memories and words unspoken.

"Trust me, then," said Lea. "Radiant Garden's not so bad. And three years is better than four. Isa's giving up something to make you happy, see?"

Isa glared, but didn't say anything.
"We'll really get to go to Twilight Town, then?" Roxas hedged.

"Yeah. Promise."

Now Lea was the one they were looking at, almost reproachfully. He couldn't stand it. "Okay, I know I've lied to you before, and sometimes I can't keep my promises very well, and--"

"Listen to me." That was Isa. "Like it or not, the four of us are together now. I highly doubt that either of you could leave any more than...any more than I can."

"Aw, I feel so loved," Lea muttered under his breath with a grin, and was ignored.

"That means that we are family. I know you don't have any experience of what family is, but it's when--"

"It's like when we were fighting together," Xion said quietly. "Sora and Aqua and Kairi and Ven and Riku and Naminé and everyone...all of us...when we all helped each other and protected each other....."

Roxas gave a heavy sigh. "So we're stuck with you, great. Fine. Promise we'll go to Twilight Town again, both of you. If you lie this time, I'll beat you both up, AGAIN."

Lea grinned and stretched out his hand. The kids stared at it curiously; then, after a moment's hesitation, Isa laid his own hand on top of it. Xion and then Roxas dubiously followed suit, until the four of them were joined by those hands, a gesture of alliance and trust and camaraderie. Xion decided that she liked being in a family.

"First the Garden," Lea affirmed, "then Twilight Town. Heh, not like there's much to do there - you don't need some fancy-schmancy degree for that sleepy little place, right, Isa?"

"I simply refuse to be a dropout like they always said you would be," Isa grumbled.
It was painful, picking his way through the crumbled, half-rebuilt neighborhood, drawing closer and closer to his old house with his heart sitting heavy in his chest. "Isa...I don't think this is such a good id--"

"Stop whining."

"I'm not whining!"

He could see it now. Someone had re-painted the shutters the same color as his hair, as if they were calling out to him. "Hey, you guys go catch up with everyone, I'm gonna head around to the shops and see if--"

Isa wordlessly and firmly linked an arm through his, Roxas did the same on the other side, and Xion patted him soothingly. "It's okay, Axel."

"Hey! Let go, what, you think I'm gonna run away or something?!!" They didn't even bother responding.

Joyous reunion, blah blah blah; apparently his mother wasn't a mind-reader, and it didn't hurt as much as he'd been afraid it would, seeing Zell and the girls grown up instead of still being the little kids he remembered, those lost children he still thought of vaguely at the back of his mind whenever he looked into Roxas's and Xion's eyes. The Keybearers seemed to enjoy the sight of their towering mentor being smothered and babied by his own mom, and they definitely relished the look of horror on Isa's face when his mother, rushing over from her house down the street, called him "Saa-chan" as she flung her arms around him.

"I like that name better than 'Saïx,'" Xion decided. "And I'll remember it better than 'Isa.'"

"Yeah. We'll call him that from now on."

"Don't you dare," Isa snarled over his mother's shoulder.

"Saa-chaaaaan, what happened to your beautiful face?" she cried in distress, finally pulling back and stroking the scars as he shied away uncomfortably.
"Such things happen in battle. Mother, please."

"And who are these cuties, Lea sweetheart?" his mom asked with great interest as she finally acknowledged the fact that her long-lost son wasn't the only person inhabiting the universe at the moment.

"Um, these are my...." 'Best friends' didn't quite convey the fact that they didn't have anywhere to live except with him, and 'kids' was probably not the best choice. "...my family."

"Oh?"

As the weeks passed, it became apparent that the house was too small to comfortably accommodate all of them: parents, five teenagers, and grown son who felt weird heading out every day to wait tables and earn munny rather than slay monsters and gain experience points. Instead of returning to the comfort of Twilight Town, to the huge shadowed castle and co-workers who mostly ignored him as he fended for himself, it was the tiny, crowded, messy warm house, people everywhere, constant chatter and yelling, constant noise and confusion, great food and so many questions and stories and laughter. It was awesome.

But it was going to take a while to get used to.

"Isa?"

Just the two of them for once, waiting out in the courtyard until the kids got out of school, Isa drowning in textbooks as always, Lea still in his work uniform as he absently licked at an ice cream bar.

"Hm?"

"It feels weird being treated like a kid again...."

"I know what you mean."

The house they found was tiny, but it sat perfectly between the university and the high school, and
the rent was tolerable. Xion fell in love with the flowers growing in the window box out front, and doted on them like they were her babies. Roxas liked having easy access to the skater's park. Isa didn't hate it particularly more than he hated everything else these days. Lea was just glad to have a haven where he felt like a man again instead of an overgrown kid who'd never settle in.

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"Ugh." His Organization days were over, and he was still waking up at five in the morning. Isa dragged himself out of bed, shuffled around getting ready for school, and found Lea sitting in the dark living room, staring blankly at a black-and-white movie on television as he cradled a mug of coffee in his hands. "Early shift again?"

"Yeah...."

"I'll make breakfast."

"Thanks."

Xion soon came in, perhaps drawn by the smell of cooking food, looking sleepy but eager to see what the new day would bring. Isa often envied her youthful enthusiasm. "Can I help, Saa-chan?"

He had long since given up protesting the humiliating nickname, at least when they were in private. "Make a fresh pitcher of juice, please."

"Okay."

"Did you finish your homework last night?"

"Almost...."

"What didn't you understand?"

"The 'motif' thing."
"Bring it here, I'll explain it to you."

"Okay. Thanks, Saa-ch-- Isa."

"Hmph."

College was dang expensive, it sucked up munny like Luxord's Grim Reaper. It was clear that they were going to exhaust their Organization earnings within a few semesters if they didn't take steps now, and both of them refused to touch Roxas's and Xion's munny, so Lea took on a second job. If Isa could kill himself with 18-hour semesters with nothing more than wordless scowls, then Lea could handle two jobs without complaining, too. And there was always the kids, their bright eyes and innocent curiosity and carefree laughter, to remind them why they'd longed so much and worked so hard to get this human life back again.

o.o.o.o.o

Something was wrong.

Isa finally managed to lift his head off the desk, wincing at the crick in neck, and realized what both sources of wrongness were at the same time. One, his desktop was clear - there was no sign of the books, papers, and computer he'd fallen asleep in the middle of working with. Two, daylight was starting to creep through the window. His alarm clock hadn't gone off for some reason.

He was up and bursting into the living room in a flash - where he came up short. Lea was not in uniform - he and the younger ones were bustling happily about, Lea tossing things toward Roxas for him to pack into a couple of beach bags, Xion running up to announce triumphantly that she'd found the sunblock.

"What are you doing?" Isa said sharply.

"Look, Isa." Roxas pointed at the sliding door, onto which was taped a paper reading 'VACATION.' "I got to make the Vacation Day this time."

"Lea, you've got work today," Isa snapped.
"Traded my shift," Lea said airily. "Do me a favor and grab a few towels, Isa."

"I'm late for school."

"Saa-chan," Xion said patiently, as if to a small child, "Vacation Day means that you don't work. You go out and have fun. We're all going to the beach together."

"Lea!"

"Chill, you can miss a day. It won't kill you."

"Lea! It's an eight-hour class! Missing one day is like missing an entire week of school!"

"You can copy someone else's notes like I did that time I was sick," Roxas said. "Here." He reached a blueberry muffin up to Isa's mouth. "Me and Xion made them, they're good."

"Get that away from me." Isa whirled in a panic and lunged for his desk again before remembering that everything was gone. "Where are my books?!"

"Don't worry about 'em."

"You don't need books on a Vacation Day, Saa-chan."

"Duh."

"They're in the closet, aren't they." Isa went and yanked at the doorknob, which was locked. "Where's the key!"

"Now, where did I put that thing again?" Lea wondered playfully.
"Xion, open it now."

"Ummm...my Keyblade broke," she said, blinking innocent blue eyes.

"Roxas!"

Roxas summoned his Keyblade, whirled it in the fancy gestures he had learned from Sora, and ended with the weapon pointed at the closet door. Nothing happened. "Huh. That's weird." He dismissed it and went back to stuffing sandwiches into a plastic container, obviously hiding a grin as he did so.

"You three are lucky I don't assign you missions anymore," Isa snarled, raising a hand to retrieve the books himself. It was just once, and a small one, for such short distance--

Suddenly Lea was there, gripping his arm to stop him and chirping in a fakely bright voice, "Splendid idea, Saa-chan! Let's open a dark corridor and toss out a welcome mat for Xehanort's Remnant to come waltzing back into your heart so that you turn back into a Vulcan-eared, butterscotch/topaz-eyed jerk and we have to drag Sora out of retirement again to save you and turn you back into the green-eyed jerk we all know and sometimes wonder why we love." His voice and expression abruptly went cold. "Just hope that Sora's willing to dive back to your pillar, because I won't be doing it this time."

There was a long silence. Finally broken when the worried-looking Xion whispered to Roxas, "I'd rather give Saa-chan the closet key than him turn back into Saïx."

"But he'll miss Beach Day," Roxas whispered back.

"He'll miss Beach Day if he's Saïx, too."

"Oh." They both looked at him unhappily.

Isa slowly lowered his arm, and Lea finally let go of him. "...I need to study."

"You're doing this for us," Lea said softly. "Killing yourself with these crazy semesters so you can
get through sooner and spare us an extra year of this. We want to do something for you, too, Isa."

Xion came over and took their hands. "You said we're a family now, right? Families are supposed to go on vacations together and do fun things together and be together. Your mom said so. We're not Numbers anymore who have to work all the time."

Roxas shoved his way into the circle. "Your books are boring, anyway, and you hate them. You'll have more fun at the beach."

"...This is true," Isa acknowledged. He gave a long sigh. "Fine. I'll fail the class and waste thousands of munny just to humor this whim of yours. You had better make this worth it."

Lea chuckled. "So dramatic."

"So we're going to the beach?" Xion asked, her face lighting up.

"Yes."

"You'll like it," Roxas promised. "We'll teach you how to build a sandcastle."

He was a little surprised when Isa grinned back at him, just a little. "Is that so."

This time, Lea laughed outright. "Rox, remember how I said that I knew someone whose sandcastles could pose for magazine covers?"

"Yeah?"

Lea pointed at Isa.

"That was Isa?!!"
Isa turned away without answering, though he looked a little smug. "If we're going to be spending the day outdoors in this weather," he said in a brisk tone, "we're going to need much more sunblock, that bottle is half-empty. Lea, make sure we don't forget the parking pass; Roxas, go fill several bottles with water, we need to stay hydrated; and Xion, come with me, I need your help fetching the...."

"Man," Lea commented as he watched them walk off. "Still bossy as ever."

"At least he can't sic us on Leechgraves and stuff anymore when he's mad."

"Heh, true."

They high-fived and then went back to packing.

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**Author's Notes:** The butterscotch/topaz stuff is from Cleolinda Jones. ^^
Beyond the War: Existence {Lea, Roxas, & Xion}

BbF&ML: Existence (rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Lea didn't realize it would take THE ENTIRE SUMMER, plus a lot of work, traveling, and research, just to get Roxas & Xion enrolled in high school.

A/N: Uh...one sequence will make a lot more sense if you've read Before Sora. *wince* It's so stupid how ingrained that fic has become in my headcanon when I haven't even finished it yet.... *headdesk*

0.0.0

It felt weird, being in a school again after so long.... Lea moved across the courtyard slowly, looking around, noting all the changes, reliving memories. 'Maybe they can just homeschool....' But no, Isa's mom had said she couldn't really help them once they reached the high school level material they were supposed to be on, and no one else had both the time and ability to teach them. Roxas and Xion were just gonna have to do their best here at Radiant Garden High.

"Hi...um, I wanted to, uh, sign up my...sign up a couple of kids. As students. For when school starts."

The secretary smiled at him. "Oh, yes, we were expecting you."

"You were?!"

She frowned a little in confusion. "You're Lea Hayes...?"

"Yeah...?"

"A woman called earlier, I believe she is your mother...?"
"Oh! Oh. Yeah, Mom must have called."

She smiled at him again. "The principal will see you shortly."

Lea had an alarmed moment before he realized what she meant. 'I'm the parent now, flaming pants....' Well, he'd kind of been from the start, but after all this time, it still amazed him that he kept having these moments. '...What's gonna happen when they figure out they have hormones?'
The start of Xion's 'Monthly Fun Times' back in the Organization had been an utter nightmare; now that she and Roxas were both about to get tossed into a sea of other adolescents....

"Are you all right, Mr. Hayes?"

"Huh?"

"You were, er...whimpering."

Lea abruptly stood up, but before he could announce that he'd decided to homeschool after all, the door opened, and the principal herself was smiling at him. "Mr. Hayes?"

"...I've never done this before," he managed to say, not even exactly sure what he meant. He'd never done anything before...enrolled a kid in school, helped a kid with their love life, had a love life himself.... 'I'm not a parent. I'm a...mentor. I teach newbs how to do missions, and that's it. And I teach zombies about ice cream. And laughter. And friendship. And how to take a freaking bath and zip their own freaking coat and how to cook and use the washing machine and how trains work and what the beach is and flaming pants I really am their dad THIS WAS NOT HOW MY LIFE WAS SUPPOSED TO TURN OUT."

"Mr. Hayes, you don't look well."

"I was supposed to date a bunch of hot chicks and fall in love with my soul mate and get married and have babies and raise them up into teenagers. Not have a couple of one-year-old fifteen-year-olds when I'm 25 and single."

"Er, I'm afraid I don't--"
"Am I doing the right thing?! They have no clue how high school works! They'll get eaten alive!"

He wasn't addressing anyone in particular - the shredded remains of Kingdom Hearts, maybe - and was surprised when the principal laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "I was given the impression that the students are not your biological children," she said gently. "Are you fostering them?"

"Uh...sort of...."

"They'll do just fine here," she said in a reassuring voice. "Why don't you have a seat, and we can start getting things in order."

Lea sighed and sat down, and she did the same on the other side of her desk. "Now, then. What are the students' names?"

"Uh.... Oh; uh, Roxas and Xion."

"Full names?"

"Huh?"

"Their full names. I need the names that appear on their birth certificates. I'll need to see their actual birth certificates, too."

Lea stared at her blankly. *'Roxas, Number XIII, the Key of Destiny. Xion, Number XIV.'* "...They don't have family names. Or birth certificates."

She glanced away from the computer and narrowed her eyes at him. "Pardon?"

"Those are their names...Roxas and Xion. That's it."
"Why is that?"

"They just don't."

"...Who are their parents?"

"Nobody."  'Ha, ha.'

"Mr. Hayes," she said severely.  "I need all the information you know about their identities and families."

'You wouldn't believe me even if I told you.'  "They don't have any.  Roxas is Number XIII, Xion is Number XIV, and I'm the closest thing they've got to family.  That's all I can tell you."

She was still obviously not happy with him.  "What about their transcripts?"

"siiiiigh*  They don't have any.  They've never been in school before.  My friend's mom has been tutoring them the last few weeks, trying to catch them up, but that's it."

She scooted away from the computer and folded her hands on the desktop, glaring straight at him.  He squirmed a little.  "Mr. Hayes.  I must tell you that this situation is starting to look suspicious.  We take children's safety seriously here."

"I didn't kidnap them or anything!  Look, they lost their home worlds, and they have amnesia."

"Amnesia," she repeated skeptically.

"You can ask 'em yourself - they don't have memories from before a year or so ago."  'Because they didn't exist before a year or so ago.'  "We lived in...er, Twilight Town.  I mean, come on; so many worlds fell to darkness and were destroyed, this can't be the first time you've had to deal with this!"

She sighed.  "Do you have their refugee paperwork?"
"Refugee...paperwork?"

Her eyes narrowed again. "Assuming that they 'cannot remember' their worlds of birth, the next best option would be to make sure they are properly registered in Traverse Town's database."

"Traverse Town?"

"I'm afraid that I cannot help you until you've got those records sorted out - and in the meantime, the authorities here will be keeping an eye on you."

"Man, why does stuff like this keep happening...do I really come off as a creep?" "Fine," he said aloud, through gritted teeth. "I'll get them some paperwork." If for no other reason than because it might be difficult for Roxas and Xion to get into colleges or get good jobs without it. "I'll be back."

"I hope so, Mr. Hayes," she said coolly.

o.o.o.o.o

"Traverse Town's fun," Sora said eagerly as he sat at the Gummi ship's controls. "There's lots of districts and shops, and there's people there from all over the universe, I make so many friends there."

"Is there anywhere to use the skateboards?" Roxas wanted to know.

"Yeah! I'll show you! You wanna come with us, Xion?"

"Sure."

"Work first," Lea reminded them. "We're not going there to play. You guys'll get to run around after we've got this paperwork mess settled, okay?"
"Awww...."

The Moogle in charge of refugee registration in Traverse Town looked at them with an expression that was typically difficult to read. "Homeworlds, kupo?" it inquired, opening two blank forms on its computer.

"Twilight Town for Roxas," Lea said. "And for Xion, Castle Oblivion, I guess-- Wait, no, it's the Land of Something now. Land of...of...." He snapped his fingers, trying to remember.

"Departure," Roxas supplied.

"That's it! Land of Departure."

The Moogle typed for a while. "Apologies, kupo," it finally said, "but there are no records of these individuals in either world. No records whatsoever, kupo."

'Well, there wouldn't be,' Lea thought in exasperation. "They're orphans, and they have amnesia. The whole point of this trip was to establish some paperwork for them, you know? So that they can 'officially exist.'"

"I thought we already existed," Xion protested, sounding upset. Lea tried to put an arm around her, and got caught in an arm traffic jam as Roxas and Sora attempted to do the same thing at the same time.

"You've always existed!" Sora declared.

"It's red tape, Xi," Lea tried to explain. "Existing for real and existing on paper are two different things."

"What does tape have to do with anything?" Roxas asked.

"Roxas, I can't play that game right now.... Look, Moogle. Both of them were found in the middle of nowhere, they don't remember a thing from before then. They don't have anything. We need to make something for them."
The Moogle regarded him for a minute with its inscrutable expression. Then it said, "You will at least need genetic reports for them, kupo. Bring those in, and we'll see what we can do."

Lea rolled his eyes. "Thanks."

As the kids were skateboarding around the Third District, he sat on a bench and called his best friend. "Yo, Isa."

"What's wrong?"

Lea smiled a little. "You can tell?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, well, this is turning out to be harder than I thought.... Is it so hard to just take a photo and crank out an I.D. card?! They're wanting genetic reports on the kids now. I was thinking of getting what I could from Vexen."

"Even."

"Whatever."

"That is a sound course of action, but you also ought to make him sign some sort of release form."

"Release form?"

"I'll find something suitable and send you a copy. I don't care in the least, but you would be upset if Even was ever able to legally seize Xion and take her out of your reach."

"I'll roast him if he tries!"
"However, as I am trying to tell you, the easier, more ethical, and legally sound way is to make him sign a release and formally renounce any and all claim he might have to Number XIV. You might one day be very glad you did so."

"Man, you think of everything.... Thanks, Isa."

"Don't mention it."

Back at the Garden, Lea went to the Royal Research Center alone. He didn't want the kids, especially Xion, anywhere near Vexen's Somebody. "You're gonna give me everything," Lea said pleasantly, "ALL the records you have on her, or else we might have to have a little repeat of the last time we were together outside Twilight Town's mansion."

"All right-- All right! Cretin. But I don't know how much good it'll do you - she doesn't have DNA, not like humans do."

"She is human."

"It's more like computer programming than anything else, like she's an extremely complex video game character--" Even gasped, staring at the packet of papers Ienzo had just handed him.

"What?" Lea demanded.

"I-- But-- It's impossible! Extraordin-- Is this really Number XIV?" Even snapped, expression changing from astonishment to wild delight to suspicion.

"It is the sample Lea gave us," Ienzo said calmly. "He would have to bring Xion herself to us if you want confirmation."

"What is it?!" Lea yelled.

Ienzo smiled a little. "Your Xion appears to have manipulated her own matter yet again - she does,
in fact, have human DNA now, though I can assure you that was not always the case."

"Manipulated...?"

"Subconsciously, perhaps. I can't imagine her having the education or intellectual capacity to knowingly change what she is made of."

"Flaming pants."

It turned out that Xion was virtually a genetic twin of Kairi. Roxas, on the other hand, was found to be genetically linked to Ventus, Sora, Kairi, and even Naminé.

"Sooo, there ya go," Lea told the Traverse Town Moogle, pushing the reports at it.

He did not like the response.

"What are you talking about?! Some of these people have never even met Rox and Xi! They don't know they exist - they don't own them!"

"Nevertheless, we have determined that the individuals with the best claim of guardianship over the two minors in question are the people listed, kupo. These guardians must come in to complete the application process."

"But I--! You can't--! This is stupid!"

"Can we go skateboarding now?" Roxas asked. "I'm bored."

"Roxas, your future is in jeopardy here, this is kinda important. You wanna be stuck on Destiny Islands until you're 18?"

"How bad is that?" Roxas said cautiously.
"We'll get to go to the beach every day, right, Axel?" Xion said eagerly.

"I'll show you me and Riku and Kairi's secret hideaway," Sora promised.

Lea facepalmed.

Sapphique King flung open the door and glomped Sora before he'd even finished climbing the porch steps. "I hate it every time! EVERY SINGLE TIME you go!"

"I didn't get eaten by monsters, Mom," Sora said, kissing her. "Hey - you remember my friends, Roxas and Xion and Axel?"

Sapphique narrowed her eyes at Lea.

"Look," Lea said, then paused. She already didn't think much of him and didn't trust him. What were the odds she'd hand over to him her 'son' she'd never known she had? "I just...I've been looking after him all this time, you know? And it's less than three years, then it won't matter, anyway."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. Ven had wandered out onto the porch and was watching, lazily licking at a bar of ice cream.

"I'm trying to get Roxas & Xion enrolled in school. But I can't, because they need paperwork first, and apparently they need you to, uh, sign some stuff for Roxas because...uh...."

"I have two brothers now, Mom!" Sora said eagerly. "Roxas and Ven really are twins after all, sort of." Ven snorted.

"Sort of, but NOT REALLY," Lea corrected hastily.

Sapphique stared. "What?"
"I mean, you don't even know him, so, like...it won't matter that...." Lea couldn't bring himself to say it, because he knew it wasn't true. 'Who am I kidding. I'm trying to steal her son from her. Of course she'll never let me. I'm gonna lose Roxas for three years and I don't freaking care, Isa can freaking stay and earn his degree, I'm gonna be living it up at the beach for three years and he can just deal, GAAAAHHHHH why can I never never never keep my family together--'

The kids had just finished explaining as much as they knew, which hadn't taken long.

"Pffft...it doesn't even matter," Ven grumbled. "You need my parents' permission, not Mom's, and my parents are frickin' dead, so--"

"Wait, what?" Sora said in confusion.

"Ven--" Sapphique started.

"I'm adopted," Ven said flatly.

Everyone stared. "Whaaaat?!"

Sapphique's face looked tight. "I just...Sora, darling, I--"

"My real dad's dead," Ven said, sounding bored, "no one knows or cares where my fail mom ran off to, so Mom adopted me and now she's my aunt and my mom, and that's why we're brothers, Sora, not because we're brothers for real. So technically, Rox, you're an orphan, and Lea can do whatever he wants."

Xion frowned at him. "Van, stop it. You're hurting them."

Ven finally had the grace to look away. "Sorry...."

"I don't get it," Roxas sighed. "Can we just get this over with so we can go to the beach?"
"Wait, no!" Sora yelled. "What do you mean we're not brothers for real?!"

As, after a few heated minutes, everyone else went inside to drink some lemonade and sort things out, Xion moved up beside Ven, who kept his eyes fixed on the ice cream stick he was twirling in his hands.

"You know," Xion said softly, "you act more like Vani when you're upset."

"Do I?" he mumbled, still twirling.

"They're yelling in there."

"So what."

"The Ven you would be going in to help calm them down."

He abruptly straightened and slammed his hand down on the railing. "I don't feel like Mr. Heart-of-Pure-Light-Everyone-Loves-Him right now, okay? I feel like Vanitas. Not your stupid 'Vani' or 'Kazé,' I feel like Vanitas."

"I know how you feel...."

"I know you do," he mumbled, sagging back against the railing as his eyes slipped away from hers.

She leaned on his arm. "Is it because you lost your mom and dad?"

"I don't know," he said stubbornly.

"I never had a mom and dad...."
"Just Axel and Roxas. Then Mom - Axel's mom, I mean - and Isa's mom, and...Isa, kind of, too...." She smiled. "I love them all a lot."

"I didn't say I don't love Mom," he said defensively.

"I don't think she cares if you're her 'real' son or not."

"I know."

"I think she *feels* like you're her real son, and nothing else matters."

"I *know!*"

She jiggled his arm a little, trying to get him to look back at her. "I think you should go tell Sora you love him."

"Don't tell me what to do!" He stormed inside, and she trotted after him hopefully.

It turned out that, biologically, Ven and Sora were cousins; and while Ven had been adopted by Sora's mother, Roxas had not, which meant that Sapphique did not have first claim on him - Ven's biological mother did. Though, as Ven had pointed out earlier, her whereabouts had been unknown for about twenty-three years.

"And it doesn't matter, anyway," Sapphique growled, "because that woman lost custody of her son, and I can't imagine a court judging that she has the right to keep any other children." Sora, Roxas, and Xion looked confused, but Lea's face darkened. Ven remained impassive.

"Sooo, what's that mean?" Ven drawled. "You gonna be the one to give up Roxas after all, Mom? We sure wasted a lot of time."

"Yeah, and who's fault is that?" Lea snapped. "I've had *enough* complications to deal with on top of your pointless goose chases...."
"Pointless?" Sora repeated, looking lost. "I just found out my brother's adopted...and I only just found out I had a brother a few months ago...."

"Hey." Ven suddenly reached out an arm to wrap around Sora's shoulders and jerk him close. "You know why it was pointless? 'Cuz it doesn't matter if we're cousins or adopted or whatever. We've been brothers since before you were born, and we always will be, okay? Get that pathetic look off your face."

Sora was staring up at Ven with shining eyes. "Ven...."

"And don't cry. Ugh, I don't know how Riku stands you...." He grunted when Sora hugged him, but did not push him away.

Xion was grinning a little as she watched. "You kind of act like Vani when you're embarrassed, too," she murmured. "It's cute."

"Shut up."

"Now, hold on," Sapphique said. "I never said I was going to give up Roxas. If all this is true, then...."

Lea laid his head down on his arms and waited.

"Really, Mom?" Ven said scornfully. "You've already got a twenty-five-year-old bum lying around the house, now you're going to take in another kid? Even though he's already got a life and a family in a whole different world, and he'll be grown up in three years anyway? He doesn't need you - he doesn't even want you."

"I like her," Roxas said defensively.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do!" Sapphique shouted at Ven. "I have a responsibility, I can't just let some crazy stranger walk off with a boy I was supposed to be taking care of all this time!"
"I'm not crazy," Lea said wearily. Then, under his breath, "Though I think I'm on the way to it...."

"It's not your fault you didn't know about Roxas," Xion told Sapphique. "Maybe he can come visit? But we just came to ask if you'd let him live with us the rest of the time.... He's like my brother, you know."

"I have so many brothers," Sora mused.

"We grew up together." Xion started telling Sapphique a bit about life in the Organization, how her first memories had been of Roxas, and how Roxas and Axel had become her dearest friends throughout the year they'd spent together. Ven listened intently, as if stitching together hazy memories in his own mind. "So...we want to live together, you see? And because of Isa, we have to live in Radiant Garden for a while instead of here. Sorry. If it wasn't for that, we could come live here with you, but Isa wants to go to school so much, because he never got to.... And, well, we can live together, but only if you let us. Please let us...?"

Lea held his breath and let the puppy eyes do their work.

Sapphique stared. Then she put her face in her hands and burst into tears.

"Mom!" Sora cried, surprised and distressed. Ven wordlessly got up and put his arms around her.

"It's horrible," Sapphique sobbed. "It's horrible. It's like we've been through a war...."

"We have," Ven murmured, rubbing her back soothingly. "We survived. We're home." He kissed her forehead. "Some of us just have different homes, Mom." He paused, briefly. "Mine is with you."

Sapphique wrapped her arms around him and held him tightly for a long time. Then she finally raised her tear-streaked face and said to Roxas, "Please come here." He went over and let her hug him, too. Then Sapphique finally sat up and wiped the tears from her face and said briskly, "All right. Lea Hayes, I am going to trust you, and if you hurt Roxas, or ruin him the way I ruined Ven, I will kill you."
"You didn't ruin me," Ven mumbled.

Lea mumbled, too. "I've already messed up...I've never had any clue what I'm doing. But I can promise you that I'll keep doing my absolute best. Okay? I mean, literally, this is my whole life now. Trying to do the best I can for the people who are most important to me." He and Sapphique regarded each other a little longer, then reached across the table and clasped hands.

"Fine," Sapphique said. "Let's get over to the courthouse, then, and see what needs to be done."

Birth certificates, it turned out. "Jimmy Kramer," Sapphique stormed, "just type one up. You canNOT look at Ven and Roxas and tell me they're not brothers!"

The clerk looked, frowning.

"Or...something," Sapphique faltered. She frowned at them as well, the two young men with identical appearances, except that Ven looked ten years older. "What exactly did you say your relationship was, again?"

"He's my clone," Ven said sweetly.

"Very funny. Jimmy," she ordered, though now slipping a cajoling note into her voice, "just make one, all right? You've got the genetic reports right there."

"Accordin' to this," Mr. Kramer grumbled, "this kid here's the son of your boy Sora, but that can't be right - they're the same age...."

"How about this," Lea and Ven said at the same time. Lea looked at him in surprise, but Ven kept right on speaking. "Type us up a birth certificate, or I'll kill you."

"Ven," Sapphique said in exasperation.

"He didn't mean it," Xion told Mr. Kramer. Then, with a sly glance at Ven, "What he meant was, you'll make a birth certy thingy for Roxas, or maybe all those files back there might catch fire...or something...you never know." Ven grinned appreciatively at her.
Mr. Kramer frowned. "Huh?"

"Fire," Xion said. A potted plant on the counter burst into flames.

"Holy--!"

Things went much more quickly after that. Roxas now had a birth certificate and was an official citizen of Destiny Islands. He was also half-released from the guardianship of Ven and Sora's mother.

"I'll get my husband to sign this tonight when he comes home," she promised as they all left the courthouse. "You can stay until tomorrow, if you'd like...?"

"We'd love to, but we have to--" Lea started. He paused to take in everyone's expressions: hope, anxiety, pain, longing. "...Yeah, sure. What the heck, it's summer vacation, we've got time to chill...."

It turned out to be convenient, since Riku and Kairi came to hang out with them, and Lea remembered that he needed to talk to Kairi's parents.

"Well, now," the mayor said slowly the next morning, after the situation had been explained to him. "I don't rightly know if that's my prerogative.... We adopted Kairi, you see."

"If this girl Xion is her sister, then I'm thinkin' you'd have to ask the birth parents, not us, since we only adopted the one girl."

"Kairi's from Radiant Garden, too, remember?" Xion told Lea. "Maybe her parents are there."

"They're not," Kairi said, coloring a little. "They're, um...well, only my grandma is left. I'm going to see her next week, actually - Sora and Riku and I were gonna help her finish moving here to the
"Yeah," Lea said wearily, "maybe she has the next clue in our super-fun little scavenger hunt here."

Kairi's grandmother was very kind, not entirely lucid, and rather excited to find that she apparently had a second granddaughter. She and Xion got along splendidly, but it was difficult to make her understand why they needed her signatures, and also difficult to pry Xion away from her at the end of their extended visit.

"I'll miss you, Grandma," Xion said tearfully, hugging her one last time.

"Come visit me, dear," Grandma said, kissing her and patting her arm.

"I-I'll try."

"I'll come get you whenever she asks," Sora assured Xion.

"Okay. I'll see you, Grandma. Sora will come get me when you want to see me, okay?"

"I'm a kid-stealer," Lea murmured, watching as he waited by the Gummi ship. "I go around and steal people's kids, because I think I love them more than they do."

"Monster," Ven agreed, though he grinned a little to show he was teasing.

Lea glanced over at him, then straightened and looked at him more closely.

"What?"

"I dunno, just.... I'll miss you, too, Ven."

Ven shrugged. "I'll see you around." He blinked. "You guys said we'd go to the Coliseum soon,
"Yeah, right," Lea said soothingly, in response to Ven's suddenly hardened tone. "Hey...you been doing okay here?"

Ven's eyes narrowed. "I'm fine."

"Don't brush me off. You've been through a lot, it's okay if you're not 'fine.'"

"I'm twenty-five, I feel like I'm fourteen, and I live with my parents. I haven't seen Terra and Aqua in ages because they hate pretending like they don't care I'm not their precious perfect fake Ven anymore. I can't go to school and I have no job, and I'm still trying to get used to the fact that everyone in this world has always hated me no matter what face I have. My little brother didn't even know I existed until a few months ago. I hate his best friend because his brothers made my life hell when we were kids, and I can't stand to look at any of that family because whenever I see them, I want to kill them. I want to hear them scream and see a whole lot of their blood. Okay? That's how I've been doing."

Lea put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't feel sorry for me," Ven snarled.

"Last time I saw Aqua, she nearly cried while she was telling me that you're avoiding her."

"...They don't look for me," Ven said tightly, nearly unintelligible.

"For one thing, they do; and for another, why should they have to?" Lea tried to remember that he was talking to a fourteen-year-old's mentality, despite the grown man's shoulder he was still gripping. "Just give them a chance, Ven. What's the worst that can happen?"

Ven glared.

"You already think they hate you, don't you? What's the difference?"
"You don't know what it's like!"

"What, I don't know what it's like to have my childhood stolen from me, to get my heart eaten by darkness, to lose everyone I ever cared about, to have to trust myself to perfect, innocent friends who only think I'm awesome because they have no clue how horrible I really am? Right, Ventus. I can't sympathize at all."

Jerkily, Ven got out his phone and squeezed a speed-dial button. He didn't say anything for a long time, even though Lea could hear the faint questioning tone of a woman's voice on the other end. Then Ven finally growled, "If you come, I'll be here." He hung up immediately without waiting for a response. He didn't react when the phone announced a text message, so Lea took it out of his hands to read it himself. He stared, smiled a little, and passed it back to Ven.

_We love you, dearest wind. Unbreakable connection. Three hearts or four, doesn't matter, we are one._

Ven spun away and marched out of sight.

'Unbreakable connection,' Lea thought. 'Yeah. That's what it is.' He smiled as the kids finally started ambling toward the ship, talking happily. 'We chose friendship over power, love over victory. And then we won anyway. That's why we're doing all this.' "Ready to go?"

"The multiverse is so huge," Xion told him, eyes shining.

"We have friends and family, like, _everywhere_," Roxas mused.

"I think that's what I like most about adventures," Sora declared.

"You guys make it so worth it," Lea laughed. "C'mon, let's get going."

_0.0.0.0.0_
On the way to Traverse Town a few days later, Xion kept looking unhappily at her freshly-issued Radiant Garden birth certificate. "But my birthday's still January 14th, right? You said I could pick January 14th...."

"Xion," Lea said, plucking the certificate out of her hand, "this means nothing. This is just a means to an end, so that you can go to school and not keep running into roadblocks every time you want to get a driver's license or get a job or--" 'Or get married...Kingdom Hearts help me....' "--or whatever. No one in charge would believe you if you said your birthday was different from your freaking twin sister's, but we know better, okay? We're the ones who matter."

"Isa said that sometimes twins can be born on different days," Xion said dolefully, pulling the birth certificate back and looking at it again.

"Yeah, but a four month difference is a bit much, you know?"

"Roxas gets to have his real birthday on his birth certificate...."

"You can have two birthday parties," Roxas suggested. "One in January, and one in May with Kairi. Twice as many presents."

"Yeah," Xion murmured.

"You have more birthdays than me or Axel or Isa."

Xion studied the birth certificate some more. "Okay."

Lea smiled. "You guys are such kids sometimes...."

The Moogles seemed to have some sort of conspiracy to keep Roxas and Xion out of school. Or to make Lea's life miserable. "Why is that freaking important?!"

"The care of an orphaned minor with no legal guardian falls to the government of the child's homeworld. Not to any unrelated strangers, kupo."
"Orphan means no parents, right?" Xion said cautiously.

"That is correct, kupo."

"Why can't they just be Emancipated?" Lea demanded. "They're nearly sixteen, for crying out loud!"

"Are they employed?" the Moogle asked. "Is their income sufficient enough to support them, kupo?"

Lea leaned to rest his elbows on the counter and drop his face into his hands. This was absolutely ridiculous. 'Of course not. The whole freaking point is to get them in school. Slaving away to keep them alive is my job, not theirs.' "I'll freaking adopt them, then," he growled into his hands, then raised his head. "Just give me the paperwork, I'll fill it out right now."

"That is out of our jurisdiction, kupo. You'll have to consult adoption agencies on Destiny Islands for the boy Roxas, and Radiant Garden for the girl Xion--"

Lea walked out.

After a whole week of sulking, playing video games with his brother, hanging out with Isa and Roxas and Xion when they weren't busy, cooking with his mom, going shopping with his sisters because he was bored, and going swimming with whoever was available at the time, Lea finally rallied and decided to give it another shot. "Okay. Wish me luck, Isa; I'm gonna be a daddy."

"I don't think I have sufficient luck to lend you. You're going to need quite a lot," Isa murmured, frowning at the heavily-annotated course catalogue in his hands.

"Oh, thanks! ...Though I kind of think you're right."

o.o.o.o.o
"Well," the friendly lady at the agency said, "prospective parents will need to decide on the type of adoption they're interested in, fill out an application, undergo homestudy, attend training and classes--"

"Kingdom Hearts," Lea moaned, "we've been living together for a year and a half. They don't have families, the little scattered excuses for families we found already said I could have them, they're gonna be legal adults in less than three years anyway, all I want is to get them into school...."

The rest of his summer ended up being as busy as Isa's, Roxas's, and Xion's. Between work and the whole adoption mess, which felt like a second job, Lea was now too busy to play video games, cook, shop, or go swimming, though he did carve out time to be with his family whenever they could be together.

"Are we almost adopted yet?" Xion asked, cuddling with him after dinner.

"Sort of...I guess," Lea said listlessly. "I can't believe how stupid this is...'training' me to adopt you guys, when I freaking taught Roxas how to eat...."

"You did?" Roxas yelped. "I don't remember that!"

"Heh, it was way at the beginning, when you were still a zombie."

"I bet I figured out how to eat on my own," Roxas pouted.

Lea patted Xion's sleeve. "This is fluffy. Where'd you get it?"

"Kaasan gave it to me," Xion said proudly. "She said she wore it when she was my age and I look as cute as a button in it."

"You do," Lea chuckled.

"Why are you doing homework during summer vacation?" Roxas asked Isa.
"I was able to enroll in time for the second summer session," Isa said shortly, eyes on his computer. "I needed to get as early a start as possible. I would be more productive at home, but someone invited me here rather insistently...."

"I haven't seen you in five days. I miss you," Lea grumped.

"There was no need to drag me here when I'm simply going to be working."

"At least I get to see your ugly face while you neglect me."

"Work, work, work," Roxas grumbled. "We might as well be back in the Organization again...."

"At least we get to work for us now, and not Xemnas," Xion mused. "Or Xehanort, or whoever he was."

"Yeah."

"Hey," Lea said. "I need references to prove that I can take care of kids and that I'm not a psychopath. Help me out, Isa?"

"I'm busy."

"For crying out--! Look, Xigbar's out of the question; Xaldin, maybe; C.O. team barely knew Rox and Xi; couldn't get that lazy bum Demyx to write a grocery list, much less be a reference; Luxord, I guess; and no one else has really seen me with the kids except Mom and everyone, but I can't ask my family. Well, I could ask your mom. But that's it."

"How many do you need?"

"I dunno. Three or four?"
"Dilan, Luxord, Mother. That's three."

"Ugh, Isa...."

Isa, did, however, care about his friend more than he usually let on, which was why he was in Agrabah shortly afterwards. "Why, exactly, can't I see her?" He asked, frowning in confusion.

Aladdin shrugged. "I dunno, apparently rich people like to pretend that babies magically drop out of the sky or something and women don't have anything to do with it."

"You don't sound very convinced about the necessity of this practice...would you be willing to break the rules for me?"

"Uh...sure, I guess. If Jasmine's okay with it," the prince added more sternly.

"Of course."

"We should probably wait 'til tonight, though. I'll tell the servants to steer clear."

Jasmine did consent to see 'Kitten Eyes,' and was sitting behind a curtain when her husband led Isa in. "We're here, Jaz," Aladdin called. Rajah peered around the curtain and growled at them.

"I'll keep my distance," Isa told the tiger stiffly. "Your Highness?"

"I'm here," she said. The sound of her light, sweet voice was more refreshing than he'd expected.

"It's been a while."

"I haven't seen you since the wedding! What have you been up to?"

"Studying.... I've returned to my homeworld, and am...essentially trying to reclaim my human life."
"Really?" she said warmly. "Tell me all about it, I'm curious. Aladdin, did you offer him a seat?"

"Huh?" Aladdin was already lounging on a cushion. "Oh! Um, yeah, go ahead and sit down."

"Thank you. Actually, Your Highness, the purpose of my visit tonight.... Do you happen to remember my friend, L--? Er, you would have known him as 'Axel.'"

"Axel? Of course - he's the man with gaudy hair whom all the Keybearers seemed to like."

"He is quite popular with children, yes.... I wanted to ask if you recalled...a certain incident last year...where you and I, er, spent some time together...."

Aladdin narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"When you saved me from being kidnapped and it took us so long to get home? Of course!"

"I suppose you got to know L-- Axel fairly well.... He goes by the name 'Lea' now, by the way. And I am 'Isa.'"

"Oh - I like 'Kitten' better."

"So do I," Aladdin said mischievously.

Isa gritted his teeth. "I dislike it immensely, as I'm sure you well know; and the name 'Saïx' has rather negative connotations for me...."

There was a pause. "Ohhh," Jasmine realized. "You mean Xehanort--" Another pause. "Aladdin?"

He sat up, looking a little concerned. "Yeah?"
"What color are his--?"

"They're green," Isa snapped, unable to even look at the curtain as his cheeks colored. "My eyes are green now, Your Highness. You have nothing to fear from me."

"Isa," she said in a soft voice, "it was never you I was afraid of."

"...."

"Aladdin, is there anyone else around?"

"Nope. Just me, you, him, Rajah, and I think Abu or Genie or Carpet might be lurking around somewhere, not sure." They all listened to the silence. "On second thought," Aladdin chuckled, "not Genie. We'd have heard him by now."

There was a rustling behind the curtain. Then Jasmine stepped out.

She was halfway across the room before Isa finally realized what he was seeing. "Oh--"

She stopped before him. "It's a bit difficult for me to stoop down these days," she said delicately.

He was already scrambling to his feet. "Your High--" Face to face now, they simply gazed at each other in silence.

"I knew you'd have beautiful eyes," she finally said softly.

He blinked and turned his attention to the most convenient topic. "Have you been eating well enough? In the time I've known you, your Body Mass Index has always appeared to be alarmingly low, and you must start taking that more seriously now that you are responsible for someone else's health in addition to your own. You need plenty of protein and calcium for the child's development, such as eggs or--"
"Oh," Jasmine suddenly gasped, her attention turned inwards. "There he goes again...." She took Isa's hand, glanced at her husband until Aladdin shrugged in consent, then placed Isa's palm on her rounded belly.

'What...?'

"He should start kicking again in a moment," she whispered. "Or she...."

They waited. Nothing happened for a while.

"Oh-- Saïx," Jasmine said, and he repressed a sigh at the name, "what do you think? We decided on Cassim if it's a boy, after Aladdin's father. But for a girl - which do you like better? Atiya, 'gift,' or Fayruz, 'turquoise gem'? Aladdin says it reminds him of me because of my wardrobe phase when we met, but I think it's silly to name a girl after something like that...."

"I think," Isa said quietly, "that in a society which values its males so highly to the detriment of its females, the daughter of such an extraordinary man as your father ought to pass on his legacy to her own children."

They both stared at him for a minute. Then Jasmine broke into a wide smile, and Aladdin laughed, "Fine, you win."

Isa jumped a little in surprise as Cassim-or-Atiya kicked at his hand. "There!" Jasmine gasped eagerly, "There she goes! You feel it, Saïx?"

"Yes," he said softly.

"I'm sorry...Isa." She cocked her head curiously. "Doesn't that mean...?"

"We don't pay as much attention to name meanings," he muttered. "My mother just saw it in a book and liked it.... I was better off than my best friend, who ended up with a name that's considered feminine in every other world we've been to."

Jasmine giggled. "Axel-who's-now-called-Lea, you mean?"
"Yes. Speaking of which, I came to ask you a favor on his behalf, since you witnessed a fair amount of his interaction with the Keybearers...."

Shortly before school started, Lea dragged himself back to Garden High and met with the principal again, this time with Roxas and Xion in tow, hoping that their Puppy Eyes might come in handy. "Look," he said wearily, "I've been working on it. All summer. But there's no way I'm going to be able to get the adoptions finalized before school starts, and I have everything else, unless you guys have yet more scavenger hunt clues to throw at me...."

"Axel says we can't go to school until he adopts us," Xion told the principal, "but it's taking a really long time. He has to go to class like Isa. And he's always talking to the adoption people."

"So now he's not home half the time when we get back from tutoring," Roxas complained. "We barely ever see him anymore."

"I miss Axel," Xion sighed, leaning on his shoulder. "It was a lot more fun when we got to eat ice cream on the clock tower every day, and go to the zoo and bake cookies and pick him up from work so he's not so tired when he gets home...."

"I don't even wanna go to school, anyway," Roxas said. "Kaasan teaches us everything."

"Who's your mother?" the principal asked curiously.

"My friend's mom," Lea explained. "They call my mom 'Mom,' and his mom 'Kaasan.' Because they've never had their own mom, you know?"

There was a moment of silence, as Roxas and Xion and the principal all gazed at each other. Lea hoped that whatever vibes were flowing back and forth between them would miraculously get the kids into school.

"You know," she finally said, "it seems like things are progressing rather nicely - just bring me some immunization records, and I'll go ahead and admit them with the understanding," her tone
grew more firm in an attempt to curb their sudden excitement, "that I will be presented with the rest of the paperwork as soon as possible."

"You got it," Lea said, nearly crying in relief as Xion squeed and let Roxas high-five her. "Shot records, then we're in...."

"Also, let's go ahead and schedule a placement test now. We'll probably have to use those results in lieu of transcripts."

"Fine. Not sure what the heck that is, but great."

He wasn't nearly so happy when the results came back and it was recommended that Roxas and Xion be put in the school's special education program. "What the heck!" he raged as they were eating comfort ice cream with Isa afterwards, "They're not friggin' stupid! They're clueless but they're not retarded, I don't know who the freak she thinks she is, saying they're 'special' as if she thinks her stupid school's too good for--"

"Lea, stop it," Isa said sharply.

Roxas and Xion were staring at Lea, wide-eyed.

"Axel," Xion said in a small voice, "I thought it was good to be special...."

"I thought we were always special," Roxas said in confusion, absently flipping the Keychain clipped to his belt.

"Not 'special' like Keyblade-wielders, 'special' like--"

"Lea, shut up," Isa said.

"Don't tell me to shut up! They're not putting my kids in special ed, forget it, they're not going anywhere near that school, I'm taking them--"
Isa stood up. "Lea Hayes, you have no idea what you're talking about, shut up."

"What're you--?!!"

"Shut UP. What do you think the program is for? A school has a duty to give every single one of its students the best education possible, regardless of any disadvantages certain students might have."

"They--"

"Have you ever actually met anyone who suffers from mental retardation? Because they exist. They existed back when we went to that school. Did you think they were just locked in a closet somewhere all day? Or did you ever even think about them at all?"

Lea stared at him.

"Special needs are simply special needs, there is no shame in having them. And even the most intelligent teenagers in the world would not be able to succeed in high school without help when they've had less than two years of life experience, no formal education, and learned everything they know from a high school dropout, a Moogle who routinely swindled them, and a housewife."

"Isa...."

"I can assure you," Isa continued more quietly, sitting back down, "if you fling your precious Keybearers into general education, they will be completely lost, will fail most of their classes, and would probably be better off not even going to school at all. Special education will help them catch up, and graduate. Which is, may I remind you, the whole point of enrolling them."

Lea was still staring. "Where the heck did all that come from?"

Isa sighed. "As a freshman, my academic performance was such that they allowed me to tutor in the junior high school's Content Mastery Center during my sophomore year. Before the Garden fell, obviously."
"You tutored in the what?"

"See, you've never even heard of it. You were all so oblivious." Isa shook his head. "I mostly tutored students with learning disabilities who'd come in with assignments, but near the end, they started asking me to help in...other classrooms. It was eye-opening. It was...." Isa eyed the curious Keybearers, then continued in a lower voice, "It was what made me decide to become a teacher."

There was a long pause.

"Oh," Lea finally said.

Roxas tossed his ice cream stick at the trash can and made a little victorious noise when it made it in. "So, what. Are we going to school in September, or are you still mad?"

Lea let his head drop back against the wall. "I don't knooowww.... Fine, yeah. You're going to school. Special ed. Whatever. I hope you know what you're talking about, Isa."

Isa touched the two class schedules in front of them. "Language arts, history, and science in regular classrooms, the rest of the day in CMC - they will catch up quickly." He narrowed his eyes at Roxas and Xion. "If they are diligent and work hard."

"It'll be like missions," Xion said. "Just without the Heartless."

Both Lea and Isa smiled a little.

"Heh...."

"That is one way to think of it, I suppose."

On the morning of the first day of school, Roxas and Xion were fussed over by Lea, Mrs. Hayes, Mrs. Tsukino, and both of Lea's sisters.
"Stick with the people you know, okay?" Lea said, slinging his arms around his siblings. "If you don't have any friends, you're sunk."

"Don't tell them that," Mrs. Hayes admonished, cuddling her almost-grandchildren. "You two will be just fine, and all of us here love you very much."

"I can't breathe," Roxas said, wriggling in her arms.

Mrs. Tsukino kissed him as soon as he got free. "Don't let what anyone says bother you, all right? You both have such lovely smiles, don't forget to use them!"

"Are you kidding? All the girls'll take one look at Roxy and start swooning," one of Lea's sisters laughed.

"Don't squish my hair!"

"You have your lunch, Xion?"

"Yup."

"Notebooks, plenty of pencils, schedule--?"

"Don't people get in trouble when they're late to school?" Roxas said pointedly.

Lea stood with his and Isa's mothers as they all watched the kids leave. His arms were folded, and he kept clenching his hands. He finally realized that both women seemed to be watching him, waiting for something. "What?" he said defensively.

"Your little babies are all grown up," Mrs. Hayes prompted.

"Mom," Lea mumbled, though that had been the exact sentiment he'd been trying to suppress.
"They're soooo cute," Mrs. Tsukino sighed, "and now they're off to school, just like all the rest of the cuties their age...off to school for the very first time...."

"Aaahhhh!" Lea yelled, giving in, "My babies! My life is so screwed up!" He burst into laughter.

When both adoptions were finalized, they threw a party to celebrate. Isa didn't study during some of it, and Roxas and Xion had some actual friends from school that they were able to invite. There was a cake and games and food, and near the end, as people were starting to offer final congratulations and return home, Xion leaned into Lea and smiled when he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "We're finally a family now?"

"Finally a family," he confirmed, kissing her forehead.

Roxas crossed his arms on Lea's other shoulder, looking through the open door into the living room where Isa was arguing comfortably with Riku and Mr. Hayes, Lea's sisters and Kairi were trying to coax Mr. Tsukino to dance as Naminé appeared to be sketching the scene, Lea's brother and Sora were sprinkling confetti into the laughing Mrs. Tsukino's hair, and Mrs. Hayes was happily showing a photo album to Ven and Sapphique. "I thought we were already a family."

Lea hugged him, too. "You're right, Rox. We've been a family for a long time." He smiled. "Now we're a family in our hearts and on paper."

"It took longer than I thought it would...."

"Yes," Lea said in deadpan understatement. "Yes, it did."

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Author's Notes: While I was playing with another plot bunny in this universe related to Rox & Xi's schooling, it occurred to me to wonder how they got enrolled in the school in the first place. Once the idea sparked in my mind, it just kept unspooling like that wish list Genie pulls out of Aladdin's ear during "Friend Like Me." XD Because seriously, Roxas's & Xion's insane backgrounds would make it ridiculously hard to get them into a school like the ones in my country. ^^; I have so much fun putting science-fantasy characters into mundane situations.... X3

Most of this story was planned; some of it wasn't. I didn't realize that Before Sora was going to get referenced so much, and the Xi(Ven)Van and SaiJazAl and spec ed stuff either flowed in as I was drafting, or jumped into the outline when I wasn't drafting. ^^;
"Kaasan" (short for "Okaasan") means "Mom" in Japanese.

Ftr, I plan to eventually make another version of *First Blood* where Axel doesn't chicken out. XD

I haven't actually written out the "certain incident" yet about SaiJaz, though it's teased in *Eyes Like A Tiger's: Within Music*. ELAT was not supposed to be part of the BbF&ML universe, but...yeah. No control over my muse WHATSOEVER. -.-

Speaking of my muse, I wrote this story in, like, a week. XD I've been *flooded* with AkuSaiRokuShi inspiration lately, and unless my capricious muse gets interested in another shiny distraction soon, you'll be seeing a lot more OT4 stuff from me in the near future. *sweatdrop*

"Isa" is a male name in Arabic (it's the Arabic form of "Jesus" XD XD *sweatdrop*), and apparently it can be Sanskrit, too? But "Lea"...could not find anything except female meanings. XD
It was such a quiet day - everyone was gone. After Kayla had left for her volunteer work and the other four had left for school, Lea went back to bed, then spent the afternoon helping his mother shop for groceries and cook dinner. It was kind of nice, but he got more restless as the day wore on. "I'm gonna go out and see if I can meet them halfway."

"All right-- Oh, but would you please make the salad for me first?"

By the time Lea had washed, peeled, cut, and assembled everything, the kids' laughter and chatter was sounding at the door - they were already home. "Hey!" He hurried to greet them.

"Axel!" Xion skipped over to hug him, and Roxas waved.

"Hi, Lea," his sisters chorused in unison, then went back to eagerly discussing how hot one of their formerly nerdy classmates had gotten over the summer.

"Did you have a good first day of school?" Lea asked anxiously.
Roxas shrugged. "I dunno."

"Flaming pants. That really is annoying," Lea thought in astonishment, on the receiving end of such a reply for the very first (and by no means the last) time.

"It was okay," Xion said uncomfortably. "Kind of confusing...and weird...but it was okay."

"What?! What?! Tell me! I'll help!"

"Ummmm...okay, but let's do something else first, I just want to relax."

"...Okay." Lea hugged her again and then looked over at Roxas, who was obliviously discussing something with Zeph. "Gaaahh."

Isa came over for dinner, surly as usual but asking Xion about school without any reminders or prompting.

"How come everyone keeps asking?" Roxas complained.

"Rox," Lea said, "it was you guys' first day of school everrrrr."

"All parents like to know about their children's lives, dear," Mrs. Hayes explained, "no matter how long they've been in school. It's a very big part of your lives."

"I'm not a parent," Lea protested, "it's only on paper...."

"Did you have any homework?" Isa asked, ignoring the rabbit trail.

"Of course we don't, it's the first day of school!" Belén yelped.
"We have homework," Zeph grumbled. "This is gonna be a super-fun year, I can already tell...."

"Oh," Xion said. "I have something, Axel."

"Homework?"

"They said make sure it's filled out and bring it back tomorrow."

"Show me after dinner, okay?"

"Okay."

When Roxas saw it, he said, "Oh yeah," and went to get an identical card from his own bag. He placed it in front of Lea, said, "I didn't know most of the stuff," and went to play a video game with Zeph.

"Emergency contact information," Lea read aloud. He looked at the cards for a while, then called Isa.

"What?" Isa said irritably.

"I guess, since I adopted them, I should fill these out, right?"

Isa gave him a look as if to say, 'Why did you drag me all the way over here just for that?'

"There's two blanks, though! Who do I put for their mom? They don't have a mom. I'm not gonna put Sora or Vexen!"

"Just enter your own mother's information," Isa said impatiently.

"But--" Lea stared at the card. "They're not gonna think I'm married to Mom or anything, are
"It'll be fine, dear," she chuckled, leaning over to see. "They just want to know who to call in case something happens to the kids."

"Okay...."

**One year later:**

Lea and Isa happened to meet outside the house, just as it was getting dark enough for the street lights to start coming on. "Yo."

"Hi."

"Sooo...how was whatever you did all day?"

"Fine." Pause. "How was work?"

"Fine."

"...."

"...We're so lame."

"It doesn't matter."

Inside, Roxas and Xion were snacking on yogurt and enthusiastically playing Command Board on the kitchen table.

"Nooo, jerk!"
"Heh heh, now I'm winning...."

Lea grinned and went over to greet them. "Hey, guys. How was your second first day of school?"

"Fine."

"Fine."

"Very informative. Are your teachers nice"

"I dunno."

"Oh, Axel, we got those card thingees again you have to fill out." Xion went to get them.

Lea looked at the cards for a while. "Hey...Isa...it's asking for the parents' contact info again."

"So?"

"I'm thinking it makes more sense now to put you and me."

"No. They're your children, not mine."

"But we live together now!"

"It doesn't matter. Just use your mother, like you did last time."

"No, I told Mom that I'm grown up and on my own now, and I don't need her help anymore."
"You're not asking her for help, all you're doing is writing down her phone number."

"But I don't want them running to her if something happens to the kids! Isa, come on, we're all in the same household, we know each other better than anyone else does, you said we're a family - all I'm asking is for you to let me write down your phone number and stuff. I'll be the one to actually deal with everything, okay?"

Isa looked at the cards for a while. "...Fine, but my information goes in the section labeled 'Father.'"

"What? No!"

"I will not be anyone's 'mother' in any way, shape, or form."

"That is so not fair, you're saying I have to be their mom?"

"Just cross out the label and write 'guardian' instead."

Glaring, Lea did so. Then they stared at it for a while, with Roxas and Xion peering curiously over their shoulders.

"...You can still tell where it said 'Mother' and 'Father,'" Lea grumbled.

"Why don't you take turns?" Xion suggested. "One of you can be the mom on my card, and the other one can be the mom on Roxas's card."

"Urgh...well, I guess that's fair. Right, Isa?"

"No."

"Why are you so stubborn?!"
"Why is this important, anyway?" Roxas asked, genuinely confused. "You guys aren't even our parents at all."

"Yeah, Isa! It's not important, so stop being a sissy!"

"Stop taunting me like a five-year-old. Fine. We'll follow Xion's suggestion."

"Good," Lea said in satisfaction. He lowered the pen to write.

Isa snatched the card away and slipped the other beneath Lea's poised pen tip.

"Oi!"

"If I have to be someone's mother," Isa said roughly, "it will be Xion's. I refuse to be the 'mother' of a boy."

"Lame, Isa," Lea pouted, filling out the mother's section on Roxas's card.

"I still don't see what the big deal is," Roxas grumbled.

"Now I have a daddy and a mommy," Xion teased, hugging Isa.

"Get off."

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Author's Notes: This drabble was lame...especially for a Pairing Day.... (Not that I actually wrote it for AkuSaiRokuShi Day, but I didn't have time to write my OT4 a real story [again DX], so I just looked for an unposted draft, and this was the best I could find. *sweatdrop*)

I like to play with relationship dynamics and gender roles a lot. Plus, it's just fun to tease Sai and
gratifying to torture Axel. I didn't write this to label Isa as "the girl," just so you know.

I wrote almost all of part one before realizing that the fic actually needed to take place after they'd moved. XD *headdesk* I ended up trying to draw the scene to a close, moving on, and just leaving it in, since it seemed a shame to cut out half of an already short fic....

The name of Lea's youngest sister was causing problems - it changed once or twice before I decided on "Genesis," but then I remembered last-minute that there's already a Genesis in Final Fantasy VII. orz. Then I had to hunt for a new name, which took way longer than it should have because there were more factors involved than you would think, and I finally ended up with Belén. (Which looks way better with the accent mark, which I did not know was supposed to be there until I went searching for how to nickname it, because all the baby name sites I'd been looking at before just had it as plain old "Belen," which is wrong.) Apparently it's a popular girls' name in Spanish-speaking countries...? There's a particular reason I wanted a name like that, but it's a spoiler for the CatC universe. I put way too much effort into naming a throwaway OC, but whatever.

And Zeph, just.... He originally was the Zell from FF8, then I decided that wasn't a good idea and changed it to an OC, Zeke. Then I thought that was too similar to Zack (also from FF7), so then I went looking for Hispanic boys' names starting with Z, and somehow ended up with Zephyrus? Even though that's apparently Greek??? (It looks like Hispanics don't like Z names, so my options were quite limited. XD) I don't know anymore. -.- Like I said, throwaway OCs, so hopefully it won't matter.
My eyes ache, like when the berserk fog starts to clear, but instead of gold, all I see is darkness. I can hardly breathe, and panic starts to rise when I realize I can't move, either. The darkness is alive, pinning me, it'll consume me....

My struggles suddenly cease when I hear a whisper in my ear, and realize that the one holding me captive is human. "This is for your own good."

Lea's voice. Lea's hands hurting me. "No--"

Sudden light, a beam of it stretching out as if to capture me, so harsh that I can't see who it is surrounding us. I know who they are, though. The heroes of Light, the Key wielders. My enemies for so long. Lea is one of them now.

"Hold him, Axel."
I know his voice, too...Roxas--

"Don't worry, he's not going anywhere."

"Lea--"

"I can't say I won't enjoy this." Xion, no longer a mere puppet, ready to avenge herself on me now that I'm at their mercy....

"Please--"

A flash of light, then pain. Flaring first in my chest, then intensifying until I scream, starting to shoot through my entire body. This light...I know what it's looking for...it's finding and finding and finding, but there's nothing in my soul for it to pass over, nothing it won't burn.

"Lea, please!" I can't bear it - if they don't stop soon, they'll kill me.

"Ssshh. Almost over."

"No! No!" I have almost nothing left. I have...nothing....

0.0.0

"ISA!"

"NO!!!!" I can't get free. I can't get free. I thought I woke up, but I'm still in the nightmare, struggling in the dark as Lea pins my arms.

"Isa, wake up!"

"Get off me! Get OFF!"
"Not 'til you stop trying to kill me!"

"GAH!" We're in...Radiant Garden...?

Roxas and Xion are there, but in their sleepwear. Roxas's Keyblade is hanging by his side, not shining like I thought it was; Xion's is nowhere in sight. Their faces are pale and frightened, as if I'd only imagined those hard, merciless expressions as they prepared to destroy me.

"Get off...."

"Don't hit me again, okay?" Lea cautiously loosens his grip and I roll onto my stomach, pressing my face against the cool sheets. We're in the Garden...at home...it was a nightmare...I hadn't thought they would come back....

"Lea...."

"Are you okay, Isa?" Xion asks in a small voice. I hear Roxas dismissing his weapon.

Just a nightmare. They never tried to kill me, never tried to 'cleanse' me. We spent the day unpacking boxes, ordered take-out for dinner, went to bed, the rest was all a dream.... "I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Roxas says dubiously.

I don't look--

I get out of bed so quickly that I accidentally strike Lea, but I have no time to apologize, I must get to a mirror, a mirror--

They're green. Green. I stare, looking for any trace of gold, but there's nothing. I am...myself....

I try to take deep breaths. I have to take several before I stop shaking.
"Isa, really, you okay?" They're all clustered in the bathroom doorway, watching me.

"I'm fine. Go back to bed. You have school - and work - in the morning. I have school. Go to bed."

"Gee, I'll try, but it's kind of hard to sleep when you scream like that," Roxas complains, but shuffles away. Xion eyes Lea, then returns to her room after he nods at her.

I try to hurry back to bed before he can say anything, but he catches my shoulder as I pass, and I brace myself for uncomfortable questions. "You said they'd stopped."

"They had. I don't know why there was a recurrence."

"Isa-- Hey. Look me in the face and tell me you're all right."

I realize, to my displeasure, that I'm avoiding his eyes, so I force myself to look at him. "I am well. It was merely an unpleasant dream, but I see now how foolish my fears were. I'll be all right."

"......Okay." He lets go, and to my relief, he does not press the issue.

Until it happens again the next night.

o.o.o

"No-- NO! Not this!"

"Quiet, boy."

"You won't use me for this!"
Lea's battered body at my feet, agonized eyes full of betrayal, helpless to stop me as I raise my weapon for the final blow.

"No! You won't make me do this! NO!"

Then I realize that the screaming is all in my head, my mouth has never moved, my face is like stone as I bring the claymore down and watch his blood splatter my boots.

"NOOOO!!"

0.0.0

The harsh sobbing sound in my ears, it's my own voice, but it can't be because I've-- For so long, he won't--

"Isa, Isa, Isa, wake up...."

It's so dark because my sleeve is pressed to my face. I can't see a thing, but I can't move my arms, either, I'm so desperate to keep them pressed over my face, as if I'm holding him back. As if I ever had the power to stop him. "L-Lea...."

"It's okay, man, it's okay, c'mon, wake up...."

The room floods with light.

"I'm awake...Lea, I'm awake...Lea! Lea...!"

"Yeah? What is it? Isa, come on."

He's pulling at my hands, but I can't let him. "Lea...please...."
"Isa, sshh, come on."

"Wh-What...what color...." I force myself to move my arms, just a little. Enough for him to look. I trust him - I trust him to look at my ugly heart and see the real me. The shame feels like it's devouring me, but I owe him this glimpse at least. "...are my...?"

"They're green, Isa," he says gently. "They're green. It was just a dream."

I hide away my traitorous eyes again and dissolve into tears of relief, because I can't resist them anymore even though I sound terrible and feel like I have no dignity left. "I...."

"Ssshh." He pats my back and then puts an arm around my shoulders, settling down beside me. "It's okay." Then, voice lifted as if he's speaking to someone else, "He's fine, guys. Go back to bed."

The Keybearers - of course, that's where the light came from...curse them, why do they have to see me like this?

"Is he gonna do this every night, Axel?"

"I'll take care of it, okay? Don't worry about it."

"Get out!" I shout at them, my face still hidden.

"Geez, fine."

"He'll be okay, Axel...?"

"He'll be fine."

I'm not. At first, it's every night, though later, I am able to make it through some nights without
having any dreams at all. "Some," however, is not enough. I'm tired of this weakness, tired of looking like a fool in front of the other two, tired of robbing Lea of his sleep when he has to work so hard during the day. He never complains, though.

"'S okay, Isa," he mumbles, still half asleep as he stumbles out of bed and puts his arms around me. "They're green...."

"YOU DIDN'T EVEN LOOK!" I shout at him. I know he's having a difficult time, and I know he has to be right, but the panic clamped on my mind is not something that can be reasoned with. "YOU DIDN'T EVEN LOOK!"

"Flaming pants...." He shoves my hands away from my face. "See, they're green. Shut up."

I can't believe him anymore. I have to see, so I stumble to the mirror and snap on the light and gaze apprehensively into the glass, and sure enough, they are clear and green, like they're supposed to be. Like I knew they would be. Like I can't convince myself they are, even as I stand here looking at them. "He's left my heart...he's dead...he will never trouble me again...." A shudder goes through me, and I know helplessly that I can't make myself believe this even though I know it to be true.

I pay more attention to them than usual the next morning, noticing the yawns and the tired faces. This is not taking its toll on me alone. All three of them need more rest, and they're not getting it with this arrangement. "This isn't working out," I say, annoyed that it comes out as a sullen mutter.

"Huh?" Lea says listlessly, stirring sugar into his coffee.

"I'll look for another place to live, or move back in with my parents if I have to. This isn't--"

"You're leaving?" Xion says in confusion.

"Yes."

"No." Lea reaches out and smacks the back of my head. "Isa's just sulking, as usual."
Roxas takes another bite of cereal and says conversationally, as if he doesn't care very much, "If he leaves, he won't keep waking us up in the middle of the night anymore."

"He'll still have nightmares, though," Xion says, poking at the pancakes on her plate with a fork. "He'll just be alone instead of with us."

"That's none of your concern," I snap.

"You're family. Of course it's our concern," Lea says. "Eat your pancakes."

"I'm not hungry."

"You think I am? Eat them anyway."

He has a point. So I do. But I still don't want to live with them anymore. I hate that this weakness of mine has been so exposed to them - I'd rather suffer alone.

Of course Lea doesn't let me leave, thwarting and sabotaging me at every turn. He seems to get more stubborn and annoying the harder I try to resist him. "It's a pain," Roxas finally says in exasperation during one of our arguments, "but we just deal with it like we deal with everything else. It's not like you haven't done worse stuff to us."

"Axel says," Xion adds, "that people who live together annoy each other a lot, like how he and Roxas always leave the stupid toilet seat up instead of putting it down like you're supposed to." They've been living with a female all this time and have still not developed the habit of being courteous in that manner? "So it's okay you're annoying about your nightmares, Isa. We know you can't help it."

This is exactly why I want to leave. Why do we have to talk about it like this?

I try various things, such as staying up later and going to bed so exhausted that I don't have the energy to dream. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

"Isa."
Sitting in the dark again, pressed against the wall with my hands over my eyes, hearing Lea trying to soothe me in his patient, weary voice. "You're here with us in the Garden. You're safe."

"I c-could...feel him...in my heart...."

"Isa, you're fine. He's gone, and he's not coming back unless you're stupid and try something like using the corridors again or whatever. But I know you're not stupid, so you won't, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Lea...."

The next day, when I come out to take a break from schoolwork, I frown as the other three, who had been whispering together, suddenly go quiet and stare at me. "What?"

"Nothing," they all say in unison.

"...." Whatever it is, I don't care. I find something light to eat and then resume studying.

That night, when I wake up again, I am alarmed to find that there is more than one set of hands pulling me to my feet. "Lea--!"

"Sshh, it's all right."

"It's just us," Xion's voice says in the darkness, full of warmth, so different than in the dreams.

"C'mon," says Roxas. "We're gonna be up anyway, so...."

They push me into the living room and onto the sofa, which eases the sensation of my flesh creeping. Lea turns on the television as Roxas starts rooting through video discs, and Xion busies herself in the kitchen. The lamp lends a comforting illumination that's not bright enough to be overpowering. "Why are we here...? Go to bed."
"Can't sleep, because *someone* keeps screaming," Roxas says, dropping onto the couch next to Lea and raising the remote. Xion pushes a mug of tea into my hands, then curls up next to me with a mug of her own. Their warm presences around me are somehow uncomfortable and soothing at the same time.

"Here's the deal, Isa," Lea says. "Every time you wake us up, you get the pony treatment as punishment. Maybe your nightmares'll clear up if you know what'll happen afterwards."

"The pony...?"

They really are trying to kill me. Admittedly, however, it's rather difficult to fear anything (except going mad), when you're trapped in the same room as a children's cartoon with very bright colors, upbeat characters with very high voices, and a plotline so blatantly treacly and moralistic that I want to scream again, though for quite different reasons this time.

"I love this show," Xion murmurs happily.

"Lea, I am *begging* you, turn it off, I promise I will never awaken you again." Because I am moving out first thing tomorrow morning.

"Man, the episode's not even over, chill."

We watch until it seems to go very quiet, until the high cartoon voices seem to echo in a deep silence, until both children seem to be asleep, resting heavily against us, and Lea seems nearly asleep, too.

The episode ends, and returns to the menu. After a moment, Lea slowly raises his arm and shuts off the TV. We sit there for a moment, the silence now complete.

When I break it, my voice is so low that it seems to barely disturb the peace. "I dream...that you're holding me down...so they can 'purify' me, with their Keyblades...the darkness is all burned up, the light chasing it away completely...but...I have no light in me...there's nothing but darkness...so when they finally finish...there's nothing of me left." There's a long pause. He's asleep. I'm both offended and relieved. "After everything I did to them, I suppose they've earned the right to tear me to pieces. I don't blame them. I just want nothing to do with them, and I'm sure they feel the same about me." I'm startled when Xion's arms curl around my waist and squeeze tight, as if in an embrace.
"Axel," Roxas murmurs, very sleepily, "tell Saïx...I mean Isa...I don't hate him...he makes good enchiladas."

What?

"Okay, Rox," Lea murmurs back, arm curling around me on the other side for an embrace of his own. "And hey, Isa...there's light in you. If there wasn't any, we'd hate you. But we don't."

"Don't hate you," Xion whispers, barely awake. "Saa-chan...don't hate me...."

Well, of course I don't hate her. Not anymore. I don't like her at all, but that's only because our personalities are incompatible.

Over time, the dreams grow less frequent and less intense, until I am able to wake up soundlessly, and eventually resume sleeping on my own. My nightmares also gradually shift into more bizarre scenarios, often including colorful equines.... I would never admit it to the others, but I prefer these new nightmares to the ones based on memories.

"Hey," Rox as realizes one morning, "you haven't woke us up for a while now."

"Are you getting better, Saa-chan?" Xion asks eagerly.

"I'm fine. Pass the butter."

"Unless we're just sleeping through it now?" Lea says, sounding a little worried.

"You're not," I grumble. "And besides, I'm not a child, I don't need to be coddled through bad dreams like--"

"Aw, I'll miss our Midnight MLP Marathons...."
"Yeah."

They gave those sessions a name?! 

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** I'm not into the more blatant kind of "hurt/comfort," so Caxceber's kiriban didn't come out like a lot of hurt/comfort fics do. But after I wrote the hospital scene she'd asked for, this plummy came out of nowhere and **savaged** me, and it's a lot more hurt/comfortey than the original fic, so I suppose that Caxceber has two kiriban now. ^^;;;; Heh, I'll probably be really embarrassed about this fic when I re-read it in the future. >.<

Complete: 57/101
Beyond the War: Seen Before {Lea, Isa, Roxas, & Xion}

BbF&ML: Seen Before (rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Living with the opposite sex can be awkward.

0.0.0

Isa had a moment of panic when he woke up, before he realized that it was an off-Saturday and there was no class. He laid his head back down with a soft, relieved groan, realized after a minute that he was not going to be able to get back to sleep, then climbed out of bed and shuffled about his morning routine.

He ended up falling asleep on the couch, in the middle of reading a textbook. It was the noise in the kitchen that later awakened him, Roxas laughing at something Lea said as they clinked utensils and cookware. Isa raised his head so that he could see over the back of the couch.

"Mornin', Sleeping Beauty," Lea called. "You pull an all-nighter again?"

"It's a weekend," Roxas exclaimed in dismay. "I thought you weren't supposed to be a workaholic anymore."

"The workaholicness is from the Isa part of him, not the Saïx part," Lea chuckled.

"Oh."

"For your information, I did actually get a fair amount of sleep last night," Isa said in annoyance, stretching and then standing up. "I simply awakened too early out of habit and came out here to pass the time."

"How many pancakes do you want?" Lea asked.
"None. I'm going to scramble some eggs; would either of you like any?"

"Make mine with cheese and jalapeños," Roxas said.

"All right."

"Hey, I'm using the stove, you have to wait!" Lea insisted.

"Fine." Isa went over to the bathroom and pushed the door open.

Xion, who was smearing lotion over her skin, froze in surprise and stared at him. Isa registered that she was stark naked and stumbled back out, slamming the door shut as a piercing shriek burst from her throat.

"What the--?! Xion was still in there?!" Lea exclaimed.

Isa was too mortified to answer.

"I thought she was--" Roxas's eyes widened. "You saw her naked?"

"No," Isa blurted automatically. He whirled into the bedroom and shut himself in. Then he realized that he would rather already be out there when Xion emerged, instead of the other way around; so, wincing, he came back out, stalking over to the freezer to make some orange juice just so that he would have something to do.

"Is this, like, a thing with you?" Lea was cackling. "I'm starting to think you're doing it on purpose--"

"Each time was an accident, and separated by quite a long period of time, SHUT UP," Isa snarled.

"Saïx saw Xion naked," Roxas said blankly, as if he wasn't sure how he was supposed to feel about
"My name is ISA," Isa growled at him.

"Xion's gonna be mad at you."

"Undoubtedly."

"I'm kinda mad at you, too," Lea remarked, flipping the pancakes over.

"As if you've never walked in on a disrobed female, accidentally or otherwise!"

"Yeah, but those were my sisters, and I was, like, nine. And Larxene made me pay, flaming pants did I pay...." Lea shuddered.

The bathroom door banged open and Xion came sailing out, now dressed and looking miffed. "I think you should apologize," she told Isa.

"I apologize," he mumbled, glaring. "Why didn't you lock the door while you were showering?"

"I forgot to bring clean underwear and had to go get it, and I guess I didn't lock the door again when I came back."

"Why are we talking about your underwear?" Lea groaned under his breath.

Isa silently counted to ten. He had promised Lea that he'd practice being nicer. Swallowing the indignation and embarrassment as much as he could, he said stiffly, "I shouldn't have just assumed you were still asleep, and I should have knocked first. Forgive me."

"It's fine," Xion mumbled, pouring herself a bowl of cereal. "It's not like you haven't seen me naked before, anyway...."
Isa held back an apprehensive whimper and glanced at the other two in resignation. Roxas blinked, and Lea choked on the mouthful of coffee he'd just started to swallow, spitting it all over the stove with disastrous results. "He's WHAT?!"

"You know," Xion said nonchalantly, scooping up a spoonful of Cap'n Crunch. "When they were programming me to kill Roxas and I was in that tank thing. Xemnas was there, then Saïx came in and they talked for a while. I didn't get any clothes 'til the tank broke and I found a coat."

Lea whirled and violently planted a hand on the counter beside Isa, causing some of the orange juice to spill.

"I didn't exactly have a choice about the matter!" Isa snapped. "I didn't have much of a choice about anything in those days...."

"Oh, 'It wasn't my fault because I was possessed!' again, huh? Don't make excuses!"

"At least I never slept with her, as you were often in the habit of doing!"

"She's the one who'd come to me every time there was--!" Lea got a bit tongue-twisted as he remembered that he was supposed to keep it a secret and then realized that there wasn't really any reason to keep it a secret anymore. "She's scared of lightning! She goes nuts, so me and Roxas always had to keep her company!"

"I'm scared of thunder, not lightning," Xion protested.

Lea and Isa both ignored her. "I didn't even see anything that time, anyway; it was like seeing a doll. A science experiment, nothing more."

"Oh, right, naked teenage girl floating in front of you and all you thought was 'science experiment'--"

"Xemnas is the one you should be angry at, not me; he was the one staring and leering for who knows how long before I came in--"
"I'm going to KILL HIM--"

"Which would be difficult, since the offending parts of him are already dead--"

"Well, maybe I should kill you instead!"

"Why is it that I always arouse your ire when I refer to her as inhuman, then the one time when doing so is to my advantage, you rage at me for allegedly seeing her as human--"

"Don't make this look like my fault, I'm not the one who walked in on her!"

"I didn't do anything wrong!"

Roxas looked at Xion and said, below the shouting, "I don't think we're gonna get either pancakes or cheese-and-jalapeño eggs. Do you want strawberry Pop-Tarts, or cinnamon?"

"Cinnamon," she said. They didn't bother to toast them, and instead took the box of Pop-Tarts outside where they could finish eating breakfast in peace and quiet.

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Author's Notes: There are some references to my other fics, Fire & Moonlight: Scream and Raindrops & Whiskers.

I've been frustrated with my muse lately, have been having a difficult time with both writing and drawing....

Then, while clicking around in CaxceeberXVI's gallery on devART this evening, I came across an MMD picture she did of Xion in that tank ("Xion :Test tube Princess"), and it gave me this plot bunny. XD Yaaaaay, I managed to write something that cooperated.
Beyond the War: Miss a Day {Lea, Isa, Roxas, & Xion}

BbF&ML: Miss a Day [censored version] (rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Xion gets sick, and neither Lea nor Isa can stay home to take care of her....

A/N: Ftr, here's the layout of the house: most of it is taken up by the kitchen and living area, which are like two halves of the main space. Off to the side is a vague t shape with the bathroom in the middle. The bedroom is on one side of it, which Lea and Isa share (Lea claimed the top bunk); on the other side is a tiny room which was meant to be a study or something, but the kids use it as their room to keep their stuff in. Only Xion sleeps there, though; Roxas sleeps in a loft over the living room.

Also, AkuSaiRokuShi don't have a car. I made a mistake in "Vacation Notice." *sweatdrop*

Btw, Americans, I used Celsius instead of Fahrenheit because not only does everyone else use the metric system and I consider the KH characters to be half-Japanese, but metric also makes more sense. XD 40°C is about 104°F.

0.0.0

"Xion," Lea called, knocking on her door for the fifth time and starting to sound impatient, "I'm about to barge in and drag you out of bed. You're gonna be late for school."

She didn't deign to respond this time.

"Xion--"

"Hey...."

Lea turned to find Roxas standing behind him, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist and still damp from a shower. His hair looked hilarious.
"I need my clothes."

"Don't say I didn't warn you!" Lea yelled at the door, then presented it to Roxas like an usher.

Roxas edged the door ajar, then pushed it all the way open when he wasn't yelled at. "Xion?" It was dark, and he snapped the light on. "Xion?"

She moaned in response and sluggishly rolled over in bed, turning away from the light.

"I need my clothes."

"Mmnh...."

Shrugging, Roxas went to dig his school uniform out of the closet, taking it back to the bathroom to get dressed. After a while, Xion made a feeble gesture, and the light bulb went dark again.

A little later, Isa marched in, flicking the light switch as he did so. When nothing happened, he frowned at the light bulb, then shook his head and took hold of Xion's shoulders, briskly trying to rouse her. "Get up. I don't care how late you went to bed, you are *not* missing school for some capricious--" He abruptly went silent, feeling at her face and forehead. "Lea."

Lea was in the doorway almost instantly. "What?" he asked in alarm.

"Get the thermometer."

"Is she sick?!"

"I will use the *thermometer* to decisively determine this."

"Xion!" Lea darted to feel her forehead and fuss over her. Isa rolled his eyes and went to get the thermometer himself.
Roxas, after being called over and restoring the light bulb's functionality, leaned on the doorframe and watched the proceedings with mild interest as he finished eating the last sausage.

"She has a fever," Isa confirmed. "It would be best if she remained home from school."

"Xioooo!" Lea cuddled her in distress. She lay completely limp and unresponsive in his arms.

"Will you stay home to care for her?"

Lea stilled, staring at Isa. "Uh...me?"

"Of course you," Isa snapped. "I can't possibly miss class, I've got two exams today and a group project to work on."

"But...I can't miss work, either." Lea hugged her tighter. "Rent's due at the end of the month, I don't know if we'll be able to cover it even if I don't lose any hours...."

Roxas made a mental note to pay for the next grocery shopping trip, and tried to think of how to do so without Lea or Isa finding out. They were starting to catch on that Mrs. Hayes and Mrs. Tsukino weren't regularly 'sending over extra food.'

"I don't feel good," Xion whimpered against Lea's chest.

He stroked her hair and said to Isa, "Okay, here's the plan: you and me'll starve for the next two weeks, and Rox and Xi can eat at Mom's house. That way, I can miss work and still have enough munny for rent."

"You're so dramatic," Isa grumbled. He looked at Roxas.

Lea shot a pleading glance at Isa, noticed where his attention was, then looked at Roxas, too. Roxas fiddled with the grease-stained napkin in his hands and looked back at them, wondering why they were staring.
"Hey, Roxas," Lea said.

"Yeah?"

"This will surely end well," Isa muttered sarcastically under his breath.

"You're a big boy, you can take care of a sick person, right?"

"Huh?"

"It's easy. You just wait on her hand and foot all day."

"I'm supposed to wait for her foot?" Roxas said dubiously.

Isa straightened and said sternly, "You're a young adult who should have developed a healthy sense of responsibility by now, after helping to save the multiverse from a megalomaniac."

"Mega-what?"

"Therefore, I expect you to be diligent and attentive. This is not a vacation day."

"Could either of you kind of let me in the loop here?"

"You can stay home from school and take care of Xion, right?" Lea said eagerly.

Roxas considered this. "Yeah, I guess so." He went to change back out of his uniform into something more comfortable.

o.o.o.o.o
Lea and Isa were annoying - he wished they'd just shut up and leave.

"Check on her at least once every hour, okay?"

"Make sure she gets plenty of fluids, and get a fresh container periodically; she shouldn't be drinking out of the same bottle all day. There's juice in the refrigerator, and canned soup in the pantry."

"Make sure she's got plenty of blankets and a cold cloth for her forehead, okay?"

"Read the medicine labels *carefully*, and take note of the time whenever you give her a dose. Do *not* overdose her and do *not* give her anything you are unsure of."

"Call me or Sai if-- I mean, Isa, whatever his name is--"

"Really, Lea...?"

"--call us if anything bad happens, okay? *Call us.*"

"Only if it's an emergency, such as if her temperature rises above forty degrees or she stops breathing, or--"

"Don't tell him to wait to call us 'til she's *dying*, are you crazy?!"

"She's not *dying*, and we're *busy*, he's perfectly capable of handling--"

"Maybe I should stay home after all!"

"Just go AWAY!" Roxas yelled, shoving them both out the door. "I won't let Xion die. Okay? Go to work and school."
"Call us if--" Isa started.

"You sure you've got--?" Lea added.

"I didn't let you guys die," Roxas reminded them.

There was a pause. Then, to his surprise, Lea hugged him. "We promised we'd always be together."

"Yeah," Roxas said, hugging him back.

"...Flaming pants, you've gotten tall."

"Oh." Roxas looked up and found that Isa was gazing straight into his eyes.

"We trust you," Isa said quietly.

"Yeah. We all trust each other, right?" Just when Roxas was starting to wonder if he was supposed to hug Isa, too, Isa nodded and Lea clapped his shoulder and they both turned away.

"We are so late," Lea remarked as they walked off together.

"At least it's Tuesday. I would have missed a quiz if Xion had decided to fall ill a day earlier...."

"Good thing she was nice enough to get sick at a more convenient time for Your Royal Saixness."

Roxas rolled his eyes at their retreating figures and shut the door.

He watched TV for a while, then figured he'd better check on Xion. She was sleeping. He
watched some more TV, but then he got bored. He sighed and turned the TV off, and listened to how quiet the house now was. "I'm hungry...."

Eating alone, he wistfully thought that he wished she was eating with him. He finally went into her room, and she looked kind of dead. "Xion?" He turned on the light. She lay perfectly still with her eyes closed, her face nearly chalk white, sweat beaded on her forehead and her hair tangled in damp strands against the pillow. The room kind of smelled a little. "You don't look too good...."

He started to put a hand on her forehead, and gasped at how hot her skin was. "Flaming pants--" Now he was struggling to remember all that stuff Lea and Isa had been telling him. "Blankets...?" She needed something cold for her forehead. Or, medicine...a thermometer...?

After realizing that he'd been standing here not actually doing anything for too long, Roxas dug for his phone.

*Don't call us unless it's an emergency.*

Was this an emergency?

*Call us if she's not breathing.*

"Sacred--" Roxas patted helplessly at her. Finally, his face practically touching hers, he figured out that she was breathing. "Okay...breathing...." He looked around. "What do I do first?" She looked uncomfortable, so he finally started wiping the sweat off her forehead, and fluffing her hair so it wasn't all stuck to her skin. She whimpered a little. "Xion, are you okay?"

The word slipped out of her mouth like a sigh. "Lixir...."

"Uh...we don't...have any...anymore...remember...?" It didn't look like she heard him. "Oh, man." He looked around desperately and saw a bottle of medicine on the bedside table. "Ah!" He dove for it.

...The words were *tiny*, and there were a whole bunch of them.
"Whatever, Saïx." He shook two pills out into his hand, because that was how many Lea had given her that morning. "Okay, you have to eat these, Xion." She didn't move or even open her eyes, so he finally slipped them into her mouth. She didn't chew. Then, just as he was wondering if he was supposed to move her teeth up and down, she made a strangled sound, spit out the pills, then threw up on him.

Roxas stared down at the vomit, feeling like he was gonna throw up, too. "...Help."

Lea's phone buzzed in his pocket, and he instantly dove into hiding as soon as he saw that the call was from Roxas. "What happened?"

"Xion threw up on me."

Lea tried not to laugh. "She must be feeling pretty bad."

"She wouldn't eat the pills."

"Eat the--? Roxas, those kind of pills, you have to swallow them whole. You can't chew them."

"...Oh."

"You'll have to get her to sit up and drink some water - if the pills are in her mouth at the same time as the water, she'll swallow them both together."

"Oh."

"It's probably easier if you do one pill at a time."
"Okay. She threw up on me."

"Poor Roxy." After talking him through most of the cleanup, Lea was discovered and had to hang up. "I hope they're doing okay...."

Pushing and pulling Xion around was kind of like playing with a huge, hot doll. Worried, Roxas worked hard until everything was clean and she'd eaten— swallowed some pills and she was sitting up more and covered with blankets and had a cloth on her forehead to try to make her not so hot, and now he was trying to get her to eat. "Come on, Xion. I was hungry, so you should be hungry, too. Eat the sandwich, it's good."

She turned her head away from the smell of peanut butter and whimpered.

"...."

Plenty of fluids.

"Um...I'll get you some juice, then, okay?"

He finally didn't know what to do anymore. He lay down beside her and looked at her for a while, feeling her misery in his heart. Then he got bored and wanted to play video games. But he was afraid to leave her alone now, so he carried her into the living room and settled her on the couch, and gave her some more pills because she looked dead again. Then he sat down on the floor and turned on the TV.

After a while, he heard her say in a gravelly voice, "Roxas?"

He paused the game and turned around and propped his arms on the couch. "Are you feeling better?"

Her eyes were open, and she'd kicked off the blankets. "I'm so hungry...do we have any crackers?"
"Crackers? I guess so." He went to look, and saw a cluster of soup cans on the shelf above them. "Oh yeah! Isa said there's soup." He put it in a pot on the stove to warm up.

When it was ready, he poured some into a bowl and brought it to Xion, who smiled wanly. "Thanks...." She only ate a few bites, though. "I'm tired," she murmured. Shivering, she put the bowl down and pulled all the blankets around her again, huddling under them as if she was freezing.

"You didn't eat very much...."

"I'm tired."

"...But you're still hungry?" She didn't answer. He found that she'd eat it if he put the spoonfuls into her mouth for her, so he fed her bit by bit until she whimpered and wouldn't open her mouth. "It's almost finished, anyway." He took the bowl back to the sink, fed her more pills, and went back to his game.

Most professors either ignored it when cell phones went off in their classes, or just made a brief, annoyed remark and kept going. Professor Higgins, however, notoriously strict, did not put up with it at all. His syllabus made it clear that anyone who missed more than two days of class would be dropped from the roster, and that texting during class, or leaving to answer a phone call, or being caught on unrelated Web sites during lectures, counted as 'absences.' He was known to follow through. This was why Isa had been very careful, since he could not afford to take risks. Being dropped from a class after the late registration deadline was simply not an option.

"My, my, my, Mr. Tsukino."

Isa closed his eyes in dismay and tightened his grip on the phone. He usually silenced it during class, but had left it on vibrate mode today, because of Xion's condition. Of course Roxas would choose this time to text him about something trivial.

"You are now absent today, Tsukino."
"Sir, my younger sister is ill and her teenage brother is the only one watching her, I needed--"

"Excuses, Tsukino?"

"...No, sir," Isa said stiffly, flashbacking unpleasantly to all the times he'd had to grovel to Xemnas. "I apologize."

"Very well. Then, since you were paying so close attention, perhaps you could summarize for us the significance of Lamar's 1912 discovery, which I just finished expounding."

'...If you knew what I have done in the past and what I'm still capable of, you would not be lording it over me so carelessly.' No. He cut off that line of thinking immediately, as always. He knew it could never lead him anywhere good. "Well, sir, from what I understand...."

Halfway through the period, it happened. Bzzt, bzzt, bzzt. Not a text message this time. To his horror, Isa accidentally knocked the phone into his bag when he reached for it. He frantically dug through books, folders, and everything else in there hindering his search; when he finally pulled out the phone, it was too late. Now at his side, Higgins snatched the phone out of his hand, accepted the call, set the phone to speaker mode, and said loudly, "Hello?"

'I hate you,' Isa thought. 'I don't deserve this.'

"...Isa?" Roxas's voice crackled uncertainly.

"This is Professor Ronald Higgins at Radiant Garden University," Higgins boomed. "You are currently interrupting my class."

"I have to talk to Isa."

"By all means, be my guest," Higgins said sarcastically, raising an eyebrow at Isa but continuing to hold the phone out of reach.

Isa sighed. "What is it, Roxas."
"I...I don't know if it's an emergency or not, but--"

"It doesn't matter now. Why are you calling?"

"I...I just...Xion threw up again, and she doesn't look good but I don't know what to do...."

Three precious, hard-earned course credits in jeopardy, and all for this nonsense. "Roxas--"

"My heart really hurts."

...Now, that was cause for concern. Roxas and Xion were still connected enough that each of them could feel the other's strong emotion. "You haven't been neglecting her, have you?"

"No! I put her in here with me and fed her and I cleaned up the last time she threw up and I've been giving her medicine and trying to keep her warm, or cold, or whatever she wants, but--"

"Which medicine?"

"The one on the table."

"Which table, Roxas?" Isa said in exasperation, too distracted to register that Higgins had put the phone back into his hand. "There was a pain reliever / fever reducer in her room, and Lea must have dumped half the medicine cabinet out in the kitchen--"

"The one in her room."

"All right, when was the last time you gave her a dose?"

"Right before I called. But she looks worse, not better."
Isa got a bad feeling. "What about the previous dose?"

"I dunno."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Isa stormed, rising to his feet. "Didn't I tell you to check the time?"

"Uh...."

"Number XIII, tell me exactly how much medicine you've given that girl since the time we left."

"...Are you mad at me?"

"I ASKED YOU A QUESTION."

"Fine, geez! I dunno, five times, maybe?"

"What?!"

"Or...four or...three...yeah, three. ...Or four."

On top of his folder which contained the course syllabus, and the words, "A third instance will be considered confirmation that the student wishes to drop the class," Isa pressed his hand so that it would stop trembling. He looked up to meet his professor's eyes and said to Roxas, clearly and quietly, "I'm coming home."

Higgins, who had been watching him inscrutably, showed no change of expression.

"What? But I thought you said you couldn't-- Uh, I think Xion wants to talk to you."

"Xion?"
Her voice finally came through, hoarse and weak. "I want to...."

"Xion," Isa murmured, unaware of how much his voice had softened.

"Are you...at school...Saa-chan...?"

Isa closed his eyes in mortification at the intimate nickname being broadcast for the entire class to hear. Although successful in not collapsing into a puddle of shame, he dropped his head so that his hair swung forward around his face. "Yes, but I'm leaving."

"Class is...over...?"

"No, but it doesn't matter."

"You can't...miss class...."

"Forget what I said this morning. Your health is more important."

"No...I'm okay...just come home as soon as school's over...okay?"

"...All right," Isa pretended to agree, laying the phone down so he could start packing his things.

"Saa-chan...?"

"What."

"When you come...will you...watch ponies with me...just once...?"

Isa did collapse this time, sinking down into his chair because he was too horrified for his legs to
hold him. "Xion," he said in a completely dead voice, "I will do whatever you ask, because apparently I was born to submit to your feminine humiliations."

"Oh...."

"I'll see you soon."

"Okay...love you, Saa-chan...."

Well, at least he was never going to set foot in this class again. "I appreciate your sentiment."

"When does your last class end?" Roxas asked.

"4:50."

"Okay...."

"She had better still be alive by the time I get there."

"O-Okay."

Isa hung up, swung his bag over his shoulder, thanked Higgins brusquely for the opportunity to learn from him this semester, and started to march out the door.

"Tsukino."

Isa halted on the threshold and looked back resentfully. 'Haven't you done enough?'

For some reason, most of the female students were staring at Isa with lit up faces, but he didn't spare much attention for them. Higgins was back at the board, about to resume the lecture, watching Isa. "I will see you in class on Thursday. I assume you weren't too busy texting to notice
"I - heard that, but--" *Why does it matter? Haven't I been expelled from this class?*

"Very well. Have a good afternoon, Mr. Tsukino." Professor Higgins began scrawling more notes on the board. "Now, it's true that the discovery throws a wrench into the widely accepted Simulacrum Theory, but some leading authorities have argued that...."

Somewhat at a loss upon being offered such unexpected mercy, Isa bowed deeply without interrupting the lecture and then left. *'I can't...believe it.... I still have a chance of finishing that course after all....'* He smiled. Briefly. Then remembered that all fifty or so of his classmates, plus the professor, had heard Xion's end of that horrific phone conversation. "Sacred moon, do I want to?" Of course not, but he didn't exactly have a choice about the matter. "Why is it that you people seem to make a hobby out of destroying my life...?"

He rushed home as fast as he could. As soon as he opened the front door of the house, he saw Roxas kneeling on the living room floor, holding Xion close with one arm and clutching at his own heart with his other hand. Xion was curled into him, shivering and whimpering.

"Isa!" Roxas burst out in great relief. "I thought you weren't supposed to come until--"

"Is her condition better, worse, or the same as it was when you called me?" Isa demanded, dropping his bag and crouching to feel Xion's forehead.

"Worse...."

[. . .]

"You'll have to wait until we get you to the hospital," he said, rising back to his feet.

"N-No...I have to...."

Ignoring her, Isa dug his phone and wallet out of his bag so he could shove them into his pockets. "Do you have your phone and wallet on you?" he asked Roxas.
"M-My phone's here, but my wallet's in my school bag, I think--"

Isa had retrieved it, and had just found Xion's as well, when he heard Roxas calling him urgently.

[. . .]

Isa ordered, leaping to his feet and practically flinging himself across to his closet. 'Coat, coat, where's my wretched coat, is this mine or Lea's...?'

"What are you doing?" Roxas said in alarm when Isa stepped back toward the bathroom, zipping down his old Organization coat as far as he could without crippling himself.

"I'm taking her to the hospital now. We don't have time to go the long way."

"You're gonna take her through a dark corridor?!

"Move." Isa started wrestling Xion into her own protective coat.

"Isa! You can't go through the corridors!"

"Get off me."

"I'll take her!"

"No." Isa stood up with Xion in his arms.

"Isa stop it! If you use the corridors, Xehanort might come back."

"If that happens, you have permission to kill me," Isa snapped, turning away.
"Isa!" Roxas shouted.

Isa gestured, and a dark portal opened before him. Xion stirred. "Saa-chan, no...."

Roxas rushed into Isa's path and pushed him back. "No. I'LL take her, give her to me!"

"Move, Roxas!"

"Please!" Roxas cried, finally breaking into the tears he'd been struggling against all this time. "I know I messed up and you can't trust me anymore, but it doesn't matter, does it? You don't even care about us, you don't care if Xion dies, so please please please let me take her and just call Axel or something, I really can do this...."

Isa stared in shock, no longer resisting as Roxas struggled to pull Xion out of his arms. "Roxas, I...."

"I won't mess up again," Roxas said, sniffing hard to try to quell the tears. "I promise."

"Roxas, it wasn't-- Wait! Get your coat, you fool!"

Once they were gone, Isa ran, racing to the hospital as fast as he could and trying to text Lea at the same time. "STAY at work, you cant help. just come to hospital afterward. STAY." No reply, which meant that Lea had probably completely ignored him and was now running to the hospital, too. "You'll be just as useless there as I am, Lea...."

o.o.o.o.o

Xion would recover from the poisoning. Once the nurse left them alone, Roxas crawled onto the bed and curled up next to his twin, face hidden against her shoulder, as she held his hand. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"It's okay," she whispered back.
Lea hugged them both and said, a little awkwardly but sincerely, "I love you guys. Don't scare me like that, okay?"

"Okay. And don't scare us, either."

"Heh, I won't." Then, wondering where Isa had disappeared to, Lea went to look for him, and found him in a waiting room. Isa was sitting in a chair in a corner - not studying. He had gone back home to get some schoolwork, but it simply lay on the seat next to him as he stared off into space. "Hey...Isa?"

Wordlessly, Isa picked up a textbook, opened it, and stared at the page as if he was reading it.

"Isa, cut it out. Come hang out with us."

"...Roxas thinks I don't care about them."

"Do you?" Lea said cautiously, and regretted it when Isa gave him an injured look. He sat down next to his friend. "What's going on?"

"I...did resent them at one point...I still do sometimes...they can be quite irritating...."

Lea rolled his eyes and prompted, "But?"

"...But they're my family now, and I--" Isa looked around and lowered his voice before continuing, "and I do care about them. They're not threats anymore, they're not nuisances...at least, not all the time...I see things in them now to admire and appreciate." A pause. "I thought they knew that. I thought it would be obvious that I would be upset if they got hurt."

"Well...sometimes, Isa...you have to, you know - talk to people. Not everyone's smart like me and can read your mind. Sometimes you have to go to those people you used to hate and tell them you don't hate them anymore, or they'll think you still hate them."
After a while, Isa finally got up and went back to the hospital room. Roxas and Xion were watching TV together. Isa flinched away from the ponies and came to stand by Xion's bed. She looked up at him. Roxas gripped her hand tighter and kept his eyes on the TV.

Isa couldn't meet her gaze while he did it, but he leaned down and kissed Xion's forehead. "I'm glad you'll be all right."

"Did you come home early from school?" she asked. "I don't remember very well...."

"Er...yes, I did."

She smiled at him. "You weren't supposed to."

He rested a hand on the side of her head to draw her close. "I know I've never specifically told you, but...I care about you, Xion. I was worried about you."

"...."

"Don't cry!"

"Okay," she sobbed. He sighed and held her until she calmed down, ignoring Lea smiling at them from across the room. Roxas was watching them, too, but quickly pretended he was engrossed in the pony cartoon again when Isa looked at him. Isa went around and laid a hand on the young man's shoulder, noting that he flinched. "Roxas...."

"What," Roxas said defensively.

"I'm proud of you, you know. You did well bringing her here - you were right when you said you could handle the task."

"...."

"And - you did well earlier, also."
Roxas stiffened in surprise.

"You did your best, and all will be well. Thank you, Roxas. We were right to trust you." He thought that this warranted some sort of response, and was displeased until Xion reached to stroke her brother's hair and Isa finally realized that Roxas wasn't answering because he didn't want to reveal that he was crying. 'Oh....'

Well, this was awkward. A little embarrassed at all the things he'd forced himself to say, Isa backed up and then turned to leave again, needing to be alone.

"Isa," Lea said softly as he passed, "thank you."

Isa mumbled something, he was not even sure what, and went to search for a good place to read.

The morning after Xion came home, it was quieter than usual, since she was resting in bed as Lea and Isa went about their morning routines, and Roxas was apparently sleeping in, since he wouldn't have to go to school again.

He did, however, have to be up before the men left, so as their departure time drew closer and closer, they paused more and more often to yell up at the loft.

"Roxas, wake up, we're leaving soon."

"Rox! Come on, buddy, up and at 'em."

"Roxas, I'm about to come up there and drag you down by force."

"Seriously, Roxas, let's go."

Lea finally climbed up to physically haul the sleeping teenager out of bed. "Isa!"
Hearing the tone of his friend's voice, Isa immediately veered over until he stood at the foot of the ladder. "What?"

"Help me get him down, I think he's sick."

"Not again...."

Xion, wrapped up in a quilt, came shuffling into the living room. She watched Lea and Isa carrying Roxas's limp body over to the sofa. "What's wrong with him?" she croaked.

"Must've caught whatever you have, Xi."

"Oh no!"

"He'll be fine...."

Xion shuffle-ran to her brother and knelt beside him, anxiously smoothing his hair out of his pale face. "Roxas...are you awake...?"

Lea and Isa were silent as they worked together, taking Roxas's temperature, finding something he could eat for breakfast that wouldn't upset his stomach, making sure he had blankets and water....

Glancing at the clock, Isa finally murmured, "Lea...I can't miss school. I truly can't. I'm already going to be late to my first class."

Lea looked at him helplessly.

"It will be all right - Roxas insists on paying the hospital bills, and you said we can make the rent if we buy nothing else until then. If we ration the food here carefully, and have the children eat at your mother's house...."

Lea smiled a little and shook his head. "Sometimes, I just need to know when to quit." He pulled out his phone. "Hey, Mom.... Yeah. Yeah, everything's going great-- No! No, wait, it's not, that's
actually why I'm calling."

He expelled a breath. "Look, I...." His voice faded to a mumble as he spoke. "I know I said I'm a grown-up and I can take care of myself now, and that I can handle everything and I don't need you and I'm perfectly capable of running my own place and taking care of my own family and I don't need my mom to keep baby-sitting me and I'm not gonna be one of those people who make their parents raise their kids, but...."

Isa forced himself to be patient and not point meaningfully at the clock.

Lea sighed and leaned back against the wall. "Usually I can handle it, it's just...hard sometimes. And I've been working my butt off and I can make rent this month, it's just, both the kids are sick and I can't stay home to watch them because, well, then I won't make rent, and Isa is, you know, busy, too, and I just...it's only for maybe a day or two, just until the kids get better, and I-- ...Mom, I need help."

Both their mothers came together. Mrs. Hayes went straight to hug Lea ("You should have called us sooner!"), who was past the sentimental mood now and reacted by simply whining. Mrs. Tsukino kissed her son's cheek in a distracted way and then went to fuss over the teenagers, cuddling Xion and cooing at Roxas.

"It's good to see you, too, Mother," Isa said dryly. "I'm leaving now."

"I gotta go, too, Mom," Lea said, breaking away. "Look, I - I really appreciate this. I'll never ask again, I swear."

"Lea, you are always my son, and you can always ask for help." She kissed him one last time. "Go on, love, we'll take care of things here."

"All right." Lea took one last look back, smiled, and left for work feeling lighter.

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Author's Notes: I spontaneously decided to write a "sick fic" when I myself was sick. ^^; It got a lot longer than I expected, I kept getting ideas.... LOL, poor Saïx is so fun to torment. XD I adore SaiShi....
I did look up this kind of poisoning; I definitely took artistic license, but still, you CAN die from overdosing on over-the-counter pain relievers. Please read the warning labels, follow the directions, and be careful when you're using any kind of medication.

Okay, so - I know I told some of you that I wasn't going to censor this story, and my reason for censoring anyway was actually not because of the sensitivity of the content. (And for those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, there was a really awkward scene in this story that I was ANGSTING big-time about how to handle, whether or not to censor, how to post, etc.) I was very, very close to tacking the full version onto the end of First Blood, but at the last minute, I decided to just cut out the scene and group this story with the rest of the BbF&ML fics. The deciding factor was, yet again, me trying to write about things that I really have no clue about. *sweatdrop* Artistic license is one thing, but there was one element that could have been a really ludicrous mistake, and I didn't want to risk breaking the limits of plausibility, so...I ended up doing the easiest thing after all. *sweatdrop*

Basically, the scene that got cut out was where Isa & Roxas had to change Xion's clothes (because it never occurred to Roxas that people who've been drinking water and juice and soup all day will have to use the restroom at some point, and will need help doing so when they're sick...), and in the process, Isa discovered an alarming symptom that made him want to get Xion to the hospital ASAP. (They had a towel covering her, btw; neither of the guys actually saw anything.) Isa managed to get through the ordeal in a businesslike way, even though he was mentally going, "Whyyyyyyyy? DX DX Dang it Lea this is all your fault AGAIN" the whole time. Roxas, in addition to having zero sexual attraction to his sister, was also pretty worried about her, and feeling guilty about how he messed up and made her even more sick than before. Xion herself wasn't entirely lucid and was too sick to care. The VERY LAST thing I wanted was for people to jump to wrong assumptions, or to accuse Isa and Roxas of things that would have never crossed their minds. It's certainly an awkward situation, but situations like that happen in life when you're a caretaker, you know? :/
Beyond the War: That Kind of Love {Isa, Roxas, Xion, & Lea}

_BbF&ML: That Kind of Love (rough draft)_

_A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl_

**Summary:** This is supposed to be Lea's job, but Isa's usually the one who's more available.

A/N: Sorry ahead of time; these were _intended_ to be cute SaiShi and SaiRoku drabbles where Isa's forced to be parental, but it ended up as more like fictionalized rants or character/pairing introspection. Sorry. :/ I hope they're not too boring or uncomfortable to read.

Also, I know that one of Xion's friends at school is Sally, but I forgot who the other one is supposed to be, so I just made up a random name for now. *sweatdrop* The Xion story takes place first; the Roxas one takes place after they've been living in Radiant Garden for about a year and a half.

**Part 1 - Isa & Xion**

Isa was studying in the library when someone came up and set their things on the table beside him. He had no idea what to make of this until the person crawled into the chair next to him and he realized it was Xion. "What are you doing here?"

"I looked all over the library until I found you," she said in a low voice.

He turned toward her, frowning in concern. She looked rather small and subdued. "Where's Roxas?"

"They went to Skater's Park...."

"Why aren't you with them?"

"Um...they don't like when I go with Roxas everywhere all the time."
Isa's frown deepened. "Don't you have female friends you can spend time with?"

"Yeah, but...I just wanted to come home."

He looked at her, expecting more of an answer.

"I...." She finally reached out and set a piece of paper in front of Isa. It was wrinkled where she'd clutched it.

"What's this?" A note form a teacher probably would have been typed. This had been handwritten.

"What should I do?"

He picked it up and read it. Confusion, surprise, dismay, exasperation, annoyance. "...Well. It seems you have an admirer."

"Is that bad or good?" she asked anxiously.

"It depends on how you feel about it. Do you like this boy?"

"Yes."

Isa studied her a moment. "Do you think you would enjoy kissing him?" he clarified. Then, realizing that further clarification might be necessary, "On the lips?"

"What?" she gasped.

"If not now, then some time in the future when you're more accustomed to the idea?"
She stared at him. He waited.

She thought about it. "Um...not really."

"Then you will have to turn him down."

"What's that mean?"

"Do not meet him as he requests, obviously; and if the subject ever comes up again, make it clear that you have no romantic interest in him."

"So...like...."

He sighed. "You had better talk to Lea about this...."

"But he's busy."

"I'm busy, too, Xion. Lea would know far more about this sort of thing than I would, anyway."

"Huh? Why?"

He hated moments like this. *Lea* was their adopted father, not him; it wasn't fair that he ended up in parental situations so often. ‘...He is funding much of my college education. I suppose I have to pay him back in one way or another.’

He sighed. "Xion. Human beings are living organisms, and therefore have a very deep-rooted drive to procreate. This drive manifests in many ways, one of which being the attraction between males and females that is often termed 'love.' Being higher order beings, the process is usually much more complicated for us than for lower organisms, which means that humans have a good chance of failing to--"

The longer he spoke, the more confused she looked. He closed his eyes and opened them again. "Traditionally, two people are attracted to each other, fall in love, get married, and have children."
You are at an age where most people are being attracted to each other. Because we're human, it's complicated, and sometimes you're attracted to a person who does not return your affections in the same way.

"...Oh," she said cautiously.

"Because the attraction in this case is not mutual, your letter-writer will have to give up on you and look elsewhere for a more suitable...mate." 'I don't think that was the appropriate term. I am not the person who should be explaining this to her.'

"Is that bad?"

"Xion, just tell him you're not interested."

"Not interested in what?"

"Xion."

"Well, I don't know! I don't know anything! Sally and Hilde are always, always, always having to explain stuff to me, and people make fun of me and Roxas for being dumb--" She broke off, staring at him in surprise. "What's wrong?"

"...I'm trying to remind myself that injuring schoolchildren will land me in jail, and would not be the best way to help you."

"Help me...?" She scooted closer. "Saa-chan, it's okay. Sally and Hilde tell me to ignore them, so I do."

"Hmph."

"Saa-chan?"

"What?"
"Am I ever going to be as smart as everyone else someday?"

He laid his hand over her own. "Xion, people are always learning. Always. It doesn't matter how much you discover about the world, there will always be more. Our universe, in that regard, is infinite."

She smiled.

"Each person also has his or her unique areas of expertise." He shook his head slightly. "Keep in mind that the people you know at school would have a difficult time living in the Organization, and would be completely at a loss if they had been assigned the tasks you were given, or expected to slay the Heartless you destroyed on a daily basis."

"I guess that's true."

Isa added in a mutter, "And my area of expertise is certainly not this whole love and dating nonsense, Lea should be the one helping you with this...."

Xion studied him. "Saa-chan?"

"Hm?"

"You said people fall in love and get married, but you said it like not everyone does."

"Like I said, human beings are complicated."

"Did you ever fall in love?"

"No."

"...What about Princess Jasmine?"
He sighed. "Though I am somewhat fond of her and consider her to be a friend, I was never 'in love' with her. I am glad she is happy with her husband."

"So you're gonna find someone else to fall in love with?"

"No. I'm not. As long as I enjoy my life, I don't see why a lover should be a necessary component of that."

"Are you happy?"

He opened his mouth, closed it again without speaking, and thought about this. He finally said, "I dislike school very much...."

"That's another thing I don't get. You do school all the time, that's your life, you're ALWAYS going to class or studying. But it looks like you hate it."

"Well," he grumbled, "I do."

"Then I don't get it."

"It's...a means to an end, I suppose. I want to finish what I started. I want my life to be what it was supposed to be like, before it was...interrupted. When I graduate, I want to look back on the accomplishment and be proud to have reclaimed one of the things that was stolen from me."

She squeezed his hand. "And then you'll be happy?"

He regarded her, this young woman before him with clear blue eyes and a strong heart. He thought of his dearest friend, how they were both alive and together and home again, with no more lies or darkness between them, and the rest of their lives stretching out before them. He remembered all the time that had passed since the end of the war, the way this family he hadn't wanted at first had become comfortable to him, the place where he belonged. Lea's laughter, Roxas's and Xion's smiles. The love between all four of them.
School was his job. Lea and Roxas and Xion were his life. "Xion," he said, "I'm already happy."

"I'm glad," she said. "I didn't used to care, but after a while, I started wanting you to be happy, so I'm glad you are."

"I'm glad you are, too." He paused. "Are you?"

"Me? Yeah, I guess so."

He frowned. "What does 'I guess so' supposed to mean?"

"I just.... School is hard...and me and Roxas are so different from everyone else...."

"I'm sorry," he murmured, not sure what else to say.

She squeezed his hand again. "It's not your fault. All I ever wanted was to be free, and to know who I am, and to live with Roxas and Axel forever." She smiled. "So...I have that now. It's not perfect, but I don't think anything is."

"That's right."

"Yeah. So I have my dream now, like Rapunzel did, and now I'm just...not sure what my new dream is."

"Well," Isa finally said, looking back at the love letter, "I assume it's not this boy of yours."

Xion laughed a little. "No.... Saa-chan, what do I do? Am I supposed to just...walk up to him tomorrow and say I don't feel the same as him? He'll be so sad...."

"He'll get over it."
"You think so?"

"Yes."

"...But until he gets over it, he'll be so sad...."

Isa sighed. "Write a letter, then."

"Huh? Like this?"

"No, not a letter like this. Just an ordinary letter, to tell him that you're sorry, but you don't return his feelings."

"Okay.... Um, can you help me with it, Saa-chan?"

When Lea got home from work, Roxas had fallen asleep on the couch, and Isa and Xion were chatting as they made tea. Lea looked at them for a minute, smiling at the sight of two of his Important People getting along ('It never gets old...'), then gave a relieved sigh and sank down into one of the kitchen chairs. "Hey...can one of you be awesome and get me something with lots of sugar?"

"Uh...do you want a Pop-Tart?" Xion suggested, at the same time Isa said disapprovingly, "Sugar is just going to make you even more tired later."

"I'm tired, don't argue...." As Xion went to rummage around for the Pop-Tart box, Lea frowned at the kitchen table and started to read the unfinished letter lying there. "'...I know it must have taken a lot of courage, but I'm afraid I can't return...."

Isa whirled, eyes widening when he realized what Lea was doing. "Don't read that!"

"Some high schooler wrote you a love letter!" Lea exclaimed in astonishment.
"Give me that, and mind your own business," Isa growled, jerking it out of his hands.

"How'd you get a high school kid to fall in love with you?!

"It's not me, it's Xion. Some wretched boy thinks he's in love with her."

"But the rejection letter's in your handwriting."

"I'm helping her, she'll re-copy it later."

"Riiiiight."

"Look, here's the original letter. It's to Xion."

Xion took her own Pop-Tart to the living room and sat on the couch, draping her legs over Roxas's inert body.

"Are they fighting again?" Roxas asked sleepily.

"Yeah. But I'd rather they fight over dumb stuff than over munny."

"Yeah."

"Here." Xion broke off a piece of Pop-Tart and offered it to her twin.

"Thanks." He shifted so he could eat it.

"...Roxas, I got a love letter today."
"What's that?"

"Someone fell in love with me."

"Oh."

"Isa's helping me write a letter back, so I can tell him I only want to be friends."

"Oh."

"...If I did love him back, though, would you be mad?"

"I dunno." He looked uncomfortable, and laid a hand on her knee as if to hold her close. "If you fall in love with someone, don't get all stupid and forget me...."

"Oh, no." She leaned over and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Ow."

"Sorry. I'll always love you, Roxas." She kissed his cheek.

He put his arms around her waist. "Good." He looked at the TV, not wanting to work on homework yet. "What do you want to watch?"

"Suite Life is on now, right?"

"I think so."

Lea, who'd finished his argument, came over to watch, too, leaving Isa to finish drafting the
rejection letter fairly quickly. He came over to drop it on Xion's lap and said, "From now on, Lea is the one you go to about your love life. Understand?"

"Yes. Thank you, Saa-chan."

"Hmph."

**Part 2 - Isa & Roxas**

There was a disagreement about food again, so now Roxas was spreading pepperoni slices across the top of an uncooked pizza, as Isa seasoned the vegetables he was sautéing.

"Did you finish your homework?"

"Yes, sacred moon, all you think about is homework."

"I simply do not want to see a repeat of last semester--"

"I won't slack off, okay? I wanna try to make Honor Roll this semester."

"...Oh. Well, good."

"Yeah."

They continued cooking in companionable silence. It made it easy to hear Xion and Lea bickering good-naturedly over the use of the bathroom.

"People are noisy when they get ready for dates."

"Yes."
A few minutes later, Xion came dashing into the kitchen. "Move, Roxas, I need the sink!" she cried, grabbing a dish towel out of a drawer.

"Whoa--"

"Xion, I've told you not to run around in your underthings," Isa said in exasperation.

"Axel knocked over my makeup and now my slip's stained!" she protested, hiking up her skirt so she could scrub at the powder smeared on her slip. She wasn't wearing anything but a bra on top. "Jerk's hogging the mirror and blocking the sink; Saa-chan, tell him to move! I'm a girl, I need it more."

"Xion, what you don't need is to be worrying about your slip--" He caught her arm to make her look at him. "--because no one is going to be seeing it. Do you understand me?" he growled. "If this boy even attempts to touch you inappropriately, I will be paying him a visit, and I will bring Lunatic with me."

"Isaaa," she whined, trying to wriggle free, "we'll be good. I don't even want to have sex until I'm married, anyway." She suddenly hugged him, to his surprise. "But I like that you're worried about me, Saa-chan. You feel way more like my daddy than Axel does."

"Get off. Put on a shirt, and stop fussing with the slip that no one is going to see, since it will remain under your skirt and properly clothing you at all times."

"See?" Xion kissed his nose and waltzed back to the bathroom. "Axel, move!"

"I'm almost done!"

As Isa and Roxas were eating, Xion came twirling back in, now fully dressed and ready to go. "How do I look?" she asked coquettishly, posing.

Roxas shrugged. "Fine."
"You look very beautiful, Xion," Isa said dutifully. She giggled in relief and went to hug him.

"Show time!" Lea crowed, hurrying out to join them. "Wish me luck!"

"Good luck," Roxas said, at the same time Isa frowned and asked, "Luck with what?"

"Well, not getting dumped would be a good start...."

Isa sighed. "When are you ever going to take my advice and stop trying so hard when it's obviously not working?"

"I haven't hit rock-bottom yet."

The doorbell rang. "It's Kenji!" Xion squealed. Then, "Axel, Isa, no!" when they both started heading for the door.

"We still don't like him yet," Roxas explained, going to join them.

"Uuuugh...you guys had better not ruin my first Valentine's date!"

Kenji stepped back in alarm when he saw the three grim faces greeting him. "Whoa--! Ugh, seriously?"

"Hi, Kenji," Roxas said. "If Xion's not happy when she comes home, I'm gonna beat you up."

"I already got the Shotgun Lecture from you freaks twice," Kenji grumbled.

"Oi," Lea said, "just because it's Valentine's Day doesn't mean the rules've changed, smartmouth. No tongue--"

"There is school tomorrow," Isa put in, "so you will have her home no later than 10:30."
"Seriously?"

"Not ten-thirty-one, TEN-THIRTY."

"All right, fine!"

Roxas felt like most of the rules could be summed up pretty easily. "Don't be a jerk."

"Hands above the waist," Lea ordered, "and--"

"Okay, we got it, thanks," Xion said, pushing through them and shooting them an I'll-kill-you smile before dragging away her boyfriend. "I love you guys!" she called back once they were safely out of range.

"Love you, too!" Lea yelled after her.

"Have fun," said Roxas.

"Stay out of trouble," Isa added, a little hopelessly.

When she was out of sight, Lea sighed, made sure he had everything, and hovered awkwardly in the doorway. "Well...I guess I should be off, too."

"Okay."

"I think you're already running late."

Still, Lea hesitated. "Hey - you guys'll be okay alone?"
"Of course."

"Why wouldn't we be?' Roxas said in confusion.

"I dunno, I just-- Valentine's and all...." They looked at him like they weren't sure why this should be significant.

Lea chuckled and shook his head. "Well, bye, then. Call me if you need anything, all right?"

"We are perfectly capable of surviving without you for one evening, Lea."

Lea smiled a little. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Have fun," Roxas said.

"Will do."

After he was gone, Isa and Roxas went back to finish eating dinner.

"...So, no plans for tonight?" Isa finally asked.

"No," Roxas pouted. "All my friends are lame and have dates."

"You don't?" Isa said in mild surprise. "I thought you were fairly popular."

"Well, yeah, but...I dunno." Roxas shrugged.

"I see you weren't wanting for affection, at least," Isa remarked, glancing at the corner of the living
room where both Roxas and Xion had dumped their 'Valentine's loot' from school.

"Huh?"

"You received many Valentines."

"Yeah. And four girls asked me out. And a guy."

"You turned them all down?"

"Yeah."

"...Why?" Isa asked curiously.

Roxas shrugged. "I dunno. They weren't The One."

"The One?" Isa repeated dryly.

"You know...like in the movies...your true love, the one you want to be with forever? Like how Rose has Phillip, and Jasmine has Aladdin, and Belle has that guy, and--"

"Yes, I understand."

"None of them were my true love. So I said no."

"...You're looking for your true love?" Isa said skeptically.

"I mean, I'm not looking. I'm just going to school and stuff. But when I get my true love, I'll be happy, and until then, I'll just...do stuff. Like I'm doing now."
"Unhappily?" Isa teased in a monotone.

"Isaaaa. Come on, you get it, don't you? Aren't you waiting for your true love, like you're always telling Axel to do?"

"Hm.... First of all, I'm not, since I already have all the love I need and am as happy as school will allow me to be. Second of all, yes, I am always telling Lea something like that, and it's interesting how you, at least, are taking my advice, even if the one it was meant for is ignoring it."

"...You already have all the love you need?"

"Yes."

"Even though Axel doesn't love you back?"

"What?"

"A lot of people at school say you and Axel are gay. Gay means you like guys instead of girls, right?"

"Yes, it does, at least in the context you're implying; and no, I'm not, and I am rather tired of hearing people jump to those conclusions."

"They say because we all live together and you guys aren't married to anyone else...."

"Our life circumstances are quite unusual and have nothing to do with our love lives. I'm not married because I have no romantic interest in women-- Or men. Lea is not married because he has had very little opportunity to cultivate a worthwhile romantic relationship, and I suspect his desperate efforts to find a 'true love,' as you put it, are actually counterproductive, which is why I keep telling him to slow down."

"Why does he date so much, anyway, if he's not trying to hide how he feels about you?"
"...That's the explanation they give?"

"Some people. They wouldn't believe me when I tried to explain, and finally I thought that maybe they're right."

Isa sighed. "Let them believe what they want to believe, it has nothing to do with us. Though just for your own information, Lea and I care about each other very much, but have never been attracted to each other in the way your overeager gossips like to assume."

"Like with me and Xion.... That's what I thought, but then I wasn't sure."

"And to answer your question, I suspect that Lea is trying to do the same thing I am - reclaim some aspect of the adolescence that was stolen from us."

"Ohhhh."

"I don't know for sure, but that is what makes the most sense to me."

"Okay."

"Roxas, your instincts are usually right. Although it's good to consider carefully what other people say, listen to yourself first."

"Okay."

How had they ended up talking about all this, anyway? "...Are you finished eating?"

"Yeah."

"Help me clean up."
"Sure."

After dinner, Isa retreated to his room to study, as Roxas tried to watch TV and then play video games. But the house was too quiet, and dark, and he was kind of bored and lonely, so he took the PSP to the bedroom and climbed up to Lea's bed so he could lounge there and play in someone else's presence.

Isa sighed. "Roxas, go away."

"You can't even hear anything, I've got ear buds!"

"I can hear the buttons clicking, and it's very distracting."

"Fine. I'll get off the bed."

"Thank you."

Roxas climbed down and sat on Isa's desk, right on top of all the books and paperwork spread there. "Is this distracting?"

"...You can be worse than Lea when you put your mind to it."

"I'm distracting, and worse than Axel," Roxas sang loudly, to the tune of his own theme song. "Ow!"

Isa had stood up and ruffled his hair roughly enough to hurt. "What do you want to play?"

"Really?!" Delighted, Roxas leaped to his feet, too, and scampered back to the living room. "I don't even care, pick whatever you want. Here--" He started pulling video games out of the TV cabinet. "Crash Team Racing, Mario Party, Halo...." He paused when he saw Isa wistfully cradling a game case in his hands. "Night Howler IV?"

"I never did get to play this one," Isa murmured.
Roxas grinned and popped the disc into the console. "Let's see if you forgot all your mad skills from studying too much."

"You wish."

As Valentine's Days went, it was a fairly enjoyable one for all four members of their little family.

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** Ftr, Xion is still uncomfortable with anything past kissing, and thinks kissing is supposed to be like in Disney where you touch lips and just kind of hold there. ^^; Also ftr, Kenji is not her 'true love,' he's just a boyfriend she dates for a while.

The video game titles were so random. (Though the "Night Howler" series is just something I came up with.)

Although I had a skeletal outline, most of the conversation flow was just spontaneous drafting. I wrote these right around the time I went on hiatus, when yaoi fans were driving me crazy and one of them finally said something that was the last straw.

I get frustrated with the yaoi side of the fandom a lot. Obviously people can interpret whatever they like if it still fits with canon, and pretty much anything goes in AUs, but it bugs me when people say stuff like, "Pffft, DUH they're gay [in canon]!" about characters whose relationships are unspecified.

I keep seeing that happen in my real, offline life, too, in situations that have nothing to do with homosexuality. People keep _labeling_ other people and assuming they know what's going on, but they're not in their heads, and most of the time, they're wrong; then they turn against each other and sabotage themselves and it turns into this big mess that could have been so easily avoided.... It's frustrating to watch.

Anyway, so these SaiShi and SaiRoku things were supposed to be stories, but as I was writing, I realized that it was basically a lot of stuff that I usually would have put in a rant or something. It just kind of spilled out in fiction form because it was really pressing on my mind while I was drafting. Again, sorry that this installment is less 'story-like' than it should be.
Summary: Seems like things didn't turn out like they planned.

A/N: This is set in that post-KH3 headcanon of mine.

"Whyyyy do they kill us with homework this close to summer vacation?" Roxas groaned, walking home with Xion and a backpack that felt like it contained a pile of bricks.

"We still have two weeks left...."

"This close! THIS CLOSE to summer vacation! School should be, like, getting easier, right? But noooo, science test, lab write-up, English essay, history essay, history project, makeup work she just can't give me a zero for, math homework every single freaking day, we even have homework for choir on top of practicing for the concert, then there's A WHOLE WEEK OF Finals after all that...."

"Summer vacation's in two weeks," Xion said soothingly.

"I don't care what Isa says, I'm burning my books as soon as finals are over."

"He'll give you the doomgaze look...."

"I don't caaaaare! Man, if I was Axel - Nobody-Axel, not this Axel - I could just snap my fingers and Poof! No more homework."

"The teachers would just make you do it all over again, even if you don't have the papers...."
"Stop being right."

It occurred to her that he just wanted to vent. "Okay. You want me to buy you some ice cream?"

"Sure."

He was in a better mood by the time they got home, but then there was something else to worry about. Isa was lying on the couch, watching *My Little Pony*.

"...Are you sick?" Roxas said bluntly.

Isa ignored him.

"Can I get you anything, Saa-chan?" Xion asked.

"Give me my life back."

"Uhhh...."

He sighed. "Never mind. Just go about your business."

"Okay," Roxas said, heading for the kitchen.

Xion hesitated, then came around to look at Isa from the front. He was just lying there, his face completely blank like when he'd been a Nobody. She was a little relieved to see a book lying on the floor, but it was closed. Also, the ponies. *Ponies.* "...Saa-chan?"

"Go away."
"I didn't know you like this show."

"Leave me alone." He blinked, and a little bit of life crept back into his eyes. "What show--?" He shot upright. "What is this?!"

"The episode where Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash play pranks on everyone."

"Sacred moon--!" Isa fumbled for the remote and stabbed buttons until the TV shut off. He stared at the black screen, breathing hard. "What was...that...?"

"Saa-chan...you were watching it. You do remember watching it, don't you?" She was getting a little scared now.

"I was n--! What time is it--?" He stared at the clock. "It's been twenty-three minutes," he said in a dead voice. "That was on screen for twenty-three minutes and I didn't even notice...." He kind of tilted over like a falling tree and just lay there again, this time with his face hidden in the couch pillows.

"...Saa-chan, really, can I help, please?"

"Go do your homework," he mumbled.

"...I need help," she asserted. "I don't get it."

"Yes, you do."

"I don't."

"I'm tired."

"Saa-chaaaaan, that's the thing! You're never tired! Even when your eyes are bloodshot and you look like you're gonna keel over from exhaustion, you just drink another Potion and keep going! What is wrong with you?!!"
Roxas came back into the living room, eating a sandwich. "Is he sick?"

"I don't knoooow! Roxas, come see what's wrong with him!"

Roxas came over and kicked the couch. "Oi, what's wrong with you?"

"Go away."


Isa suddenly surged up, eyes flashing.

"Whatcha gonna do?" Roxas taunted, giggling a little in anticipation as he backed away, still trying to keep hold of his sandwich. "Gonna go berserker on me? Ooooh, who's still got a Keyblade and who's just a loser with no magic now, huh? Ooooh, whatcha gonna do...?"

Isa didn't take the bait. His expression faded, and he dropped back onto the couch, picking the book off the floor as if to read it. "I don't feel like playing your childish games. Go amuse yourselves elsewhere."

Xion and Roxas looked at each other, then back at their friend. Isa ignored them, eyes fixed intently on the book. Roxas finally shrugged and wandered away. Xion waited until she was sure that Isa was just staring at the book and not actually reading it. "Are you ever gonna turn the page, Isa?"

He did so in response.

She snatched the book out of his hand, and he glared at her. "What did you just read?" she challenged, glancing at the page to make sure.

"...Quasimodo was...showing Esmeralda around the bell tower...."
"NO! You're just guessing!" She flung the book aside and grabbed his shoulders, trying to resist the urge to shake him. "What is wrong with you???

He looked at her, really looked at her, for a long moment. Then, to her surprise, he took her in his arms and just hugged her for a while. "You're really worried, aren't you," he said softly.

"Umm...well, yeah. You're our friend, Saa-chan. You're acting weird, something's wrong."

"Nothing is...wrong, Xion." He sighed deeply and let her lean back. She studied him warily, and he put on a smile that she knew was fake, because it was so obvious he was still sad. "I apologize for worrying you. You said you need help with your homework?"

"I was...lying, I just wanted to spend time with you."

"...Would you like to help with dinner later tonight?"

"Okay."

"Good. What would you like?"

"Saa-chan."

"Hm?"

"What happened?"

"...Nothing."

"Liar."

He frowned.
"Your smile is just pretend. I wanna know what's wrong." She found herself reaching to trace the scars on his face with gentle fingertips, and he pushed her hand away, not roughly. "Are you waiting for Axel to come home so you can tell all of us at the same time?"

"...Yes."

She knew he probably hadn't been planning to tell them at all, but whatever. Lea could get the truth out of him. "Okay." She kissed his cheek. "We love you, Saa-chan."

"I hope you're not expecting me to return the sentiment."

"You won't say it, but I can see it in your eyes," she said with a grin.

"Get out of here. You've got work to do."

Xion went to change out of her school uniform, and paused when she saw Roxas looking at Isa's computer. "What's wrong?"

"I wonder if this is why Isa's mad...."

She looked over Roxas's shoulder. The computer screen showed a list of classes and grades. "Wait, are those Saa-chan's classes?!” she exclaimed.

"His name's there in the corner, it's gotta be his account. But really? He flunked...whatever '19cFemTheor' is?"

"It can't be! That's not Saa-chan!"

"He flunked." Roxas gave an incredulous little laugh. "Xion, he flunked. Mr. I'm-so-smart-and-better-than-you-at-everything flunked, look, it's right here."
"Ohhhh, poor Saa-chan," Xion murmured. "No wonder he's upset."

"Whatever. He takes everything too seriously."

It turned out to not be so simple....

"Saa-chan," Xion said a little later, bringing her plate into the living room where Isa was just lying there again, not-reading. "I got some math done, but I'm gonna take a little break, okay?"

"Very well," he said listlessly.

"...Do you mind if I watch *Hannah Montana* in here?"

He sighed, then dragged himself upright and said, "This is a communal area. Do what you like."

"Really? I thought you hated *Hannah Montana*."

He blinked. "What?"

She resisted the urge to throw a chunk of Pop-Tart at him. He was being so *spacey*, it wasn't like him at all. "I'm gonna watch a show you hate, about a girl who wears a blonde wig and sings!!!"

"Oh...." He looked as if he wasn't sure how to respond.

"No complaining when I turn the TV on, okay?"

"I told you. Do as you like."

She watched him closely the first few minutes, but when he finally seemed to realize what she was talking about, all he did was wince and then look more earnest about trying to read *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. 
She gave up and leaned comfortably against him, and was pleased to find that it was one of the
times when he wasn't going to protest her invasion of his personal space. Which meant he was
either feeling affectionate in response to her doing something nice for him, or he was upset and
needed comfort. It had to be the latter case this time rather than the former, but Lea was usually
better at handling him when he was like this. She'd wait and leave it up to him, and do the best she
could in the meantime.

When the show was over, Xion turned the TV off and reluctantly went to take her empty plate to
the kitchen and get back to doing homework, but was surprised when Isa stopped her.

"Xion," he said slowly. "Let's--" Then he shook his head. "Never mind. You're busy."

"No, I'm not," she said quickly.

"You have homework."

"What did you want to do?"

"I don't know...I just wanted to go out and do something; the rest of you are better at dreaming up
specifics...I simply forgot that, unlike myself, you are not on vacation yet." His expression
suddenly darkened. "All three of you are hard at work, I'm the only one wasting time, not earning
my keep."

She wanted to reach up and wipe the self-disgust off his face. "What if we all go pick up Axel
together?"

She knew he'd like the idea, but he usually had such a poker face - she wasn't expecting his
expression to visibly light up so much. Though his voice was still pretty much a monotone when
he said, "That is a good idea. Let's do so."

Lea looked satisfactorily surprised when he found them all waiting for him at the end of his shift.
"What the--?! You guys came to pick me up?"
"Axel~!" Both of the younger ones hugged him. He laughed a little as he put his arms around them, then looked up at his old friend. "Isa? What's going on?"

"Nothing."

"...You look like you need a hug."

"...."

"Oh my gosh, you do need a hug?!"

"No," Isa mumbled, but didn't resist at all when Lea came to put his arms around him.

"Oi. Oi. What happened?" Lea demanded.

"Isa flunked," Roxas announced, just a little gleefully.

"What?!" Lea yelped as Isa glared.

"I'm sorry, Saa-chan," Xion said. "Your laptop was open, we saw it when we passed by...."

Isa rested his forehead on Lea's shoulder and didn't say anything.

"It was only the one class," Xion added. "He made good grades in all the others."

"Dude! It's not the end of the world!" Lea laughed.

"I know," Isa mumbled again.
Lea shook his head and patted his friend's shoulder. "C'mon, buddy, let's go get some ice cream."

"No. It's too close to dinner."

"Come on, Isa, we're not little kids who're gonna spoil our appetites! Both of them eat like horses, anyway."

"The Keybearers are not the ones I'm worried about," Isa said, with just the smallest hint of the old spark in his eyes.

Roxas laughed. "You're the one who never wants to eat anything after ice cream, Axel...."

"Hey!"

It was fun to leisurely make their way home, laughing and talking and watching Isa seem to very quietly cheer up. Then they all trooped back into the house and Lea flopped down in front of the TV to unwind and Roxas moved his homework in there to join him, and Xion went to help Isa in the kitchen and watched him slowly wilt back into gloom again.

"Saa-chan? I can take care of this on my own; do you want to go and hang out with Axel?"

"No."

"...Why not?"

"Because dinner needs to be made, and I've wasted enough time today."

"...Isa, go sit with Axel."

"No."
She studied him. "Are you still upset about your grade?"

He slammed the measuring cup back down on the counter. "It's not just the grade, Xion, it's everything. It's everything, all right? I've taken more than my share of your time, it's your turn, it's your turn, you're finished indulging me and that is acceptable to me and I'm perfectly willing to give way to your wishes now. All right? Now stop pester ing me."

She stared at him. Then she went and got Lea. "Axel, there is SOMETHING WRONG, you have to talk to him."

Lea stopped laughing at whatever Roxas had just said, and sighed. Then he gave her a tired smile and kissed her forehead and said, "Fine, I'll talk to him, but you know he's just being grumpy again."

"Axel, he's really upset. He really is. I don't know what to do."

"I told you we should get him a puppy," Roxas said.

They all trooped into the kitchen, where Isa seemed to be banging cooking supplies around harder than was necessary.

"Yo. Isa."

"It'll be another half an hour or so, you'll have to wait."

"No, I'm not hungry, I meant-- *sigh* Isa, I've told you before, it's okay to not be perfect, right?"

Isa whirled, scattering rice all over the floor. "You think it's just a matter of having unreasonable expectations of myself? I failed the class, Lea. That means I didn't earn the last three credits I need to meet graduation requirements. They don't offer that class in the summer, Lea! Only in the fall or spring semesters."
There was a pause.

"Are the three of you really that stupid?" Isa said in exasperation. "I'm not graduating this month after all. Don't you understand? I'm out of time. If I can't re-take that class in the summer, then I can't earn my degree - but I want to make it quite clear that I have resigned myself to this, and will stay faithful to the agreement we made. Although I am extremely displeased about the wasted time, effort, and munny, I want to assure you, since you seem to find it important, that I harbor no ill will toward any of you whatsoever."

"Waaaiiiit," Lea said. "You can't graduate without that class?"

"No. Obviously. I didn't exactly have the leisure to enroll in non-mandatory classes," Isa said coldly.

"But why don't you just take it next year?" Roxas said in confusion. "You said you can take it in the fall, right? Just take it again and pass it and whoo, you're graduated."

"Yeah," Lea said. "I bet it'll even be easier at the Twilight Town college."

Everyone looked at him. "Twilight Town?" Roxas and Xion echoed at the same time.

"Yeah. Pffft, after doing time at Radiant Garden University, no way they won't let you in."

"Lea," Isa said in exasperation, "I hope you're not seriously suggesting that I earn my degree in Twilight Town."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Lea! There is a reason I wanted to graduate from a university with a reputation like Radiant Garden's! Graduating college in Twilight Town isn't much better than graduating from high school in the Garden!"

"Considering you're a high school dropout, I'd stay that's a step up...."
"I hope you're not trying to make light of the destruction of our homeworld fourteen years ago."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Wait, wait, wait," Roxas said. "What are you guys talking about? Isa's not gonna go to college in Twilight Town, are you?"

"Certainly not."

"Why not?" Lea demanded. "You can get in easy, take that class, and - like Roxas said - whoo, you're done!"

"I didn't mean Twilight Town!" Roxas insisted.

"Lea," said Isa, "it's not simply a matter of 'getting in easy.' There's an application process and a plethora of fees, not to mention the small matter of HAVING TO RE-TAKE HALF MY CLASSES. There's a limit to how many credits can be transferred, Lea! It would mean at least another two years of school. Honestly, I've had enough, I can't tolerate anymore. I have to graduate from the Garden or not graduate at all."

"Yeah, see?" Roxas said triumphantly.

"I'd rather let these last three years go to waste than settle for such an unappealing alternative. My deepest regret is that the years were wasted for the three of you, not just me."

"But why does it have to be a waste?" Xion pleaded. "If you can't change colleges, why don't you just take the last class again here, in the fall?"

Isa stared at her.

Before he could speak, though, Lea exclaimed, "What do you mean, take it here?! We're going to Twilight Town, remember?!"
"What?! Why?!" Roxas burst out.

Lea stared at him. "Did you forget, Roxas? Three years in Radiant Garden, and then we move to Twilight Town. That was the deal."

"No! I like it here!"

"Axel," Xion said, "I mean, that's what we said, but it's just one semester. We can stay a little longer and let Saa-chan graduate, right? And then we can leave after that."

"NO!" Roxas yelled. "I don't wanna leave!"

Now all of them were staring at each other in helpless, confused frustration.

"Roxas, it's Twilight Town," Lea said. "I thought you wanted to move there! You love Twilight Town, that's our place! You hated it here, remember?"

"Yeah, like ages and ages ago. This place is awesome. I'm not gonna pick up and leave and never see the Garden again. I can't leave my friends, we made plans! I wanna graduate here, too, and I have to have the skater's park, and there's no waterfalls there, and--"

"Roxas, you can skate all over the place in Twilight Town."

"Yeah, where it's all crowded and people call you a crazy hooligan. Skater's park is different, they built it FOR US."

"Roxas," Lea said in disbelief, "are you seriously saying that you want to live in Radiant Garden FOREVER? Seriously? Are you seriously saying that?"

"He's been here for three-quarters of his life," Isa murmured thoughtfully. "No surprise that it's come to feel like home to him...."
"I like the Garden."

"So, what, you hate Twilight Town now?" Lea said angrily.

"No...I still miss it sometimes, but...you know, I'd miss the Garden more," Roxas said uncomfortably.

"Rox!" The betrayed look on Lea's face hurt - for a moment, until it turned crafty. "C'mon, don't you want to see your little friends again? Hayner and Pence and Olette, didn't you say you miss them?"

"Well...yeah, I miss them...I mean, it'd be cool to see them again. I'd like that." Roxas's face hardened again. "But we live HERE now, Axel. I wanna stay."

"Gah, why are you so stubborn!"

"Can't we decide this later?" Xion pleaded. "I mean, I want to go back to Twilight Town, too, but I'm not in a hurry or anything...we have a whole semester to figure this out, right?"

Now Lea was turning that disbelieving, wounded look on her. "Whaddaya mean, a whole semester?! We were supposed to hit the door as soon as you finished your finals for junior year."

"But we don't have to, Axel," she said in frustration. "Sacred moon, we can wait a few months for Isa, can't we?"

"It's a whole 'nother semester!"

"It's one class!"

"You know he's exaggerating about the credit thing, right? Because he always does, he's not gonna have to re-take half his classes, he always makes it sound like a bigger deal than it actually is because he just haaaaas to always get his way--"
"Excuse me, *I'm* the one who always 'has to get his way'?” Isa said icily.

"Are you accusing me of something?” Lea growled.

"Merely your insufferable insistence on always having the last word and getting everything you want regardless of how it will affect other people--"

"Oh, I'M the one who always HAS to get everything I want?! Well, I'll tell you what I DIDN'T want, Isa, and that was SLAVING AWAY FOR THREE YEARS so that *you* could get your precious flaming TOTALLY USELESS COLLEGE DEGREE instead of getting a REAL JOB like SOME PEOPLE in this room--"

"Oh, so dead-end employment with few benefits and no future is your definition of a 'real job,' rather than a fulfilling career you could actually use your talents for--"

"I never finished tenth grade and I turned out FINE, just like YOU would've if you hadn't INSISTED on chasing after the perfect life you never had and'll never get because you've never, ever accepted the fact that we'll never be normal, Isa, you can't just lose your freaking heart and have fire dancing at your fingertips for a decade, then come back and just expect everything to be same as when we were freaking stupid kids who didn't have a clue what we were getting into--"

"Are you fighting about munny again?” Roxas suddenly realized.

"Axel!” Xion wailed, nearly in tears, "I *told* you, I still have so much from the Organization, I can give you as much as you need--"

"WE'RE NOT TAKING YOUR MUNNY,” Lea & Isa thundered at the same time.

"Don't yell at her!” Roxas roared back, stepping in front of Xion as if to shield her. "You two think you're always right and you're always in charge and you can always push us around, but you DON'T! We're your friends, not your lackeys! You're not the boss anymore, *Saïx*, and you don't know as much as you think you do, Axel! Just because we're younger than you and stupider than you--"

"I never said you were stupid, Roxas!”
"--you can't just keep deciding things like we don't matter and acting like you're too good for us to help! I wanna throw this munny at your freaking heads and I hate you and you're so stupid and I--"

"Let's have a boss battle," Xion suddenly suggested. "That used to make us feel better when people were mad at each other in the Organization...."

"Can't," Roxas said with a mocking look at the other two, "we'd just kick their butts."

"You think I can't take you just because I lost my fire?" Lea snarled. "Just let me--" He seemed to wilt a bit. "Let me go...dig my chakrams out of the closet, ARGH sometimes it's a pain being human...." Isa was silently looking at his empty hand, as if thinking similar thoughts about Lunatic. Roxas's smug expression faded, and he considerately did not summon his Keyblade.

"We could get jobs," Xion suggested. "Roxas and me."

"No," Isa and Lea said in flat unison.

Roxas flared up again. "Why not?"

"You are to focus wholly on schoolwork while you are still students, you do not need unnecessary distractions," Isa said, at the same time Lea stormed, "I'm working my tail off for all of us, okay? You guys finish school and I'll take care of everything else, that's how it's supposed to work."

"What'd you say?" Roxas said in confusion.

Xion shook her head. "Then I'll LOAN you munny. Pay me back, whatever; just don't use this as an excuse to be all miserable and keep whining and fighting with each other, because I HATE it when you guys fight and I HATE seeing you both so tired and worn-down and I hate, hate, hate when everyone's so miserable and angry and biting each other's heads off when we're supposed to be a FAMILY! Families are supposed to love each other, not keep hurting each other!"

"Life Lesson number six billion whatever," Axel said wearily. "Family members sometimes like to tear each other apart."
"No doubt," Isa added slowly, "because one can more successfully hurt a family member without losing the relationship entirely, as opposed to hurting others with whom there is a less fundamental bond."

"What are you saying?" Xion said, now crying in earnest. "Families hurt each other more than friends do...?"

Roxas put an arm around her. "You guys are jerks," he told them. "Maybe we don't want to be your family anymore."

"Roxas, it doesn't work like that," Lea said quickly. "When you're family, you're family for life, you can't just get rid of us. That's why we have to go to Twilight Town together, we can't just leave people behind."

"Why do we have to go to Twilight Town at all! We just stay and let Isa finish school and then everyone's happy!"

"Not everyone's happy! You may love it here, Roxas, but I don't! All I see in these streets is a life I'll never get back, a childhood that was over a long time ago, memories from the most horrible day of my life! There's nothing for me here."

"There's your mom," Xion whispered, sniffling. "And your brothers and sisters, your other family--"

"I mean, yeah, there's them," Lea said uncomfortably. "But, Xi...you're my family now, you know? People grow up and leave home and start new lives. You're my new life now, the three of you. I'll miss Mom and everyone...I really will...but I'm not...living for them anymore...you know?"

"There should be a way to live both places," Roxas grumbled. "Stupid corridors, I wish they still worked, then we could go back and forth whenever we want...."

"The dark corridors are the same as they always have been," Isa said in a sulky voice. Lea nudged him, and Xion poked Roxas, and they both went quiet.
Then Lea sighed and said in a pleading voice, "Roxas, Twilight Town really means a lot to me. Whenever things got really bad in the Organization, that's where I'd go, that's where I'd get the closest to feeling happy again. All those sunsets together, all that ice cream, everything we talked about...doesn't it mean anything to you?"

Roxas shifted uncomfortably. "I miss it, yeah. I like Twilight Town, you know? A lot. I just...don't really wanna live there anymore. Not if I have to give up the Garden." He gestured with the arm he wasn't holding Xion with. "This is my new life, Axel, you know? You guys, and being here - I'm growing up, too. I left the old place and now I'm here, and...maybe I can leave for a little bit, but I can't give it up forever, Axel. You know? Not forever. It's like...like a little piece of my heart is here, or something...have you ever felt like that?"

Lea shook his head, smiling a little. "Yeah, Rox. I know what you mean."

"There has to be a way," Xion said hopelessly. "It's not fair to make Isa work so hard for so long and then he won't even get what he worked so hard for...it's not fair."

"Hey, no one made him nearly kill himself with school," Lea said.

"A mistake," Isa grumbled. "Though I do not agree with you about the value of a college degree, Lea, I do regret now thinking it was something I myself should have aspired to."

Xion raised her head. "Isa, you're not giving up, are you?"

"I see little choice about the matter. I told you, I have resolved myself to it."

"Isa! You're ONE CLASS away! Don't quit now when you're so close to finishing!"

"We made an agreement," Isa said stubbornly. "Three years."

"Who cares about the 'agreement'! No one's gonna make you fight a Dustflier because you couldn't finish college in three years! Axel, tell him he's being stupid!"

Lea fidgeted. "Will they really make you re-take half your classes...?"
"Xion, I'm tired," Isa said. "The workload I took on was too much, even for me; I had not taken that into consideration at the beginning. At least being a Nobody dulled the effects of overwork, but I no longer have this benefit. I can hardly stomach the thought of an extra semester, and to transfer to another institution is unthinkable.... I was counting strongly on being permanently finished with school by the end of this month, and am honestly loath to endure even one more class."

"Then take next semester off and rest up and finish in the spring!" she yelled. "Then me and you and Roxas can all graduate together!"

"Noooo!" Lea wailed. "That's a whole 'nother year...!"

"And then we just go to Twilight Town after all, right?" Roxas complained. "Which was exactly what I didn't want to do?"

"WHY ARE YOU ALL SO SELFISH?!!" Xion screamed. She threw Roxas's arm off her shoulders and turned her back on all three of them and marched out the door with angry tears spilling down her cheeks.

To be continued...

Author's Notes: ...hopefully in my Sora/Xion Day fic on January 30th. *sweatdrop* Though if it gets invaded by too much AkuSaiRokuShi, I might just use it for the "Making up" theme of this challenge, I dunno. Whatever. In any case, there will be a Part 2, regardless of what series it ends up in.

Lol, glaring mistake in one part, but I liked the line too much to try to fix it.... *sweatdrop* Maybe no one will notice.... Or maybe some of these post-canon AkuSaiRokuShi stories will just be slightly AU from each other. *sweatdrop*

I love SaiShi. ;; I mean, I love AkuRoku and AkuShi and SaiRoku and SaiRokuShi and every single combination of my OT4 (platonically XD; RokuShi's the only one I can tolerate as romance), but SaiShi is the weirdest because they hate each other so much in canon and it never occurs to anyone to do them in fandom and so many of Xion's fans hate Saïx and Saïx's fans hate Xion......but fluffy SaiShi is so amazingly adorable to me. ;;
And Sora saves the day again.

A/N: Most of this is the exact same as the Sora/Xion Day version, but I've just tweaked some parts to be platonic. Re-reading the story, the SoXi parts were bugging me.... Just like with a couple of my other fics, the romancey/ship-tease bits just seem so forced and unnatural. :/ I'd wanted to post this directly after the SoXi attempt, but I didn't get around to it until now, after I'd written lots of other BbF&ML stories in the meantime. *sweatdrop*

Direct sequel to BbF&ML: Day 23 - Arguing. In case you haven't read that fic, my post-KH3 headcanon for AkuSaiRokuShi is that the four of them agree to live in Radiant Garden together long enough for Isa to earn his college degree. In this fic, they've been a family for three years now; technicalities aside, Roxas & Xion are about eighteen.

Xion eventually got tired of walking around crying and bumping into things, so she finally sat down by a fountain to continue crying. Crying and crying. She was the only one who ever cried, it wasn't fair. Maybe the other three were still Nobodies and couldn't feel anything; maybe they were somehow giving their tears to her so she had to cry for all four of them. Didn't matter; whatever it was, it still sucked, and she wanted to hit them. "Jerks! All of you are jerks, gah, I hate you!"

Maybe she was PMSing. She never knew she was until afterwards. Then she'd always apologize a lot to the boys, especially Roxas, since Lea could escape to work and Isa to the university, but Roxas was stuck with her at school all day. Roxas would be like, "Whatever; are you finally gonna go skateboarding with me now?" and Lea would say, "Aw, it's okay, Xi," and look really relieved; and Isa would just grunt and tell her to do her homework.

"I don't miss you," she said fiercely, as if they could hear her. Didn't miss them and their selfish, pig-headed bickering at all. Not at all.
...She did kind of miss them, though. Not the bickering, but Lea's smile and Roxas's companionship and Isa's reliability. Those were the parts she missed. "I don't!" she insisted, and burst into fresh tears.

"Don't what?" He had to say it a couple of times before she heard him.

"Huh?" Then she looked up and saw the sweet-faced young man leaning over her, seeming to glow in the sunset.

"Sora!" she shrieked, utterly delighted. She'd had no idea he was coming, it was so amazing and wonderful to see him, especially at this moment when she so desperately needed a friend. Xion flung herself up and into his arms. She was at a terrible angle, unable to support her own weight at all, but he held her so securely that she barely noticed. "Sora! Sora! You came?"

He laughed. "Well, I wanted to see you guys, anyway - I've been missing you and Roxas a lot. But-- Well, it's this week, right?"

"Huh?"

"Or next week, maybe. I was planning to stay a while, just to visit."

"What's this week?"

He studied her, mildly confused. He'd grown so much... He was definitely taller, his shoulders and arms a lot bigger and more sculpted than she remembered. He looked very handsome, much more man than boy. "Didn't Axel ask me to come?"

"Axel?"

"You know. To help you guys move."

She got a cold feeling in her stomach. "You're here to take us to Twilight Town when our finals are over?"
"Well, I guess so."

Her fingers tightened in the fabric of Sora's shirt. "He just assumed, didn't he. Just thought he didn't even have to bother to tell us, because we'd all agree."

"...Am I not supposed to be here?"

"No," she said, then "Yes" immediately because she wanted him, and she squeezed her arms tighter around him and rested her face on his shoulder. She meant to cry some more, but it seemed like she'd finally used up all her tears.

They stood there for a while, holding each other quietly. Then, when Xion finally gave an 'I feel better now' sigh and pulled away, Sora smiled and said, "So, are things going okay for you guys? You sounded upset earlier...."

"I am! I am fed up with them, all three of them."

"What'd they do?"

"Oh, just, all being stupid, and stubborn, aaaaarrggghhh I hate boys...."

"Oh...sorry."

"Not you," she said in amusement. "I love you. You're wonderful and sweet and nice and you actually care about other people."

He laughed self-consciously and scratched the back of his head. "Oh, I'm nothing special. You're the one who's really nice, Xion. I dunno if I could've forgiven Saix and moved in with him the way you did."

"He's Isa now...."
"Oh yeah. Sorry."

She smiled. "You could've, easier than I did. I didn't have a choice at first, we just...all had to go where Axel went. Because he's ours, we can't just let him go, even if it means putting up with someone we hate." She blew out a breath. "But...Axel loves all of us, all three of us, and after a while, me and Roxas could finally see why. Isa isn't Saïx. He can still be a jerk, and mean, and sometimes I want to smack him, but I love him now, too, and I know he loves me. Because we can see each other now, you know? We couldn't before. We really did become a family after a while." Then she frowned. "Which is why I can't just let him throw away all his hard work, because I care about him now, darn it! And the reason he's insisting on keeping his promise is because he thinks me and Roxas are worth keeping promises to. He's so STUPID!"

"For thinking you're worthwhile?" Sora said in confusion.

"No! Gah, I don't know!"

"Um...you wanna get some ice cream and vent some more?"

"No! No ice cream! That's their thing!" Roxas and Axel and Isa were dishonoring what sea-salt ice cream stood for. "Let's see what the bakery's got instead."

"Sounds good."

They went and bought cupcakes, then sat on a bench eating them and watching the stars come out as Xion explained the details. "It's just one class, but Isa can't graduate without it, so I want to stay here just one more semester so Isa can get his degree, but Axel wants to go to Twilight Town NOW and won't let us stay, and Roxas doesn't want to live in Twilight Town at all because he loves the Garden too much now, and I wanna stay here a little longer but I do wanna go back to Twilight Town someday because I miss it, and Isa made his stupid precious promise that he'd graduate in three years, but now that he can't he wants to go to Twilight Town anyway because he promised and he can't stand Axel being miserable even though it's just ONE MORE CLASS, one class, and he's been moping all day and freaking me out and he actually sat through Hannah Montana without saying a word and I think we burned dinner because we were arguing so much and it's just so frustrating because I'm tired and there's always sooo much homework and I think I'm failing math but I'm scared to tell Isa and Axel, and finals are coming up and the concert and there's just so much to do, soooooooo much..."

Sora tossed his most recent cupcake wrapper into the lid of the bakery box, dusted crumbs off his hands, put his arms around Xion, and hugged her again.
She closed her eyes and let herself be hugged.

"I know what it's like," he finally said, gently stroking her hair. "Everyone having all these expectations of you, everyone needing your help.... Like, being pulled in a million directions at once, and the whole time you can feel that your best friends are in trouble and all you wanna do is go find them and help them, but you can't because you're stuck because everyone else needs you to help them, too, and if you mess up then it means all these worlds will get swallowed in darkness, so you can't make any mistakes...."

Xion found herself crying softly again, though she wasn't sure this time if it was herself she was crying for. Sora's eyes were dry, but her own heart seemed to pulse with the memories of his grief and frustration.

They were both startled by the tinkly opening notes of "Working Together."

"What--?"

"Oh! My phone, sorry." Xion slipped it out of her pocket to see who was calling. "Ugh, Isa," she muttered, pressing the green button. "Hello?"

"I am required to tell you that I am deeply sorry for upsetting you, and I beg your forgiveness," he said in a haughty tone.

"Tell Axel that I don't care what you say when you're only saying it because they're holding your computer hostage," she said, and hung up.

Sora was staring at her, wide-eyed.

"Isa practically lives on the computer," Xion explained. "We can make him do pretty much anything if we threaten to smash it. It has to be really important, though, because he nearly kills us afterward."

She was surprised when Sora grinned. "You must be really important, Xion."
She grinned back.

Just as her phone rang again.

She sighed. "Hello?"

"Xion!"

"Xion, I--!"

"We are first," Isa's voice cut in, "courteously informing you that you are on speakerphone."

"Thanks." She didn't bother to courteously inform them that she wasn't alone.

"Xion okay fine I'm really, really sorry," Lea said in a rush. "I was selfish, I'm a horrible person and I don't deserve to live, you guys should probably just shoot me if I wasn't the one paying all your bills--"

"I can tell you just sound soooo sincere."

"Xion." That was Roxas, sounding near tears, and from the way her heart ached, she knew that it wasn't just an act. At least, partially. "Xion, please, we can work this out. Just come home, okay? You ran off and I couldn't find you and Axel said to just let you cool down, but my chest hurts and I know you're not okay."

"I'm fine, Roxas. I just don't want to see you guys now."

"See, Rox? She's fine."

"What do we do to make you wanna see us again?" Roxas insisted.
"Isa has to promise to finish school, and Axel has to promise to wait for him, and you have to let me go back to Twilight Town someday, and all three of you have to hug and make up and be nice to each other, and to me."

"...."

"...."

"...."

"...Okay--"

"And you all have to MEAN IT."

"Xion, are you trying to kill Isa or something?" Lea said wryly.

"He'll do it," she said, "if it really is important to him."

"What is important to me," Isa said coldly, "is that your whims are disrupting the entire evening for all four of us, since Lea and Roxas refuse to leave you to your own devices. Apparently, they are incapable of wasting only their own time; they seem to require mine, as well."

"What time? You're on vacation!"

"Which could be spent reading rather than tramping around Radiant Garden searching for you."

"Isa, shut up!" Roxas cried. "She'll get mad at you and then she'll never come home!"

"I'm already mad at you all!" Xion yelled.

"Can you at least be mad at us in the kitchen, while we're eating dinner?" Lea pleaded.
"No. I want to be mad out here, by myself."

"Are you really by yourself?" Roxas suddenly said.

"It's none of your business."

"Of course it's our business," Isa said sharply, "depending on who your associate is."

"Flaming pants, Xion, you're not with some creep, are you?!" Lea cried.

"No!" Xion yelled. "I'm with a friend, okay? A friend."

"And how long have you known this 'friend'?"

"Isa, stop freaking out, I'm not gonna get kidnapped or anything, okay?"

"Yes, because a kidnapper would have the courtesy to inform you of his heinous plans before actually carrying them out," Isa said, in such a monotone that it took a moment for Sora to register the sarcasm.

"Oh my gosh, it's Sora, okay?! I'm with Sora! Sacred moon, you guys need to chill!"

"Sora?" all three of them chorused in surprise.

Then, from Isa, "What is he doing here?"

and Lea, "Let me talk to him!"

and Roxas, "Oohhh, that's what I was feeling!"
and then suddenly the three of them were coming around the corner. The two groups stared at each other. "Hi," Sora finally said.

There was a flurry of sound and activity. Roxas ran to glomp his Other and then yell at him in agitated delight; Lea was right on his heels to make rapid-fire inquiries.

Isa watched to make sure they were all distracted, then turned to Xion. "Earlier," he said in a low voice, "I wasn't completely lacking in sincerity. I...truly am sorry, Xion. For upsetting you. Your face is much better suited for smiling."

She hugged him, and when she saw his eyes flick to the others, she grinned and squeezed him tighter. "I love you even when other people are watching."

"Yes, I know," he grumbled.

"Saa-chan."

"Hm?"

"It's only one class. One."

"I know," he groaned softly. "But after three years of nonstop overwork, it just seems like the last straw...."

She patted him. "We'll help you. You don't have to do everything all by yourself, that's why we're a family."

He laid a hand on her shoulder. "I know. Thank you, I will try to remember that. By the way, you are coming home now, right? The other two are practically in hysterics, and I can't get anything done."

She laughed. "Come on, let's go rescue Sora from their pestering."
As they approached, Sora was saying, "Yeah, that's what I figured. Xion was telling me earlier."

"This shouldn't be such a big deal," Lea groaned. "But everyone's freaking out about it...."

"Yeah, and you're the worst one, Mr. Zomg-I-Can't-Stay-In-Radiant-Garden-One-More-Second," Roxas pouted.

Sora was thinking. "Why don't you guys just travel back and forth between Radiant Garden and Twilight Town?"

"Can't use dark corridors," Lea said shortly.

"One of us can't risk the corridors," Isa corrected in a growl, eyes averted. "The other three are strong enough to handle them."

"But we agreed we wouldn't," Roxas said with a frown.

Xion took Isa's hand in both of hers, startling him into meeting her eyes. "You're one of us, Saa-chan," she said quietly. "We've never felt like you were holding us back."

"I wonder whom you think you are addressing with that ridiculous moniker," he said frigidly, forced to keep up appearances in the presence of an outsider, but he squeezed her hand in acknowledgment, and his eyes glimmered a little.

"Actually, I wasn't thinking of the dark corridors," Sora said. "Why don't you guys use a Gummi ship?"

"Oi, Roxas," Lea said casually, "where'd we leave our spaceship parked?"

"Huh? We don't have one," Roxas said in confusion.

Lea gestured mockingly and raised an eyebrow at Sora.
Sora chuckled. "Well, I can give you one, I've got a ton of them."

Lea's cheeky expression dissolved into astonishment. "You'd give us...?"

"I told you you were the best Other ever," Roxas crowed.

"I can give each of you one, if you want. Seriously, I have a TON."

The four of them stared at each other in delight. "Yeeessss!"

"Sora, I owe you so much ice cream for this."

"Hey, you're my friends! I'm happy to help you guys out."

Roxas glomped him again and Lea did a little victory dance and Xion grabbed Isa's hands again to jump up and down in excitement, though he simply stood there. He did give a small smile, though.

"I get the red one!" Roxas announced, pumping his fist in the air.

"What? I get the red one," Lea insisted. "Red is my color, duh."

"You don't own the color red, Axel!"

"But I'd look cooler in a red Gummi ship than you would, so there."

"Sora, I can have a red one, can't I?"

"Stop behaving like children," Isa cut in. "I'm sure that Sora has more than one red ship to spare."
"Oodles," Sora assured them. "All four of you can have red, if you want."

"The color is low priority," Isa said. "The specifications are far more important."

Sora called up a holo-display, featuring rows and rows of Gummi ship models. "There's basically three kinds: high attack power but low defense, high defense but low attack power, and stuff in between."

Isa gestured at his chosen vessel, making Lea grin.

"Isa, that one's purple."

"Your point being...?"

"I want a blue one," Xion said happily. "It reminds me of someone I like."

"Apparently it's my lot in life to be constantly surrounded by sentimental fools," Isa grumbled, though he didn't even wince when Xion planted a kiss on his cheek.

That night after dinner, while the boys were ooohing and aaahing over their new ships, Xion stepped back onto the ledge where Sora was watching with a gratified look on his face. "Sora."

"Hey, Xion," he said, and laughed when she hugged him.

"Thank you," she said warmly. "This really means a lot to us."

He patted her on the back, smiling affectionately. "Anything to help you out, Xi. You're really important to me, you know."

She smiled back at him. "You're important to us, too, Sora. I wish you'd let us repay you...."
"Hey, I don't need anything. Besides, I'm doing myself a favor, too." He winked. "This way I'll get to see you more."

"Aww, I'm so flattered. I'll be sure to visit you lots."

"I'll be holding you to that promise."

She laughed. "I'll look forward to keeping it. Hey, do you want to get Naminé and Ven and everyone all together for Christmas?"

"It's like you read my mind...!"

Author's Notes: ...Wow. I barely changed anything; like, fifteen words when Sora first shows up, and ten or so words here at the end. Seriously, it can sometimes be a very fine line between platonic and romance....

Ftr, the RokuShi in this universe will stay firmly platonic, since it would mess up their adorable dynamic if they fell in love with each other, and there's someone else I intend to ship Xion with, anyway. (Not Riku. XD He had his turn with her in Stepsibs, and politely chose to decline a second opportunity.)

I love platonic RokuShi and SaiShi so freaking much.... X3

Complete: 6/30
Summary: Well, at least Saïx found something, even if it wasn't what he was actually looking for.

He couldn't find it anywhere. Wondering if he could have dropped it in the Grey Area, Saïx entered the room close to midnight and then paused, a picture of incredulity. Axel was lounging on a couch with both Keybearers cuddled up to him, fast asleep. He looked pretty heavy-lidded himself. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"MLP marathon," Axel said sleepily. "I got the movie today, and we were gonna watch the whole series in one go. Kids didn't make it, though; we'll have to finish tomorrow."

"What is 'MLP'?"

Axel grinned. "You don't wanna know."

Saïx looked at the colorful, high-voiced cartoon ponies cavorting on the television screen, and silently agreed. "The younger ones should be in bed, also."

"Well, they're already asleep...." Axel lifted the remote and shut off the DVD player, but didn't move after that.

Saïx didn't, either.

"Man...it's been ages since we watched this show," Axel remarked softly.

...Every Thursday night, together, cosplayed as the heroes on weekends, waited in line for hours to
get the actors' autographs, Lea playing the video game tie-ins more times than he could remember, Isa's shelf full of collectibles....

Saïx stood watching for about half an hour. Then a second episode came on - apparently the station was playing the entire third season back-to-back - and Saïx sat down so as to be more comfortable.

The next morning, Xaldin came up short upon entering the Grey Area, and stared. He had no idea why Numbers VII, VIII, XIII, and XIV would all be curled up together asleep on the couch with My Little Pony DVD cases scattered around them, and he very much did not want to know. All he cared about was getting his latest mission brief, though he suspected that any other Organization member who came across them like this would have more than missions in mind....

Author's Notes: ...Dang it, OT4, why do you only cooperate in AUs and post-canon? DX DX DX
*sulk*

Lol, either they magically get transmissions from other worlds, or maybe Demyx runs a TV station on The World That Never Was. XD

Complete: 4/30
Summary: Sometimes, science lessons can be useful for more than making good grades.

The two young Nobodies sat at the top of the clock tower, laughing.

"No way that really happened," Axel said, taking another bite of ice cream. "Mmh! Cold. Ah."

"Brain freeze?" Saïx inquired, licking his own ice cream.

"No, I just-- Mmh. But yeah, that guy's just a big rock, no way he'd be caught dead in a girly store like that."

"Search his room if you don't believe me. And if you're too chicken, I suppose I'll have to sneak in myself and get a photo."

"Don't bother! I'll check it out and prove you're a liar."

They laughed again. After a moment, Axel smiled out at the sky. "Man, that's an awesome sunset...."

"Mm." Saïx glanced over at him and grinned. "I bet you don't even know why it looks so beautiful."

"Huh?"
"All those shades of red - it's because visible light contains different wavelengths, which we perceive as different colors. The shorter wavelength components like blue and green are scattered more strongly than the longer ones as they travel through the atmosphere, so it is the red and orange hues which reach our eyes the most intact during sunset."

"Isa, are you even speaking English?"

"Lea, we learned this in fifth grade."

"Did not!"

"Admittedly, it was less detailed than the similar lessons we had in subsequent grade levels, but you ought to have remembered the elementary school lecture, at least."

"Light is made up of many colors," Axel remembered slowly. "And out of all those colors--"

"Red is the one that travels the farthest," they finished together, then laughed again.

"Man, we talk about the dumbest things when we're out here...."

O.O.O.O.O

"Hey, Roxas." The boy glanced at him inquiringly. "Bet you don't know why the sun sets red. You see, light is made up of lots of colors. And out of all those colors, red is the one that travels the farthest."

"Like I asked! Know-it-all," Roxas chuckled. The two of them laughed together, best friends enjoying ice cream on the clock tower just like another set of best friends had done years before.

O.O.O.O.O

'Well. What was I expecting?' Lea thought in disgust. 'Guess it doesn't matter that it wasn't really Isa all that time. Or how much I needed those two when I had nothing else left. Sea-salt ice cream
doesn't erase a year of misery and anger.' He took a bite of ice cream and considered just getting up and leaving.

On one side of him, Isa sat and stared sullenly at the sunset, untouched ice cream dangling loosely from two fingers. On his other side, Roxas and Xion were silent, taking an occasional bite of their own treats and looking resentful. 'Yeah. This was a great idea.'

After a while, Roxas sighed, then finally ventured a look to his right. Just the sight of that shaggy blue hair made him grit his teeth. But...there was also Lea. Who looked really unhappy. 'We're the ones making him unhappy,' Roxas thought. Because coming up here was supposed to be something fun they did together, like the three of them used to do back in the Organization, and like Lea said he'd used to do with Sаïx back when they were still teenagers. But instead of talking and laughing like back then, they were all just sitting without even saying anything or looking at each other. This wasn't fun at all. And of course it was Isa's fault, because his eyes might be green now, but he still hated them, and the idea of 'having fun' hanging out with him was like trying to 'have fun' with a grouchy tiger.

He heard Xion sigh a little on his other side. 'Well. Maybe I should do something. Didn't Belle tell me that nothing will happen if I don't try?' Roxas couldn't help sighing, too, before he spoke. "Hey. Isa."

Lea and Xion blinked at the unexpected address, and Isa glanced over at Roxas in distaste.

"I bet...I bet you don't know why the sun sets red."

Lea's eyes widened, and Isa frowned. "Pardon?"

Xion smiled a little, recognizing the memory from when she had shared Roxas's heart. "You see...light is made up of lots of colors."

"And out of all those colors..." Roxas continued, Lea echoing him softly.

The four of them spoke the rest of it together. "...red is the one that travels the farthest."

For the first time that day, they were all looking at each other.
Isa did not smile. But his face was...neutral. Which was a decided improvement. "Wherever did you hear that?"

"Someone told me once," Roxas said in a nonchalant tone, licking his ice cream.

"Someone told me that, too," Lea said quietly. "A long time ago."

Isa finally raised his melting ice cream and took the first bite out of it. "It does sound familiar," he murmured non-committally. Which, again, was an improvement over his usual surly tone when speaking in the Keybearers' presence.

"I wonder what happens to the other colors," Xion mused.

Isa paused.

"Oh, no," Lea laughed. "Don't get him started."

"What, do green and blue get bored and decide to take a nap or something?" Roxas said.

"Well," Isa began, almost cautiously. "You see...." The younger two were more interested than he expected.

On Lea's part, the rest of the afternoon kind of felt like school, but since he wasn't the one doing the teaching for once, and he was no longer having to choose sides, he didn't mind very much.

Author's Notes: This story flowed a lot better in my head than it did when I tried to write it. *sweatdrop* Part of that may have been because I waited too long to write it and started forgetting details.... Why am I so dang BUSY?! :shakefist:
But anyway. Wouldn't it be so lovely if AkuSai had their own "Why the sun sets red" scene in canon, and double-lovely if AkuSaiRokuShi got one, too? *waves OT4 at Square Enix's face*

Complete:  7/30
Aqua, unable to hug and fuss over Ven anymore because Terra had finally gotten impatient at having to wait his turn, sighed and looked around for something else to do.

She very quickly spotted the two figures slumped further down the beach: Roxas and Xion sitting together on the sand, she leaning against his shoulder, and both of them looking depressed. "Ohhhh...." It annoyed her a little to realize that Zack's teasing about her 'mommy instincts' apparently hadn't just been teasing, but it wasn't as if she could just turn her back and pretend she hadn't seen. She gave a wry smile and started heading toward the two teenagers in need of cheering up.

Sora got there first, racing over and prompting them to surge away in disgust, Roxas yelling at him about being a clumsy idiot getting sand in their eyes.

"Sorry! Sorry! You guys just looked kind of glum, so I thought--"

"We're fine."

"You don't look fine," Sora said unhappily, glancing at Xion, who was rubbing at her eyes and seemed to have been doing so before getting sand sprayed in her face.
"We're okay, Sora," she said in a subdued voice.

Aqua came to a stop beside Sora and crouched down so that she was more level with the other two. "What's wrong?" she asked, her voice softening as she gazed at Roxas, who had the same face as her own precious one.

"Nothing," Roxas grumbled sullenly.

"If nothing was wrong, you guys'd be laughing and talking to Axel, wouldn't you?" Sora insisted. He pointed dramatically at some of the others farther away. "Like Terra and Ven, you can practically hear what they're talking about from here; and the Princesses of Heart are being all girly and I can't even get to Kairi; and Riku's about to get in a fight with Xigbar, or Braig or whatever his name is-- I thought you guys were Axel's best friends."

"We thought we were, too!" Xion burst out, then buried her face in Roxas's shoulder before she could cry again.

"But not anymore, I guess," Roxas said sourly. "He just takes one look at us and marches off to go hang out with _Saix_." He lowered his chin back to rest on the crossed arms he'd propped on his knee. "Liar...said he'd never had a best friend before us...flaming liar, he _did_ have one, and he likes him better than us now that we're all human...."

Aqua looked over at the two figures even farther off, sitting on a fallen paopu tree, red and blue hair standing out vividly against the foliage. Roxas stood up and yelled in their direction, "Fine! Be his best friend now, I don't care, I've still got Xion, you loser!"

"I miss Axel," Xion said sadly.

Aqua looked at Sora. "Cheer them up," she ordered, then started marching over to the former Numbers VII and VIII without waiting to see Sora's enthusiastic salute.

---

Isa had thought he would be one of the ones without a Joyous Reunion, and he did not, as Braig had, care to butt in on other people's for the sake of attention. So he'd procured an ice cream bar, found a shaded place to sit, and prepared to wait it out until everyone was ready to be useful again
(Xehanort, after all, was not quite dead yet, and they needed to make plans).

So he was very surprised when someone came crunching across the sand to plop down on the tree trunk next to him. The surprise itself was rather overwhelming, and took a while to process; but when Isa was finally capable of speaking again, he said, "What are you doing here?"

"Hiding," Lea mumbled. Either he'd matured enough over the years to be able to confess something like that, or he felt comfortable enough with Isa again to be able to show weakness in front of him. Either way, Isa was rather touched.

"From whom? Aren't they all your best friends now?"

"Just two of them," Lea said sulkily, "and yes, but so are you."

"...I don't think that's why you came to sit with me." 'Because even if getting your heart back has awakened your sense of obligation, it's still clear that they are what's most important to you now.'

"It's not," Lea wailed, and buried his face in his arms.

Isa sighed. 'Stop it,' he told himself. 'I know it's harder to deal with when you have your wretched heart back, but you've already known for quite a long time that he doesn't care about you anymore, so put it aside and give him what he needs.' So he could go back to the Keybearers and leave Isa behind again. That was all right. He and Lea had stopped being friends a long time ago. Isa, deceiving Saix, had even pushed Axel away deliberately in order to protect him. It didn't matter if Isa was still alive when he expected to be dead by now; he still had to accept the consequences of what he'd sacrificed. "Then I suggest you simply tell me what your problem is, since I'm not going to waste time and energy trying to wheedle it out of you." He took another bite of ice cream.

"Man, Isa, you're no fun for pouting people."

"Was I ever?"

"Heh, no." Lea expelled a dramatic sigh. "Just look at them!"
"Thirteen and Fourteen?"

"Call them by their names, Isa."

'I don't want to.' "...Lea's Pet Number 1 and Lea's Pet Number 2."

"They're not *pets*, they're-- Gah!"

"Just spit it out, Lea."

Lea pointed in a highly exaggerated manner. "They are HUGE!"

Isa paused in confusion. "Pardon?"

"Look at them!!!!"

Isa looked. "I suppose they're a bit taller than they were in the Organization...."

"They greeeeewww!"

"Young people grow," Isa said in exasperation. "Why is this a problem for you?"

"Because...because...."

"Lea, they're, what, seventeen now? Or at least, the Keybearer they were replicated from is. They're virtually adults. Were you expecting them to stay small and stupid forever?"

"They're not as cute...."
A childish hope rose in Isa's heart, which he instantly crushed. "So you don't care about them anymore because they're no longer childishly appealing?"

"No! Duh! They're Roxas and Xion, I'll always love them. I just...." Lea suddenly went quiet for what felt like a very long time. Then, gazing at the two rather forlorn-looking figures on the beach, he finally said softly, "Is this what parents feel like, when they watch their children grow up...?"

".... 'He's been with them from the beginning. Taught them everything they know. Watched them develop from naive, ignorant newborns to competent warriors.... I suppose it does make sense they'd feel like the younger siblings he lost, like the children he's never had.' "Lea."

"They're not gonna be bugging me with ridiculous adorable questions anymore," Lea lamented. "They're gonna be real teenagers and start asking me to drop them off five blocks away from their dates because they'd rather walk all that way than pretend they know me...."

"For goodness' sake, Lea, this isn't a movie and they're...not brats." Isa was a little surprised to find that he meant it. "You said yourself you'll always love them," he continued quietly. "Even after they've grown up."

He remembered something his own mother had told him several times when he was young, something he was afraid to put to the test, but which he would have to eventually, when the war was over.

"...It doesn't matter how old they get, or how much they mature...your children will always be your children. They will always be precious to you." 'Even if they became criminals, Mother? Even if they were foolish, and let evil into their heart, and were used as a tool to bring about great destruction, of both your own home and many others? Even if that child was the very reason you and the rest of those people wandered grieving through the darkness for so long? How could anyone possibly forgive someone like that, even if he is your own son?'

"Urk - I think we're in trouble."

Isa saw Aqua heading purposefully over to them. "Yes, I think you're right."

"Thanks, Isa!" Lea jumped off the tree and starting jogging down the beach, thrusting a fresh ice cream bar out to Aqua as he passed her and saying brightly, "Here, have some sea-salt!"
Startled, she automatically accepted the treat, then watched with narrowed eyes as he continued on. In the distance, they could see Roxas and Xion quickly straightening up to meet Lea, Lea talking to them, Roxas yelling at him, Xion suddenly hugging him, all three of them hugging, laughing, talking, then a playful fight, then Isa couldn't watch anymore and he turned away to finish his ice cream.

"...They misunderstood, didn't they," Aqua finally said.

"Lea is an idiot."

Aqua paused, then gracefully hoisted herself up to sit next to Isa. "You talked to him, didn't you."

"I simply told him what he wanted to hear," Isa sulked.

Aqua studied him for a while. "You still care about him very much."

"One does tend to retain some attachment to the only friend he's ever had."

"...You know, Isa...Lea isn't the type to abandon someone just because he's made some new friends."

"If I happened to like his new friends, at all, it wouldn't be a problem."

"So you're really going to force him to choose between you?"

"He's already made his choice." Isa wasn't expecting Aqua to suddenly smack the back of his head. "Ow!" She was strong. It hurt.

"Get over there, Isa."

"Why?" he said indignantly, still cradling the back of his head. "Those two brats have no love for me, nor should they, after everything they had to deal with in that Organization."
"Isa--"

"And I have no desire to befriend them, either."

"Isa, you are part of this team, and as your ally, I'm not going to let you just give up like a coward."

Isa slid to his feet, eyes flashing.

"You want a fight? I can give you one, but you'd still just be avoiding what you're actually afraid of. *Get over there.* Before I tell Braig that you're frightened of a couple of teenagers with ice cream addictions."

"You're manipulating me."

"Is it working?"

Isa glared and sulkily trudged off in the direction of the trio.

Aqua smiled as she watched him go, then headed off to see if she could shove Terra aside just enough for the two of them to be able to share Ven.

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** Infamousplot has a knack for inspiring my muse. XD I think it's because we both totally ship parentalAxel/RokuShi. While squeeing to some of our friends about KH3, she said, "It's funny because they haven't even shown or mentioned anything to do with Axel, Roxas, or Xion, and I'm getting AkuRokuShi feels imagining Axel finally finding them and them getting saved ;-) They're probably like, 17 now? What if they got taller ;A; And Axel's little babies aren't babies any more and he finally sees them after two years and he's like "Look at you you're so tall and grown up" ;A; ;A; ;a; *tears*"
15, unless we get canon confirmation otherwise. But I couldn't say no to the cute AkuRokuShi scenes that started playing in my head when I saw what Ip said. ^^)

And OF COURSE Isa's in there. Of course he is! My OTP/4 doesn't work without him! XD But tell me if my "trying to make AkuSaiRokuShi work post-canon" scenarios start to get repetitive, okay...? They all kind of follow the same format. ;;

The title of this fic references a lovely book called *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch & Sheila McGraw. :)'

Btw, I'm not on hiatus anymore~! (I made a life/writing update entry on LiveJournal.) But my life still hasn't settled down yet, so I'll still be bad at answering messages for a while, sorry. ^^;
Not the Same Without You {Lea, Isa, Roxas, & Xion}

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Not the Same Without You

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic: story by CaxceberXVI, prose by Raberba girl

For Axel/Saïx/Roxas/Xion Day, 4 August 2013

Summary: Even after the war and getting freed from Xehanort's darkness, Isa still finds it difficult to come to terms with his past. Why does having a couple of small children constantly underfoot seem to make things better instead of worse...?

A/N: I was really unhappy with my own contributions to AkuSaiRokuShi Day 2013 (the picture looked awful and the story was just some random silly drabble I had lying around), but then my friend Caxceber on devART completely blew me away with her hilarious, adorable, amazing MMD comic. X3 X3 I loved it so much, I wanted to write it as a story... XD

0.0.0

The sun shone bright but not too hot over Twilight Town, which was quiet as usual. The figure waiting in Station Plaza heard nothing but the cawing of birds, the noise of distantly passing trains, and the breeze playing through his long hair.

"Wind? At this time of year?" Isa murmured, brushing his hair back out of his eyes. He sighed and glanced up at the tower, checking the time yet again. "It's almost two o'clock...." He shook his head. "Honestly, Lea. How long does it take to use the lavatory...? Perhaps we could make our own wa--" He abruptly lost his train of thought. "Xion!"

The five-year-old girl at his feet blinked up at him with innocent blue eyes. "Yes?"

"Put that down!" he ordered. "I've told you before not to play with things you pick off the ground!"
She stared in dismay at the cracked bottle in her hands, then back up at Isa. "Aww, but Saa-chan, it's fun!"

"Do Lea and I need to have words again?" Isa snapped, stooping down to carefully pull the bottle out of her hands and then check her tiny palms for injury. "And I've told you before not to call me that."

"...Okay," she mumbled, sticking out her lower lip in a pout.

He sighed and stood up again, moving farther down the wall. "Just come and stand here with me, Xion. They can't be that much longer."

"...Can I hold your hand?" Xion asked, widening her eyes in that way Lea could never say no to. Isa could, but there didn't seem to be any point in doing so at this time.

"All right," he grumbled, allowing her to reach up and grasp his fingers.

She smiled at him, then began rocking back and forth, humming a little. He looked back at the clock.

"Isa," Xion finally asked, "where did Axel and Roxas go?"

"I believe they went to use the restroom," Isa said in a tone of delicate sarcasm. There was no way they needed this much time for that one simple task. He knew they should have all just gone together, since those two got so easily distracted when he wasn't there to redirect them.

A sudden thought occurred to him, and he warily glanced back down at the child. "You don't need to go now as well, do you?"

"Nope," she said. "I went before we left the restaurant."

He nodded in relieved satisfaction. "Clever girl."
AT LAST, another man's voice came ringing out across the plaza. "Yo, Isa!"

"Well, it's about time," Isa growled.

"Roxas~!" Xion cried happily, running to greet her twin. Lea was ambling over to them, hand in hand with the five-year-old Key of Destiny.

"Lea, what took you so long?" Isa demanded.

"Well, you did order him an extra large soda at the cafe."

"I didn't want him complaining later about still being thirsty again. But really, Lea, it does not take that long to locate and use a restroom. Where else did you go?"

"Nowhere! We just, uh...kinda stopped for ice cream on the way back."

"Aww, Roxas got ice cream?!" Xion cried. "I want ice cream!"

Roxas cocked his head, then held out his half-eaten ice cream bar as if to offer her a taste.

"We'll get ice cream later," Isa said hastily, "when we arrive at...?" He glanced inquiringly at Lea, who was supposed to have come up with their next destination.

"Oh yeah. I was going to take the kids to the beach."

The children's attention was instantly fixed on him. "BEACH!!" they yelled in unison, eyes lit up with excitement.

Isa gave his friend an exasperated look. "Really?"

"What's wrong with the beach?" Lea said defensively.
"Nothing. I simply thought it was somewhere my assistance would be required, like a crowded theme park or some such place."

"IIIIsaaaa, pick me up!" Xion whined, hopping a little as she stretched up her arms.

"So, what, you aren't coming?" Lea scoffed.

Isa leaned down to lift up Xion as he spoke, in an effort to stop her clamoring. "You don't need me. Besides, the children prefer your company to mine."

Lea grinned a little. "He says as he picks up Xion. She went to you first, man."

Isa eyed the child in his arms for a moment, then said, "Be that as it may, you don't need me, so I won't intrude. You three are better off without me, anyway."

"Not this again," Lea groaned. "Isa, you aren't bad. And you're as much a part of this group as I am."

"Lea, you want me to feel included; I understand. However, I simply don't feel comfortable doing this sort of thing just yet."

"Your hair is pretty," Xion said to Isa, patting it with an interested look and completely oblivious to the adults' conversation. "I'mma put some flowers in it."

"For example," Isa continued, distractedly trying to pull away as Xion tucked a few blossoms into his hair, "what if they remember all the terrible things they experienced because of me? They'll hate me, and will have no reason to ever forgive me. I won't ever be free from what I did. The more time I spend with them, the more I risk jogging their memory."

"You look prettyful, Saa-chan," Xion said in satisfaction, cocking her head to study her handiwork.

Isa, finally realizing what she had done to him, shut his eyes and gritted his teeth so as not to say
something he would regret.

"Xion? Sweetie?" Lea said, trying not to laugh.

She blinked those innocent blue eyes at him. "Yes?"

"This is maybe not the best time," Lea chuckled, admiring Isa's new hair ornaments with relish.

"But he looks nice," Xion protested. "They match his eyes." She met Isa's glare with a thoughtful frown. "But I guess they'd look better if his eyes were still yellow, like the sun...."

"Uh-oh," Lea murmured as Isa drew in a sharp breath. "Isa?"

"Take. Her," Isa growled, holding out Xion as if she was suddenly contagious.

"Calm down, man." Lea sighed as he pulled Xion into his arms and cradled her protectively. "She didn't know. Yen Sid said they wouldn't remember anything major for another few years at least."

"Did I do something wrong?" Xion murmured, fingers curling uncertainly into Lea's shirt.

"No, sweetie, it's just--"

"Yes, Xion," Isa interrupted, "you did." He reached up to pull the flowers out of his hair as he continued, "I've told you before not to say things like that."

Lea narrowed his eyes, shifting slightly so that Xion was angled away. "Isa, she's just a child. She doesn't understand."

"Well, it's high time she learned. She has to know eventually, so it might as well be now."

Lea rolled his eyes. "Yeah, all right; you wanna be alone? You got it. C'mon, Roxas."
He turned away and took Roxas's hand. The boy narrowed his eyes and asked suspiciously, "Are we still going to the beach?"

"Yeah. We don't need Isa to have fun, do we?"

Roxas laughed like he thought it was a joke. Xion peered over Lea's shoulder as he walked away and called sadly, "Buh-bye, Isa...."

Roxas craned to looked over his shoulder, then glanced back up at Lea and asked, "Why isn't Isa coming? Doesn't he want to be with us?"

Lea sighed. "No. Isa...he'd rather just have some time alone."

They were now too far away for Isa to hear the particulars of Roxas's indignant protest. He watched until they were out of sight, thinking, 'Lea...I'm sorry things have to be this way. Please try to understand how difficult this is for me....'

His eye was caught by a splash of color on the pavement - Xion's flowers, where they had dropped during the argument. After a moment, Isa slowly stooped down to pick them up. He gazed at them for a while, then finally drew on his coat in preparation to enter the dark corridors.

It was even warmer on Destiny Islands than it had been in Twilight Town. Isa made his way down a path heading toward the beach, surrounded by the scent of island flowers. He paused when he neared the water, shading his eyes against the brilliance of the sun over the ocean. "Lea wasn't joking when he said it was beautiful...." He shook his head, refocusing on his purpose in coming here. "Now, where are they?"

He'd looked in the wrong direction first - Xion's cry of delight sounded from behind him. Before he could turn around, both children had hurled themselves at him and knocked him to the sand.

"Yaaaaayyyyy!"

"We knew you'd come!" Xion crowed triumphantly.
"Axel said you might not and we shouldn't get our hopes up!"

"But we knew you would cuz you're awesome!"

"He also said something about telling Santa...?"

"I said no such thing!" Lea yelped as he approached.

Gasping to get his breath back, Isa glared up at the children, who were sitting on him and grinning hugely. 'He didn't...tell them about that, did he...?!'

Lea was also grinning as he crouched to peer down at Isa along with them. "Nice of you to join us."

"I knew this was a mistake..." Isa groaned.

"So why did you come here, then?" Lea challenged.

"Well," Isa replied, his old sarcasm back in full force, "if you would be so kind as to remove yourselves from my person, I would be happy to tell you."

"Aren't you going to play with us and eat ice cream?" Xion said in confusion.

"Nonsense. I simply came to return your flowers. Then I'll be leaving again."

Xion's face began to pucker ominously. "You aren't staying?"

Lea, noticing the puckering, said quickly, "Xion, we talked about this. You said you wouldn't--"
"--cry," Lea finished as Xion burst into tears.

Roxas winced and clamped his hands over his ears. "Make her stop!"

Isa, the one trapped closest to Xion's loud and high-pitched wails, was in perfect agreement with Roxas for once. "All right!" He struggled to sit up, catching Xion before she toppled over, and she gazed back at him with huge liquid eyes that would have reduced Lea to a puddle of submissive goo if he'd been the one in the direct line of fire. Isa suffered nothing more than a squirming sensation in his chest, but it was still unpleasant enough to gentle his tone as he spoke to her. "Xion, really. You don't need me here. Not after everything I put you through."

"Lik-like w-what?" she sniffled.

'Are you expecting me to recount it all aloud?' he thought resentfully. "You really don't remember?"

She sadly patted at his arm. "I remember a long time ago Saïx was bad, but now you're Isa and you're my friend and I don't want you to leave." Her face crinkled again as fresh tears came spilling out of her eyes.

"All right...calm down. No more crying." He fished a square of cloth out of his pocket ("Dude, you have an actual handkerchief?" Lea laughed) and held it to Xion's nose so she could blow into it. "Better?" he asked when her face was clean.

"Uh huh," she said dolefully. She eyed Isa through her bangs. "Does that mean you'll stay?"

He sighed. If he left now and she started up again, Lea would have his hands full, Roxas would get bored and probably get into trouble, Lea would be run ragged, and he'd come home in a foul mood and vengefully ruin Isa's evening, too. Might as well give in to the inevitable, then. "All right. Just for a little while," he added sternly as her eyes lit up.

"YAY! I'm so glad!" she cheered, startling him with her abrupt, enthusiastic hug.
Lea could always recognize when Isa had reached his limit. "Okay, who wants ice cream?" he said loudly.

"Meeeeeee!" the kids shrieked in unison, successfully drawing Xion's attention onto a safer topic.

Lea chuckled. "You, too, frowny face?"

Isa, though quietly grateful for the rescue, gave him an exasperated look.

Of course Isa was still with them by the time the sun had set. He slumped in relief once the light had gone, murmuring to himself, "Finally over...." The day had been unexpectedly enjoyable, but there was only so much he could take.

"Isa!" Lea called, "I'm going to get Xion from the tide pools. Then I think we should head home, it's getting kinda late!"

'How observant of you,' Isa thought dryly, glancing at the horizon behind which the sun had already finished disappearing. Yet there was no point in arguing when they were finally, FINALLY leaving. "Sure," he called back.

"Can you grab Roxas?"

Isa looked around for the boy. "Roxas?"

The former Number XIII glanced up from where he was poking at a hermit crab, trying to make it come out of its shell.

Isa held out a hand. "Come along, we're going home."

"But I'm not even tired!"

'I'd confidently bet 1,000 munny that you won't be awake by the time we get home.' "Regardless," Isa said, marching over to scoop him into his arms, "I'd rather Lea not have to deal with two cranky
Roxas pushed at him, trying to get down, and when Isa wouldn't let him, he crossed his arms and glared sulkily. Isa glared right back. Their staring contest lasted until Roxas finally yawned, and leaned to rest his head on Isa's shoulder. Isa shifted him until they were both more comfortable, and Roxas murmured, "I'm really glad you came today, Isa...me and Xion missed you lots."

'Why? You weren't here for very long before I arrived.' It was strange how clingy they were, as if even the shortest separations made them feel insecure....

"It's not...the same...without...y...."

Isa craned his head, trying to see the boy's face, and finally determined that he had, in fact, fallen asleep in mid-sentence. "Hmph...even you can be sweet sometimes...."

He suddenly stiffened when he heard Lea call from the nearby path, "C'mon, man."

"Did you hear what I just said?" Isa asked in a flat voice.

"Um...no."

"Good...."

"Let's go already!"

The evening was quiet as the two men walked side by side, Lea carrying Xion and Isa still carrying Roxas, both children drowsing in their arms. Lea glanced over at his friend to study him a moment before remarking, "So, you certainly seemed to be enjoying yourself today. That's the most I've seen you smile in...well, forever, really...."

"Yes...I suppose it was somewhat enjoyable...." He frowned and gave Lea a stern look. "Just don't expect it to happen all the time now. Once was enough for at least a few months."
"Come on, man," Lea chuckled. "You're killing me!" His expression softened a little. "Was today not enough to prove it to you?"

"Lea, you just don't understand."

"Well, I'm sorry for being stupid," Lea pouted, and Isa rolled his eyes. "Explain it to me, then."

Isa sighed heavily, glanced at Roxas to make sure he was too asleep to hear, then murmured, "I just... I can't escape from the things I did. Every time I look at them, I remember. I just fear that one day, I'll look into their eyes and see hatred. "It's like I'm trapped in the past, reliving it all with every touch and gesture, even just the sound of their voices. One day, Xion will remember all the crushing things I said to her...Roxas will recall the cruel battles I forced him to fight, the injuries he suffered from my own hands. I doubt he'll even tolerate my presence then, much less hold me like this as if he has complete trust in me....' "There's no reason for me to even come near them, it will do more harm than good. It's quite likely they would not accept any apologies I might try to make."

"Man, that is a load of crap."

Isa glared at him.

"Roxas and Xion hating you? You might have a lot of great qualities, but apparently common sense isn't one of them."

"Thanks," Isa said sourly.

"Roxas and Xion adore you. They love you, man, or did you not notice them getting all mopey when you weren't around, or how happy they got when you finally did deign to show up? And as for apologizing, avoiding them isn't exactly the best way to go about it."

"I suppose you're right," Isa grumbled.

"I know I'm right," Lea said with a grin. "Just be free and be yourself. The kids will love you all the more for it."
They walked on for a moment in silence, then Isa said softly, "Lea...thank you." He cleared his throat. "I'm glad I came with you all today."

"Yeah, me too." Lea grinned again. "Do you know how hard it is to keep an eye on two hyper toddlers?"

Isa shook his head, a small smile finally lightening his expression. "No, but I have the feeling you are going to tell me...."

"Definitely."

"Of course. Lea...one more thing."

"Yeah?"

There was a long pause. "Don't tell them anymore about that Santa Claus thing."

"Heh...s-sure...."

0.0.0

*Author's Notes:* If you don't know already, that's a reference to my running joke about Saïx having "Santaphobia," which you can read about in my fic *No Need to Hide* (among others).

Chapter End Notes

Here is Caxceber's comic:

http://caxceberxvi.deviantart.com/art/AkuSaiRokuShi-day-part1-390402665
http://caxceberxvi.deviantart.com/art/AkuSaiRokuShi-day-part2-390405137
http://caxceberxvi.deviantart.com/art/AkuSaiRokuShi-day-part3-390406595
Summary: Riku has never been the same since his descent into darkness. He won't take light for granted again. Platonic Sora/Riku.

A/N: ARGH, there's another (old, CatC-era) fic I really wanted to post first (it establishes my headcanon for Riku's family life), but this week was freaking busy and I was lucky to even get this fic posted in time. -- Well, I think all you really need to know is that his mom is an extraterrestrial with "living" hair. XD (I don't think I ever mentioned her name in this fic, but you FF7 fans can probably guess if you look at Riku's brothers. *wink*)

...Still. Looking down at the nightlight in his hands (he'd chosen the one shaped like Mickey Mouse...), Riku realized that he had plenty of pride left, after all. Enough to be ashamed. Enough to announce, with not-quite-concealed desperation, to the salesgirl ringing up his purchase that he was buying the thing "for my little brother. He's scared of the dark. We thought it might help."

"Aw, poor thing," she'd said with a sympathetic smile. "Tell him there's nothing to be afraid of as long as you've got a light to chase the shadows away!"

"Yeah... Yeah, I'll...tell him...."

In any case, he DEFINITELY could not let Kadaj and the others find out about this. He had to sneak it in somehow and be careful, make sure his door was always locked when he was sleeping,
curtains closed, the light hidden away during the daytime....

It didn't work. "You have a nightlight?!" they'd shrieked with glee when they found out.

"Mother! Riku sleeps with a nightlight!"

"Heh, you're such a baby. Well, come on, baby, we can't have a wimp like you for a brother. Time to toughen you up."

Riku could take everything else. He was a Keyblade wielder, after all. He had defeated Lexaeus, Zexion, Roxas, Xemnas. His brothers didn't always win their play-battles; Riku sometimes even enjoyed the sparring.

At night, though...when it was the dark that was his enemy...that was a different story.

Smothering, choking, pressing on his chest so he couldn't breathe, hands and feet refusing to obey him, suffocated in his own body when he couldn't even look in the direction he wanted, hands lifted, doing such terrible things until he just wanted to sleep and not have to see it, not have to be him anymore, except he already wasn't. He himself was this cruel person with the taunting smile who told his best friend, the person he loved most, "You'll not find even the smallest glimmer of light...."

Kadaj had stolen the light again. Riku stared up at the ceiling, paralyzed. He knew where he was now, knew he was just in his room, back on the Islands that had been so miraculously restored. But...Ansem wasn't gone...he could still feel him, that oily darkness, stifling and poisoning him from within so that he couldn't move, could only lie here and wait.

The light always helped. When the sun would finally come shining through the window, it didn't matter whether Mickey was glowing or not, the sunlight was always strong enough to chase the shadows away.

This morning was different, though. This morning, it was raining.

Riku lay there, listening to the rain beating the house, eyes fixed on the dark window. The sun now was just as smothered as he was. Mickey was gone.
No light...none at all...nothing to lead him out of the darkness....

"Riku!" Mother was storming in. "I've been calling you!"

He licked dry lips. "I need the light."

"That's why I've been calling you, fool," she snapped. "Get out of bed, you're late for school."

Riku's eyes flicked to the clock, even though he already knew that the display was dead. For the first time, an explanation occurred to him. "The power went out...?"

"Get up."

Her hair coiled around his wrists and arms, then tightened, pulling him upright. He hung for a moment like a puppet at the mercy of its master as she studied him, and he tried and failed to muster up enough strength to resist, to stand on his own feet.

"You can't be ill," she growled. "My children are Perfect."

"I need the light," he whispered. "Please."

"Shut up. I didn't make you to be so pathetic. Get out there and make yourself useful, you've already failed me enough."

The old argument was the least thing he was interested in right now. "T...Tell...Tell Kadaj--"

She dropped him and left.

Riku curled up with his back pressed to the wall and was miserable. *You're not going to be trapped here forever...you're not even trapped...you're fine, Riku, so just get up, get up, get up and act normal, come on, it's not hard, just pull yourself up and put one foot on the floor and stand up*
He woke from his doze when the door flew open again, he wasn't sure how long later. "Morning, Riku!"

Not Kadaj or the others. Sora...?

"Aw, Riku." Sora came and actually bounced onto the bed like a little kid, peering at Riku's face intently (not that he could see anything through the thick shield of bangs). "You never showed up at the bus stop. Is the weather getting you down?"

"You could say that...."

"Well, it's okay, Riku!" Bounce, bounce, bounce. Seriously, how old was he, four? "I found a raincoat and an umbrella and some galoshes for you! Heh, 'galoshes' is a fun word, isn't it? Say it three times fast."

"I don't have a problem with the rain...." Just the clouds.

"Aw, you're not sick, are you?"

"Not really...."

"How come you're talking like that?"

"Huh?"

"All sleepy and depressed. Are you sleepy and depressed?"

Riku couldn't help a smile then. Just a small one. "I'll be fine in a little while." When the rain stopped, and the clouds cleared.
"How long is 'a little while'?"

"I don't know...."

"Are you gonna skip school?"

"...Mother won't like that."

Sora chuckled a little. "She doesn't like a lot of things."

'Including me.' "Including you. How'd you get in, anyway?"

"Gave Loz a cookie and told Yazoo he missed a spot and promised Kadaj a boss battle later," Sora said airily. "Your mom didn't care I was here when I said I was taking you to school."

"So you came to pick me up?" Riku said in mild amusement.

Sora laughed sheepishly. "That makes you sound like a little kid, doesn't it."

"You're one to talk." That smile...it was captivating. Sora could be a clueless, childish idiot, yet he was kind and loyal and innocent and had always seemed to shine far brighter than any nightlight. Riku sat up. "Just give me a minute, I need to get dressed and find my homework."

"Got you covered for breakfast, too." Sora plopped a bag of cinnamon rolls on the bedside table.

"Heh. So healthy and filling. You're such a responsible nanny."

"Hey, cinnamon rolls are good!"
"They *taste* good. There's a difference."

"You don't want any?" Sora pouted.

Riku had to smile again. "I never said that."

"So I *did* do good!"

"Sora."

"Yeah?"

"...Thanks for coming after me."

That brilliant smile again. "Of course, Riku. I'll always come for you."

'You really mean it, don't you.' "Yeah." It occurred to him that he ought to say it out loud. "Same here, you know. I'll always be there when you need me."

Sora laughed. "Well, *duh.*"

What? "Oh, you're so certain of that, after...after that whole mess?" The one that had left him with this tormenting darkness. Riku made his voice teasing, but he was anxious to know.

"You've always been my best friend, Riku." Sora laughed a little. "Even when you were being mean and stupid, I knew I couldn't give up on you. And you came through in the end, right?" That smile would never get old. "When I needed you most. The first time, and then all the times after that. You came through for us. Of course we'll always do the same!"

'It's true, isn't it...I'm not always a failure...at least, not to Sora....' "Man, how'd we get from cinnamon rolls to pledges of eternal loyalty?"
"What? I dunno!" Sora picked up a roll, grinning. "How about we pledge eternal loyalty with
 cinnamon rolls?"

"You're so ridiculous..." Just the kind of thing he needed, though. Riku made it to school that day
only a little bit late, and it didn't feel so dark under the clouds when he was walking beside
someone so full of light.

0.o.0

Author's Notes: I love Sora/Riku in canon, but the yaoi fans turn me off from it and I'm not really
interested in SoRiku in fandom, even platonic. Still, I wanted to write something for Sora/Riku
Day, and now that I'm combining that with Medli45's fic (sorry, Medli!), I also want to eventually
write a SoRiku for the This Kind of Love series. It's difficult to come up with SoRiku plot bunnies,
though. *sweatdrop*

Medli helped by recommending some fics and stuff for inspiration; the one that directly inspired
this story was "The white side of Black" by deeJuusan on devART. (It's like a little side-comic for
the series "Grey is...", which is available on deeJuusan's devART profile.) For you people on
MMO and dA, the URL is here: http://deeuusan.deviantart.com/art/The-white-side-of-Black-170132118 :)
Seventy-eight {Axel, Lea, & Isa}

Seventy-eight

(rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

**Summary:** What if Axel and Saïx had ever been able to meet their teenage selves? Platonic AkuSai/LeaIsa (plus a bit of Roxas & Xion) fic as my 78th story on FFN.

**A/N:** Instead of working on the TONS of other stuff I should actually have been working on, both fandom- and RL-related, R.girl instead chose to draft a random AkuSai fic on a whim because I realized it would be my 78th story on FFN. XD (Well, at least according to the number on my FFN profile. There are several factors that make this not my 78th story at all, but whatever. *sweatdrop* Lol, I had a couple of other plot bunnies for this, so I'm gonna try to write one of them for "Eighty-seven." XD)

I already used the time travel idea in *The Other Side of Memory*, and I'm almost certain I'm going to use it again, so I didn't bother to explain it this time because I know it's already old. Just think of it as a "What if?" scenario and don't worry about the mechanics. ^~;

0.0.0

Axel was wandering around the castle of Hollow Bastion in boredom, on a recon mission, when two teenagers came sprawling out of nowhere to land at his feet.

"Oh," Axel said. "I forgot about that."

The boys blinked up at him for a minute, then scrambled upright.

"Who are you?" Lea demanded.

"It's you," Isa said faintly.
"Huh?"

"It's you, idiot! Look at him, he's you, just ten years older."

"I don't look anything like that!"

"Wow," Axel said. "I really was an idiot."

"I know, right?" Isa said. He and Axel grinned at each other, in a moment of camaraderie that felt very strange to both.

Lea saw it. "Hey! Back off, he's mine!"

Axel raised an eyebrow.

"Not like that! You know what I mean!"

"Hey," Isa suddenly said. "Where's me?"

Axel's expression darkened, and he stalked past them.

There was a flurry of muttered conversation, and then Axel could hear the boys scrambling to catch up. "Hey," Lea said sharply, "Isa asked you a question."

"So?"

Isa hurried around in front of him and put out a hand to shove him back. "Where am I, Lea?"

"My name's not Lea anymore," he said shortly. "It's Axel, get it memorized. And Isa's dead." He stalked on. Then he slowed down and looked back, wishing he hadn't said it like that.
Isa just stood there, gazing off into the distance with an unreadable expression. Lea was staring at him in horror. He started to raise his hand in a stunned, helpless sort of desperation, but then whirled before touching his friend, running to Axel and seizing his coat to shake him. "Why didn't you save him?!" he shouted. "Why didn't you save him?! You suck! I hate you!"

"Okay, whoa, whoa, hold on, I said it wrong."

"WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?!"

"Hey." Axel fought free of his teenage self and went back to Isa. He slowed down as he approached, hesitated, and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Isa. You're not technically dead, I'm sorry for saying it like that. I'm just...angry at you."

Isa glared at him.

"I'm angry," Axel whispered in awe, lifting his hands to look at them. "Man, you kids...are like magic, or something...."

"Stop being creepy!" Lea yelled, hurling a Frisbee.

"Ow!"

"You know what, I hate you! I'm never gonna be you!"

"You hit me in the head with a freaking Frisbee!"

"Get away from him, Isa! He's a loser!"

But Isa was looking back and forth between them, frowning. "What are you talking about, Axel?"

Axel looked at them for a while without speaking. Then he sighed. "Boys, it's been ten years. It's
"...Was it my fault?" Isa asked.

"Flaming pants, don't look at me like that.... You both are idiots, okay? You both are too stupid to live." Their twin glares made him smile. "Isa...stop making me miss you...I liked it better when I didn't care about you anymore."

Lea threw a Frisbee at his head again.

This particular recon mission became anything but boring. Axel found himself missing his Keybearers - he had never fully appreciated until now their tendency to trot after him like ducklings. Lea and Isa, it seemed, were constantly disappearing or getting sidetracked, and he had to drag them out of danger several times. "For the last time, Heartless are not Pokémon! They'll suck out your heart and turn you into an emotionless husk; leave them alone!"

"Who made you an expert?"

"Lea, I think we should listen to him...."

Axel was also short a weapon, since Lea fell in love with his chakrams and insisted on dragging one of them around. Even though he could barely lift it. "Sooooo sweet," the kid said admiringly, poking at one of the spikes. "Look, Isa! I bet I can make it catch on fire like Axel does."

"No, you can't," Axel said in exasperation, "only Nobodies have-- Whoa!" The chakram had burst into flame. "Dang it, put that away, you little--!" He stopped as he realized that he was about to call his younger self a 'hooligan.'

Lea grinned and slipped the lighter back into his pocket.

"Axel's are still cooler," Isa teased.

"Hey! I bet I can hit that window from here."
"Don't--"

The fire wheel, which would have come far short of its target anyway, bounced off one of the swarm of Heartless that was in the process of materializing.

"Huh." Axel scratched his head. "You actually knocked off some HP, nice...."

"What's HP?"

It was exhausting, trying to keep them out of trouble, finish his mission, and explain the essentials to them all at the same time.

"Wait, so if you're not supposed to be able to feel anything, how can you be mad at me?"

"Did you get the tats before or after you became a bad guy?"

"How much of a tradeoff do you consider there to be between the loss of emotion and the acquirement of these powers of yours?"

"Do they have school in this Organization thing?"

"How high is my salary as second-in-command?"

"Are there any hot chicks there?"

"Do you have missions like this every day?"

"Can you set other stuff on fire, too?"
"FLAMING PANTS JUST SHUT UP UNTIL WE RTC," Axel finally yelled.

"What's 'RTC'?

It was awkward, waltzing into the Grey Area to check in with Saïx while having these particular two teenagers nearly stepping on his heels, trying to keep close to him as they huddled miserably together under his coat.

"I'm never using one of those dark corridor things again," Lea announced, throwing off the coat once they were safely out. "You guys should figure out how to teleport."

Isa just stood there, wrapped in Axel's coat and shivering a little.

"What is this?" Saïx said coldly.

"You don't remember?"

Saïx studied the boys, and Lea frowned. "Hey, you look like...."

"This," Axel said, clapping a hand on Number VII's shoulder, "is Saïx, the Luna Diviner, who forgot how to smile about four years ago and likes to spend all his time thinking up ways to make our lives miserable."

"Flaming pants, Isa, it's you!" Lea shouted. "Dang, you got ugly!"

Axel didn't like the look on Saïx's face, like he was evaluating an annoying insect. "It's me and you," he said forcefully. "When we time traveled. It's us, Sai-- Isa. Don't look at them like that."

Saïx took two steps. He and Isa locked eyes for a long moment - Saïx's face remained impassive, Isa looked horrified. Then the boy suddenly whirled and began heading for the room's only door.

"Isa! Where are you going?" Lea bounded after him. "What's up with you?"
"That's not me," Isa said in a frantic mutter, "that's not me, that's not me, that's not--"

Lea smacked him, only half-gently. "Hey, snap out of it." He studied him, frowning. "What the heck, you've got goosebumps."

"There's something...wrong with hi--"

Both of them were startled when Saïx was suddenly there, jerking his younger self away. The coat around Isa's shoulders slipped to the floor. "Silence on this matter."

"Let go of me!"

"Let go of him!"

The three of them struggled for a moment, then Isa staggered free as Lea pressed his advantage, hitting Saïx hard, yet looking pathetic, a skinny fourteen-year-old beating his fists against a man who was older, bigger, and had magical powers. Saïx was warding him off with a raised arm, eyes narrowed, weapon materializing in his other hand.

"Hey!" Axel lunged to shield the boys with a chakram. "What do you think you're doing!"

"These children are a nuisance and have no place here."

"So what exactly were you planning to do about it?" Axel shouted, stabbing a finger at the claymore. "That thing isn't designed for light damage, you freaking--!"

The look on Saïx's face. That calculating expression as he glanced at Lea - Axel realized that he was deciding whether or not to kill him. "Flaming--"

Lea seized Isa's arm and the two of them ran for cover, hiding just outside the threshold but unable to tear themselves away as they watched the fight in horrified fascination.
"Look at them go," Lea said in awe.

"No one learns how to fight that well without practice," Isa murmured. "I doubt our lives in the interim was easy or pleasant...."

Lea frowned. "Forget that, why are we fighting each other?"

"But he looks just like--"

"I don't care what he looks like, that's not me. You saw his eyes - Axel was right, he's dead inside, I'm dead, Lea, I'm dead--"

"Shut up," Lea hissed. "You're fine. I'm gonna make sure you're fine, I'm not gonna let anything bad happen to you."

"You really are stupid; look at them. It's already happened. We can't stop it because it happens, otherwise we would have never seen it--"

"Shut up! I'm not letting you turn into that creep!"

The room was a mess. Furniture, walls, and floor torn and singed, as Axel hurled fire and weapons at his opponent and tried to elude the claymore's heavy blows.

"Man, Isa, you're a jerk," Lea remarked as they watched Axel get caught by a strike.

"Lea," Isa said quietly. "Don't hold back."

Lea clenched his fists, a pained expression crossing his face. "You know, I probably won't.... Dang, you're strong."
"You're so fast...."

"Geez, just look at you, humongous icicle to the face and you barely even flinched--"

"Practice more, Lea. Don't be lazy about this, too; you have to get better than me."

Lea winced as Axel cried out in pain. "Um, yeah. Yeah, I'm not arguing, nope."

They both caught their breaths when Axel threw the chakrams again and managed to pin Saïx to the wall. For a second, it looked as if the fight was over - but then Saïx raised his head, eyes beginning to disappear in a gold glow. "Moon...shine down!"

"Don't even try it!" Axel shouted. "Thunder!"

Isa turned away from the sight of his older self's body spasming in the wake of the resulting jolt. "Let's go."

"But I wanna see--"

"Let's go. I'm not watching anymore."

However, they both turned back at the sound of a dark corridor opening. A burly man with long black hair stepped out of it, and then a small spiky-haired boy about their own age, whom they both recognized.

"Hey, isn't that--?"

"What on earth is going on here?" Number III thundered, summoning several lances.

"Axel," the kid cried, "what's happening?"
As Axel and Saïx glared at each other, the berserker's eyes slowly faded. He contemptuously jerked his remaining arm free and raised it to open a dark corridor. "You're an impetuous fool," he told Axel coldly. "I was merely considering the option. If you'd had just a few more moments of patience, you would have found there to be too many factors in your favor."

"Oh, thanks SO MUCH for deciding I'm worth more to you alive than dead," Axel snarled.

Saïx disappeared with no acknowledgement that he had heard.

The spiky-haired kid ran up to the redhead in confused concern. "Axel, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Rox," Axel sighed. "You got a spare Elixir, or a Hi-Potion or anything?" The boy immediately handed one over.

"What was the meaning of all that?" Xaldin demanded.

"Who cares. Get the Dusks to clean up, I'm getting dinner and going to bed."

Xaldin's eyes moved to the boys in the doorway. "Who are they?"

"Couple of idiots too stupid to live," Axel said, passing by them without a glance.

"Hey!" Lea yelled, scrambling after him, "Don't blame me for your stupid choices!"

Axel stopped short and rounded on him. "Oh, and who's the one who thought it was sooooo important to keep sneaking into the castle and snoop through all those notes and not listen to him--" pointing at Isa "--when he told you it was a bad idea and you should've waited 'til the delivery came--"

Isa's face paled. "It really went that badly?"

Axel snorted. "Too late to do anything about it now."
"It's not my fault!" Lea shouted.

"Whatever."

Number XIII was studying the newcomers with a frown. "You guys kind of look like Axel and Saïx. Except little. And your hair's short. And you don't have stuff on your face--"

"Hey! I'm not little!" Lea grinned. "Heh. I told you I'd see you when I see you, right?"

"Huh?"

Axel gasped a little and hurried back, slinging an arm around his friend's shoulders. "HA HA HA, guys, let me introduce you to my friend, ROXAS, who you've never seen before in your life. Rox, the idiot redhead is Lea and the other one is Isa. I guess they'll be hanging out with us tonight."

"We will?" Isa said warily.

"Sure. Whatever, I don't care."

"They're not your friends, are they?" Roxas said suspiciously.

"Rox, it's possible to have lots of friends, you know."

"Really?!"

Lea and Isa stared at him. "You said your name is Roxas?" Lea said.

Axel grinned a little. "Go easy on him, okay? He's fun, but I like him, so I'll be mad if you troll him too much."
"Wouldn't dream of it," Lea purred.

"I'm not exactly in the mood for trolling at the moment," Isa muttered.

"What are you all talking about?" Roxas said in annoyance.

They went to the kitchen to put together something for dinner, and Roxas kept forgetting to help, so amazed was he. He practically hung over Isa's shoulder, watching him chop up vegetables for salad.

"Can you not lean on me like that?" Isa said, irritated.

"How do you cut them so fast?! Look, Axel! The pieces are all the same size."

"Please can I hug him?" Lea begged again.

"No, he's my Cute Thing. Get your own."

"Hey, I AM you! And besides, Isa never lets me keep them."

"Because doing so would be illegal in many cases, and your mother would object in all the others," Isa said dryly.

"Stop talking about things I don't understand!" Roxas yelled.

Axel went to ruffle his hair in a soothing way. "Don't be jealous, kiddo. They'll be gone soon."

"What's 'jealous'?"

"It's not fair that you get that stuff all to yourself!" Lea yelled.
"Lea," Isag ordered, "the oven should be hot enough by now, go put the pans in. Roxas, wash the bowls. Axel, act your age and do something useful."

"Hey, where do you get off bossing me around?"

"Well, my future self's not around to do it...." A little to their surprise, Axel stopped protesting and went to wipe the counter.

Another small person in a black coat walked in while the meat was cooking. "Hi, Axel. Xaldin said you were in here. I couldn't find Saïx, so I hope he knows I checked in...."

"That's Saïx," Roxas said, pointing. "I think. But I don't know if he has the clipboard."

"I'm not Saïx," Isag said firmly. "And I don't have 'the clipboard,' whatever that is."

"He's Isag," Lea said, "and I'm Lea. And you're...?"

The figure lowered its hood and smiled. "I'm--"

"Ohhhh!" Lea exclaimed. "I didn't know you guys were twins, man."

"Hello, Ventus," Isag said.

"What, what?!" Axel cried. "Guys, this is Xion."

"They're triplets?!"

"What are you talking about?!"
Xion frowned. "I don't get it."

"Lea and Isa are really confusing," Roxas said, "and Axel is, too, when he's talking to them. Just ignore them."

"Okay."

"Roxas, I understand," Axel was saying to the other two boys, "but hel-lo, Xion? Black hair, girly-girl?"

"She's a girl?!!"

Axel knocked his younger self upside the head. "Geez, I know you're rude, but there's a limit, you know...."

"Dude! Where IS Ventus, then, if no one here is him!"

"I saved you some cucumber slices, Xion," Roxas said, holding them out.

"Thank you, Roxas."

"Isa is a good cutter. Look, hold them together on the side."

"Oooh! They're the same size!"

"I know! It's cool, right?"

"They're like vegetable cookies," Xion said, putting one in her mouth.

Now Isa was the one staring. "I don't collect Cute Things," he seemed to feel obligated to announce.
"Never too late to start," said Lea.

"Hey," Axel warned, "hands off, they're both mine."

"So not fair, man."

"I think maybe it's like a different language," Roxas remarked. "Like Axelese."

"Axeleaisease," Xion tried, and they both giggled.

"Maybe if we keep pretending we don't care, he'll want to show off and finally explain everything to us."

"Good idea."

"You guys wound me," Axel said, in a tone of mixed reproach and amusement.

"Do you want a vegetable cookie, Axel?"

"They're just cucumbers," Isa said in mild exasperation.

When the food was ready, Axel, wanting to avoid annoying questions in the dining room, brought all the kids along to eat in his room. Lea and Isa handled the corridors better when properly dressed in a couple of Zexion's old coats, and their meals managed to survive the journey mostly intact. They all took turns with a fighting game two at a time as the other ones watched, then when most of them finished eating, the kids all played a racing game together as Axel lounged beside them with a PSP. He spent a lot of time paused, though, listening to their arguments in amusement.

"That was mine, Isa!"

"I suppose Axel usually goes easy on you, but be assured that I will not scruple to seize any
advantage."

"Scruple?"

"What does that even mean?"

"It's Isa-talk for 'I'mma dazzle you with fancy vocab so you think I'm smarter than I actually am.' Let's triple-team him."

"Yeah!"

"Lea! How is that fair?!"

"Scared you'll lose, Isa?"

"Against you and a couple of puppies? I think not."

Axel watched the four of them far more than he did the PSP screen, fascinated by the sight of them laughing together as if they didn't have a care in the world. His chest hurt, the space that was supposed to be empty. 'I miss you, Isa,' he thought. What had happened to him, that boy with the playful smirk who had always been an irreplaceable half of their perfect team? 'Just when I thought I'd locked you out, when I thought I'd finally washed my hands of Saïx and can get on with my life, you come here and remind me why I can't stop trying...why I can't stand seeing your face every day with someone else's eyes glaring at me like I'm worthless...'

Xion was the first to quit, giving her controller to Axel and snuggling next to Roxas so she could fall asleep comfortably. As if her condition influenced him, Roxas nodded off pretty soon after that. Lea crowed in victory, was shushed by Axel, and looked over to find the Keybearers fast asleep against each other. "Heh...they really are like puppies, aren't they...."

"Still at it even ten years later, hm? I can see why you like them," Isa said dryly.

"Do you really both see her as Ven?" Axel said in curiosity.
"Yup. Only way I can tell 'em apart is that Roxas is the one with the coat."

"You know, that kind of explains some things...." Axel shook his head. "More snooping through research notes to procrastinate on, yay."

Isa had set down his own controller and was stretching. "They're not the only ones who have had enough for the day. You two can continue without me."

"Awesome. Night Howler, Team Mode?" Lea said as he glanced at Axel, flapping the case invitingly.

"I dunno...today was kinda rough, I think I'll quit, too." Axel gestured at the TV. "All yours."

"Ah, you guys are no fun." Lea flipped through the other games and stuck an RPG into the console.

"Axel?" Isa said.

"Hm?"

"You said that you people in this Organization don't have hearts."

"Yeah."

"You said that you basically fake emotions based on your memories."

"Yeah," Axel said again, more wary this time.

Isa leaned his chin on his hand, gazing at him thoughtfully. "It doesn't really make sense, though. You're obviously quite fond of those two...I can't bring myself to believe that it's just an act."
Axel sighed and lay down, propping his hands behind his head. "I dunno...they kinda remind me of my brother and sister, I guess."

Lea was apparently very fixated on the screen.

"It just...it's just nice having kids around again, you know?"

"But if you really have no emotions, then why would you care about faking them? What good does it do you?"

"I dunno...it'd be so boring...."

"That's the thing - can you even get bored? If you have no emotion, you shouldn't be able to feel bored, right?"

"Isa," Axel said to the ceiling, "you're really gonna wanna keep this can of worms closed."

"Those two, then; the ones you say aren't Ventus. They're too stupid to fake emotions the way you do."

"Hey!"

"It's true," Lea laughed. "They're like little kids. Little kids can't act."

"Lea's right. Every time they were surprised, every time they laughed or interrupted someone or were frustrated - don't tell me that wasn't real, Axel."

".....Roxas and Xion are special, all right?"

"Yeah, we know," Lea chuckled.
"I mean they're special Nobodies, okay? Don't tell any of the other freaks in this Organization, but...Rox and Xi...they're not...normal. Okay? They weren't born the same way we were. They're just...they're weird. I don't know if they've got hearts or what, I don't know, but...they can feel." He sighed. "You're right, they are too clueless to fake it, and I've...been thinking about it for a while, and I can't think of any other explanation. They're different than the rest of us." He frowned and turned his head to face them. "But that's just them, okay?"

"Not you," Isa said, looking unimpressed.

"That's right."

"So you, with your emotionless husk and inability to feel, can still somehow magically get angry at me because?"

"Are you still thinking about that? Forget it, Isa; I didn't mean it."

Lea paused the game and turned around. "Quit lying. You can lie to everyone else, but you tell us everything."

Axel grinned at him. "Why should I? You two don't even belong here. I don't have anyone I need to be honest with anymore." He wasn't expecting both of them to suddenly get up and move right next to him. He sat up quickly.

"What happened to Isa?" Lea demanded. "How'd he turn into that?"

"...I don't know, man. One day we're buddies like we've always been, next day he's waking up sick with those freaking creepy eyes, and he was still my friend for a while, but ever since then it's been...one betrayal after another.... I mean, yeah, it took a long time, but it's been years now and it was like he was dying slowly, and now he's dead. Stopped laughing, stopped smiling, stopped caring about anything except that freaking Kingdom Hearts, stopped having time for me, stopped giving a flip about what I do unless I'm getting in his way or he wants yet another favor he'll never repay...."

Isa's fists were clenched, and Lea looked like he wanted to hit someone. "Isa wouldn't do that."
"I wouldn't...do that," Isa echoed, though more uncertainly. "Not to you, Lea. Axel. Lea. You're my best friend. We agreed."

Axel smiled. "I told you, kiddo. Ten years is a long time. Things change."

"Not this!" Lea burst out. "We're always gonna be best friends! Always!"

"Yeah. We're GREAT friends now. And just so you know, this afternoon was not the first time he's tried to kill me."

"Something's wrong," Lea said fiercely. "I bet that's not even Isa. I bet that's some kind of android clone, and they've got the real Isa locked up or something, or--"

"Or dead," Isa said flatly. Lea shoved him.

"You are not dead."

Axel was watching them thoughtfully. "Man this is weird, watching you two." He sighed. "I miss that...why can't I have it back...?"

They watched him back. "You really miss me?" Isa said softly.

"Are you kidding? What you two have, what I used to have, I'd give almost anything to get it back again. I'm not the one who changed, Isa."

Isa swallowed. "I want to promise I'll never betray you...I want to, Axel. But obviously I did. I don't know what went wrong, and I don't know how to change it. But I just...I just can't imagine I'd be happy about it. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I'll do anything I can to stop it."

Lea reached out to grasp his sleeve and Axel's. "I'm never gonna give up on you. Okay? You hear that, future-me, we're NOT GIVING UP, I don't care what happens, we made a promise and we're always gonna be best friends. We're not gonna let it win, that darkness of the heart crap or whatever it is."
Axel chuckled. "Loooots easier to say than it actually is to do, Lea." He shook his head a little, smiling. "But okay. Fine. I won't give up." He met Isa's eyes again. The boy seemed mostly composed, though he was a little pale. "You hear that, Isa? I won't give up on you after all, okay?"

"Never," Lea said forcefully.

Isa gave them a small smile. "Thank you."

"You sound like you don't believe us," Axel observed.

"It looks as if I don't deserve your efforts, I'm not going to hold you to such an obligation...."

Axel frowned. Now he almost felt annoyed. "I don't break my promises, Isa. I said I'm not giving up, and I won't." 'No matter what it takes, Isa. I'm going to see the real you again.'

"See?" Lea said. "Now future-me promised, too. Don't worry, Isa."

Isa set a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Thank you, Lea." This time, he sounded like he meant it.

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Author's Notes: I may have missed BOTH of my OTP's Pairing Days and Christmas, but now I finally get to celebrate them, yaaaaayyyy! (Lol, as if I don't write them enough in non-special-day fics. XD)

OOCness again, this time because DaysRoxas is so freaking cute, I couldn't resist channeling too much of my fangirling to Axel and Lea. And there really shouldn't have been any hint of IsaShi at all. *sweatdrop* (Unless maybe it's Saïx who's immune to cuteness, whereas Isa still has a small weakness for it...? Maybe? I don't really like that idea, though....)

Anyway. Yay for random AkuSai. *sweatdrop*
Something to Contribute {Namine}

Something to Contribute

(rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

2012 Christmas gift for Mirae-no-sekai

Summary: Well, at least ONE person is interested. Attempted ZekuNami.

A/N: Takes place during a theoretical KH3.

I thought that keeping the Nobody names of the lower members would sound less weird than making up Somebody names for them. ^^-;

0.0.0

Some of them were just indifferent.

"Hm?" Lea murmured, indulgent but distracted.

"I...I mean, it's not that impressive...especially compared to all of you...but I just--"

"ROXAS! What are you, blind?" he yelled, laughing, watching Isa score a hit in the training ring.

"Lay off, my shortcuts are messed up!" Roxas yelled back in irritation, downing a Hi-Potion as Xion distracted the former Luna Diviner.

Lea suddenly blinked and glanced over at Naminé. "What were you saying?"
"Umm...nothing."

She knew she had just caught him at a bad time. No doubt he'd be more attentive when his best friends weren't being interesting. ...Still, she couldn't muster up the courage to bring it up again. It was so dull compared to their powers, their strengths; she was always, always going to be the weakest one....

o.o.o

"What's that mean?" Roxas said dubiously when she mentioned it to him.

"Um...well, it's-- I can-- Um...."

"So you can fight like us now?"

"No, not like you," she said quickly. "I'm still a...." What was that word? "I'm a, um, civilian. I just...thought it would...."

He shifted restlessly from foot to foot. "Well, I'm meeting up with Axel and Xion and Saïx for ice cream, so I'll see you later, okay?"

"...Okay, Roxas." A deep breath. "Have fun." She watched him wave a hand carelessly and walk away.

o.o.o

"Oh!" Xion exclaimed, vaguely happy. "That's great, Naminé!"

Then they just stood there awkwardly for a while.

"I...." Naminé couldn't think of anything to say.
"Well...um, that's great. Have you told the others?"

"Yes...." Did that count as a lie? "Sort of...."

"Oh. Well, that's cool."

"...."

"...You want some ice cream, Naminé?"

"Yes, thank you."

.o.o.o

Sora made her feel the worst, with his widened eyes and the change in his breathing. "Y-- Oh...um, so you...like, you can do...more stuff to people...."

Horrified realization. "Oh! N-No, nothing like that, I mean, I can, I just, it's not, I haven't really--"

Determined swallow, brave smile. "I'm happy for you, Naminé. It's cool getting new powers, isn't it? Just - this time, can you maybe tell Riku or Kairi or Donald or Goofy or Jiminy if you, you know, change me again? I'd just...I'd just kinda like someone to still know the real me...."

It was all she could do to whisper the words, "I'd never hurt you, ever again," before she had to run, before he could see her cry.

.o.o.o

Others were worse than indifferent.

"Oh, splendid," Isa said sarcastically. "So not only do we now have a legion of over-exuberant
children constantly running underfoot, but now we get to experience their adolescent daydreams in three dimensions, with full color and sound. If you, too, hold any attachment whatsoever to Those Books, I warn you: rather than suffer any physical manifestation of their contents, I would seriously consider returning to the new Organization."

"I don't like Twilight," was all she managed to say. Which was a lie, but she couldn't do any better when facing the man who was every bit as intimidating as he had been when still the Luna Diviner.

"Aw, does the widdle doll have a talent now?" Larxene had later scoffed. "Besides wrecking people's most precious memories, that is? I'd say it'd better be more impressive than your pathetic sketches, but, heh, it'd be impossible for anything to be worse."

Naminé dared tell no one else, now. Always doomed to be the weak link, the one who was always falling behind, always targeted, always needing to be rescued, she kept quiet and kept her head down and sketched more than ever. If she could help at all, even just a little bit...the extra vines in the undergrowth that caused Lea's opponent to stumble, a Frisbee coming out of "nowhere" to catch Isa's off guard, a pair of unfurling wings to carry Roxas when he fell, a copied image of Xion that was mistaken for her, a starburst to illuminate the darkness surrounding Sora....

None of them realized what it was at first. "It seems that Lady Luck is on our side," Luxord had mused at one point.

"I bet it's fairies," Demyx joked once, strumming on his sitar. "Let's feed 'em candy and see if they'll do the dishes and the laundry, too."

"I think someone's helping us," Sora guessed happily. "Like you used to do, Riku."

"An ally hidden in the shadows," Isa had grumbled. "I hesitate to trust one who will not show his face...."

It was Even who figured it out first. "Naminé," he'd ordered, "stay out of the next battle. We're
sending you to Wonderland with Demyx for recon."

She had been dismayed. "But--!"

"Dude!" Demyx's yelp interrupted, "You're arguing about recon?"

"Do as Even says," Isa had ordered brusquely. "We don't need you getting in the way yet again."

"Hey," Xion had said with a warning frown, putting her arm protectively around Naminé.

"Isa, do we need to have the Be Nice To My Cute Things talk again?" Lea had threatened, earning an eyeroll.

"What are your 'Cute Things'?" was Roxas's suspicious inquiry.

In any case, Naminé had done as she was told, and was horrified to come back and find Sora laughing sheepishly as Riku poured Elixir over his wounds, Roxas ill from the dark corridors after having tried to pass through them with a coat that had been torn to shreds, Kairi in a coma from trying so hard to maintain the Shield of Light, and Isa in bad shape from his latest brush with Xehanort's darkness.

"I should have been here," she'd said tearfully. "I should have--"

"You were following orders," Even snapped. "You did well. Now shut up."

"Professor," Ienzo had said then, a little reproachfully. "Just because the experiment was successful doesn't mean it hasn't taken a toll." His expression had softened as he turned to the girl. "It's not your fault, Naminé."

"If I'd just been here...."

"Come eat," Aeleus had said, leading her gently but firmly away. "You need to rest, as well."
"Hey, I was on that mission, too," Demyx had reminded them, and got sent off to take care of some errands at the synthesis shop in response.

They kept her out of three battles total. Disastrous ones, where people would have died if not for King Mickey. Naminé, unable to sleep, heard Even's and Ienzo's arguing voices late into the night, muffled by the walls, and the next morning, she was told to accompany the party on their next mission.

"Ienzo will be your guard."

"Yes," she said meekly.

"I'll make sure you're safe, Naminé," he assured her.

She finally looked up at him and found herself just...gazing for a while. At his soft, serious expression, a look that left no doubt in her heart that he genuinely cared about her. "Thank you, Ienzo," she said, her voice stronger.

"It will be a pleasure."

o.o.o

'How can it be, though?' she thought as she stared at him now, horror threatening to choke her. She couldn't move because his body was pinning her to the floor, but after a moment, he sucked in a pained breath and managed to lift himself up a little, resting more of his weight on his hands. "Nami...né...."

"Potion, I need a Potion," she said frantically. "I-Ienzo, in your pockets, your backpack, do you have--?" She was already searching, hands moving over him in a way that would have made her blush if she wasn't too panicked to notice, but he whispered "Cura," and then fell to the side with a sigh of relief.

"Ienzo!"
"I'm all right...."

"You're so pale," she said, pressing her hand to his face.

"The Cura spell causes a gradual increase in HP over time, I'll be perfectly all right in a few minutes...."

"You ran out of Cure spells?" she said anxiously.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"And Ethers...?"

"Calm yourself, Naminé. Your friends are doing their jobs."

Roxas and Xion were, indeed, fighting fiercely to keep a charmed circle free around them, the line of last defense against anything that happened to get past Lea, Isa, Marluxia, and Larxene farther out. If they could just buy enough time for Sora and Riku to get to Xehanort....

"But your back," she whispered. "It must hurt so much...." Ienzo's defenses had been specialized against lightning magic, which was different than what he had actually been hit with. The attack had burned through his coat and the shirt beneath, leaving a large, ugly wound on the flesh itself.

"It looks worse than it feels."

She didn't want to accuse someone of lying, but....

"It's already healing, see?"

Yes, but so slowly...he hadn't even tried to get up yet.
"That attack was aimed at me."

"You know it's my job to shield you from exactly that sort of thing."

"I just..." Couldn't stand to see people getting hurt because of her.

"Naminé, there is a reason why we needed you in this battle."

Oh-- She snatched up her sketchbook again, though she couldn't help glancing at him. "You...know?"

"About your ability to give life to dreams and imaginings? Of course."

She took a deep breath and swiftly began to draw.

Zexion's eyes soon widened, and he scrambled to his feet. "Not me! I told you, I'm perfectly all right. I'm back to 78% already, you should be focusing on the others."

"You're the one who needed my help most," she said stubbornly, gripping the book so that her drawing was covered.

"We don't have time to argue. Please, Naminé." Gazing at her again, with a strange, quiet kind of hope that made her breathless....

"I'm sorry. I'll draw."

She was able to tune out the battle then. Focused on the pictures, on shaping her dreams into reality, on sending help where it was most needed, trusting Ienzo's ability to keep her safe without question and with no trace of doubt....

She couldn't believe it at first, when it was over. She watched Sora dragging Riku into some
wonderfully silly victory dance with Donald and Goofy, watched Axel try to high-five Roxas and Xion and then having to teach them how to complete the gesture properly, watched Isa helping Braig to his feet with a shared, meaningful look between eyes now devoid of gold.

"It's all thanks to you, Naminé." It was Ienzo's voice behind her, so quiet that she was not startled, confirming the very thoughts she was trying desperately to deny.

"N-No...I didn't--"

His ungloved hand came to rest on her bare shoulder. Her breath caught, then she struggled to meet his eyes, and felt a little weak from the admiration she saw there.

"That was splendid work, better than I dared to predict. You truly are the key to winning this war."

"I--"

He smiled, and opened his laptop. "If you don't mind, would you perhaps spare me a little time to explain the details of this ability of yours, as much as you can? I'd be quite interested to know as much as you can tell me, even if it's only for a few minutes...."

After being brushed off so often, dismissed, pushed aside all this time, and now he wanted to know if she minded being the center of attention for somebody who truly cared?

She could not have stopped the smile from spreading over her face even if she had tried. "I think it's going to take more than a few minutes."

He smiled back. She decided that he was lovely. "All the better."

Author's Notes: Too much AkuSaiRokuShi, I couldn't help it.... Pretty lame excuse for a ZekuNami fic, he barely even showed up until the end.... *flails*
"What the heck, does this thing zip upside-down or something?" the boy was muttering to himself as he struggled with the coat.

Lea sauntered over. "Having trouble, Rox?"

"Uh...no...because, um, I've worn this thing a million times, so I should know exactly how it zips, ha ha ha...."

"This is true," Lea agreed, eyes twinkling.

They stood there for a while in awkward silence.

"Um, can you kind of not watch me get dressed?" Roxas said.

"Sure." Just before he rounded the corner, Lea called over his shoulder, "Try that top zipper all the way, first, then the bottom one - going halfway up, see?" Then he got out of sight and waited.
And soon heard a long, "Ohhhhh" of comprehension.

Lea came marching around the corner again. "Give it up, Ven, it's not gonna work."

"What?!" the boy yelped. "I'm not Ven, I'm--!"

"Reeeeaally? Well, that'll be easy enough to prove, seeing how the real Roxas isn't ticklish." Lea held up his fingers and wriggled them threateningly.

"N-No, wait, wait, okay, wait, I'm Ven!"

Lea nodded in satisfaction. "For the record - I sympathize, kiddo, I really do. But Aqua's your mom, not me--"

"She's not my mom!"

"--and I'm not gonna cross Master Queen of the Universe Aqua, so c'mon, let's go find Roxas."

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"What the heck, is this a clip-on or something...?"

Aqua frowned as she watched the young Keyblade wielder struggling with his armor piece. "Ven?"

"Uh...yes?"

"You can't have forgotten how to put your armor on."
"...Of course I didn't, silly, I just...." He struggled a minute longer. "Gah, stay on!" The armor clattered to the floor.

Narrowing her eyes, Aqua scooped it up, pressed the catch to release the clawed fastenings, and slapped it onto his arm roughly enough to prompt an indignant, "Ow!"

Then she took hold of his face and growled, "Who are you?"

"I'm Ven, duh-- Ooowww, owowowow OKAY OKAY I'm Roxas, ow, geez!" He rubbed his squeezed face resentfully. "You're so mean."

At that moment, a dark corridor opened, admitting Lea and his young companion.

"Ven!" Aqua cried.

"You got caught, too?" the boy in the coat said unhappily to his lookalike. The other sighed and nodded.

"Boys, sit down," Lea ordered.

They plopped down onto a bench side by side, looking sulky.

"Now, Ven," Aqua started, "we've discussed this."

"I want to go!" he burst out. "I'm not a baby, Aqua! I wanna go out and fight with you guys, not be stuck in Neverland where no one can die because it's a big fantasy dreamland for immortals!"

"Yeah, I wanna go to Neverland," Roxas said stubbornly.

Aqua frowned. "Ven, I already lost you once, I am not going to put you in danger again."
"Why don't you trust me!"

"She does trust you," Lea put in. "Even's pretty sure that at least one of the attacks'll be on Neverland, so we need you there."

Ven glared. "We know for SURE that Radiant Garden's gonna be hit soon, so I know you'll need me there."

"And I can cover Neverland," Roxas said in frustration. "I've been there a million times, Ven's only been there once."

"Rox," Lea said, "I know you're upset that Santa didn't give you anything for Christmas last year, but I'm telling you, finding the little bug-girl isn't gonna help."

"She's a fairy, and I never said anything about Santa!"

"So why are you so fired up to go to Neverland?"

"...I miss flying."

"You have Super Glide."

"I miss flying for real."

"Why can't you wait 'til after Christmas?"

"Be...cause...."

"Because he has to get some Christmas presents from there, too," the other boy supplied.

"Yeah! I have to get Christmas presents from Neverland."
"Lea, you're letting them distract you with rabbit trails," Aqua said in annoyance. "Ven, you are not going to Radiant Garden, and that's final."

"But--!

"Unless you want to try to defeat a Keyblade Master," she said threateningly, summoning her weapon.

The boys exchanged a quick look. Then Ven sighed loudly and said "Fine" in a huffy tone.

He and Roxas exchanged glances again, then Roxas raised his arms to open two dark portals. "If you see Tinker Bell," Roxas said anxiously, "tell her I'm really, really, really, really really sorry for not helping her with the pirate ship thing, okay?"

"Okay, Roxas," Ven said glumly, and trudged off into the Neverland corridor. Roxas glared at Lea and flounced off into the Garden one.

"Ugh, those boys," Aqua groaned once they were alone.

"I will never get tired of them," Lea laughed.

"What?"

"What?"

She eyed him. "...Lea, do you really think I'm being overprotective?"

He shrugged. "Gotta do what you gotta do to keep your kids safe, huh."

"I hear that didn't work out so well in your case...."
"Well, you're a better mom than me," he grumbled. Then looked up when she didn't answer right away.

"Do you really think so?" she said softly, her eyes shining a little.

"Uh...I mean, it was a joke...duh you're better than me. You're a girl, for one thing; and you didn't lose your heart for ten years or spend your adolescence killing people in cold blood...."

"What?"

"What?"

She gave him a suspicious look. "Do I want to ask?"

"Probably not...."

She shook her head. "Well, Roxas and Xion turned out well, I wouldn't say you did a terrible job of it yourself." This time it was her turn to look up when he took too long to answer.

Lea had a hand pressed to his chest, eyes distant, smiling a little. "Man, I can't convince my heart that you were just being polite, it keeps thinking that you totally made my day."

"I wasn't just being polite," she said with a small smile. "Those two adore you, and I think they have good taste."

"Aqua, go easy on me, okay? My heart's still.... A little bit goes a long way, you know...."

"Forgive me," she said, resting a hand on his shoulder. "It's been difficult for you to adjust, hasn't it."

"Nah, I'm fine. I'm just better at wisecracks and butt-kicking than mushy stuff, you know?"
"That's not surprising." She suddenly frowned.

"What is it?"

"Lea," she said slowly, "can you open dark corridors without moving your hands?"

"Uh...well, yeah, but you have to be really concentrating. It feels more natural to kind of gesture, you know?"

Now she looked alarmed. "So you can open corridors without moving?"

"What's wrong?"

"Try it now," she said sharply. "On the count of three."

"Count of ten. I need to concentrate."

"Fine; one, two, three...."

Lea was surprised that Aqua raised her arm when she spoke the number ten - it looked exactly as if she had summoned the corridor, rather than him. He suddenly went cold. "Wait...you don't think...?"

"They know each other so well by now," she said rapidly. "They've had time to practice--"

"They couldn't have--"

"Ven wouldn't have thought of Christmas shopping in Neverland--"
A boy in a black coat was walking along a sunny beach, surveying the lagoon before him with satisfaction. He paused. "Guess what?" he called loudly. "I do believe in fairies!"

Within a minute, a tiny girl in a dress made of leaves was practically launching herself at his face, tinkling wildly and dripping pixie dust.

"Hi, Tink," Roxas said happily. "You need help again?"

"*tinkle tinkle TINKLE!*"

"Don't worry, I'm not on a mission this time. Lead on, I'm right behind you!"

A boy was sauntering down the streets of Radiant Garden, twirling Wayward Wind. "Just you try invading the Garden, Heartless. I am totally ready for you."

"Roxas!" Ienzo called, hurrying up to him. "I'm glad you're here, we were wanting to--" He stopped, looking at the Keyblade. "Ventus?"

The weapon was hastily dismissed. "What's up, Zexion?"

"...Never mind, either one of you will do. Come along, I need to get you outfitted and then we can give you your assignment...."
Ventus and Roxas may have been separated by several worlds, but their hearts were connected strongly enough for them to sense each other's figurative high-five.

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Author's Notes: Lol, if you don't get the Santa thing, it's a reference to my fic Christmas at the Castle. XD

So...this is now the second time I have attempted to write an Axel/Aqua story for Bon-Bon, only to watch it get eaten by their kids. XD *headdesk* Axel, my muse really hates shipping you, doesn't it. *sweatdrop*

And oh my gosh I could NOT think of a title for this!!! DX So close to calling it "untitled," yet again.... orz

Ftr, all these Christmas gifts were supposed to be 300-word drabbles, but apparently I'm incapable of writing stuff that short unless it's in the Stepsiblings universe. *sweatdrop*
Because It Tastes Like Friendship {Ansem and the apprentices}

Because It Tastes Like Friendship

(rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

10,000 FFN profile hits kiriban for sonicdisney

Summary: Ienzo is the one most upset about this odd new allergy they've developed, but maybe they can think of something to make him feel better.... Platonic fluff for Ansem and his apprentices.

"Tell me again why we're here," Dilan said in annoyance, "rather than patrolling the grounds like we're supposed to be."

"We're here because we're following orders," Aeleus said shortly.

They were both sitting in one of the labs, having sensors taped to them.

"*siiigh* Fair enough, I suppose. Still, I consider it to be a waste of resources. Why didn't you choose more useless people as a test subjects, Even?"

"Stop whining," Even snapped. "Master Ansem refuses to use anyone for test subjects other than volunteers, and you two were the first to offer your services."

"I wouldn't have if I'd realized it was going to be a waste of time rather than an actual mission."

"Return to your duties, then," said Aeleus. "I will remain."
"Nonsense," Even said before Dilan could answer. "We need two subjects, one for each variable."

"Then just get it over with quickly," Dilan grumbled.

"As you say. Ienzo, bring the tray here."

The boy regarded him. "You're not going to wait for Master Ansem and Xehanort?"

"I sent for them quite some time ago. If they'd wished to come, they would have. Now stop dawdling, and do as you're told!"

"Yes, sir."

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"I hope Even hasn't started without us," the king remarked as they moved swiftly down the corridor to Lab D.

"He surely has, the impatient fool," Xehanort grumbled. "This is all your fault, Braig, as usual."

"Hey, stuff isn't always my fault!" Braig protested. Then he grinned. "Only most of the time."

"Yes, well--" Xehanort's sentence dissolved into coughing as the lab door opened and blue smoke started pouring out.

"Okay, THAT was not my fault," Braig declared, eyes watering from the now polluted air.

"Even!" the king shouted as he moved inside. "What happened? Ienzo, are you all right?"

"I'm fine," the boy's voice echoed weakly.
"Master! It was a *cough* miscalculation *cough, cough* I have yet to evaluate the damage, but *cough* I believe we should *COUGH* evacuate the laboratory before *cough*--"

Aeleus came looming up through the smoke, and Even was shoved toward the exit.

Once they were all clear and Dilan had shut the door behind them, Xehanort went to go adjust the ventilation and Ansem bent to put his hands on the boy's shoulders in concern. "Are you injured at all?" he asked, trying to see Ienzo's face through the long bangs.

"No, Master. Merely short of breath at the *cough* moment, but I expect it to pass soon."

Ansem put an arm around him to draw him close, then demanded of Even, "Why didn't you wait for us to arrive?"

"Apologies, Master Ansem," Even said sourly, "I assumed you weren't coming. I didn't realize you were merely--" he glared at Braig "--delayed."

Braig threw up his hands in a wordless, 'Who, me?' gesture.

"Not to worry, however. I was prepared for something to go wrong and have another set ready for quick preparation. We merely need wait until the laboratory is accessible enough for me to fetch it."

"Very well."

Ienzo did not express excitement the way ordinary children did, but his gaze was very intense as he stood by the cook's assistant, close enough that she kept bumping her elbow against him as she scooped. "Stand back, young master," she said in exasperation. "I'll have your treat ready soon enough."
Ienzo shuffled a tiny step back, still watching the ice cream like a hawk. The young woman rolled her eyes and tried to adjust her movements.

"Patience, Ienzo," Ansem chuckled, and was answered with a small sigh.

As soon as the dish was in his hands, Ienzo swiveled away and started to walk off, but the king caught his wrist before the first spoonful reached his mouth. Ienzo looked up at him. Then he turned to the girl and said quietly, "Thank you for your service."

"It was my pleasure, young master." Only then was he allowed to commence.

The king and his companion had not even reached the dining room before it became apparent that something was wrong. It started when the boy coughed.

"Are you all right, Ienzo?"

"Yes, Master."

"You're not still ill from the incident earlier, are you?"

"No, Master, I *cough* have recovered, thank you."

Ansem eyed him, but decided to let the matter rest.

Until they were almost at the dining room threshold and he realized how long it had been since the boy's last bite. "Ienzo?"

"...Yes...Master?"

"Really, are you all right?"
"...I think I'm just a little tired, that's all...."

Ansem frowned and laid a hand against his forehead. "Hm, you do feel a little warm...."

"*cough*"

"I think you ought to go to bed as soon as you finish eating."

"Yes, Master," Ienzo murmured, with just the slightest air of relief.

Ansem watched him closely after they had sat down. Ienzo took a few more bites, then set the spoon back in the dish, nudged the remainder of the ice cream away, and rested his face in one hand.

"Ienzo? You are beginning to cause me great concern."

"...I think...I ate too much at dinner...I would like to go rest...."

His voice sounded odd. Ansem frowned and reached to lift the boy's face. "Ienzo!"

"Hm...?"

"Your jaw--"

Ienzo closed his eyes.

"Your face looks like it's swelling-- Tell me, are you ill?"

"...I don't...feel well...Master...."
Come to think of it, Ansem was beginning to experience some unpleasant sensations himself, particularly a tingling ache in his tongue and lower jaw.... He called for a doctor.

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"You're allergic to ice cream?" Braig exclaimed, then started laughing.

"The situation is not amusing, Braig," Ansem said sternly. "Ienzo is quite upset. Both of us seem to have developed an allergy regardless of flavor, and the loss is a difficult one for him at his age. You should have more sympathy."

"So, what, you guys are gonna switch over to Snickerdoodles or something?"

"That is not the interesting aspect of it, Braig," Even said impatiently. "Master, do you have any idea what could have caused this allergy?"

"I do, actually," Ansem said slowly. "I tested the others earlier, and they confirmed my suspicions. Even, Braig - head for Lab E. You're going to be tasting a lot of ice cream soon."

"Best experiment ever," Braig decided.

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However, he changed his mind when the experiment was actually in progress. Coughing, gagging, itching, swelling, finally he threw the mint chocolate chip across the room and told them they were the stupidest smart people ever, DUH that blue smoke had made them all allergic to ice cream.

"Obviously that is our theory as well, but we need to determine the exact--"

"Shut up, Even."

Now to find some people who hadn't been exposed to the smoke, since it had been confirmed that the king, Xehanort, Braig, Dilan, Even, Aeleus, and Ienzo had all been affected.
"Dilan, would you wait a moment, please," Ansem called, approaching the front doors with Xehanort, Even, and Ienzo at his heels.

Dilan turned inquiringly, with two sulky-looking teenage boys dangling from his hands.

"What do you have here, Dilan?"

"Those trespassers I've been telling you about," Dilan growled. "Caught them at it yet again - did you ever sign that restraining order?"

Ansem studied the boys. "A persistent pair, aren't you. What were your names, again?"

The redhead spoke up at once in an insolent tone, "I'm L-" but was cut off when his friend kicked him in the ankle and glared. "Ow! What's your problem, Is--? OW!"

"Enough," Dilan thundered, shaking them.

Ansem stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm.... Xehanort."

"Yes, sir?"

"Try the ice cream on them."

The boy in blue looked suspicious, though the redhead perked up. "Ice cream?"

As expected, neither of them showed any adverse reaction to any of the flavors of ice cream they tried.

"Thank you, boys, that was very helpful. Dilan, please escort them out now, and bring me that restraining order."
"Hey! You're not gonna show us your secret--? Ow!"

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"Ienzo," Dilan said. "You were supposed to buy organic cage-free brown eggs, a carton of the standard white eggs, Gala apples, and Macintosh. I see none of these things here, which means that Master Ansem cannot perform the experiment, and nowhere on the list did we request black-eyed peas and cherry pie."

"...."

"Ienzo, why did you buy black-eyed peas and cherry pie?"

"...I don't know." Ienzo looked at the scrap of paper in his hand. "They're not on the list."

"Exactly."

"...Did I buy these?"

"Ienzo, go back out and follow instructions before I lose my patience."

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For heaven's sake, the child was supposed to be feeding the specimens, not sitting there letting them lick his face. "Ienzo!" Xehanort shoved Ein and Zwei back into their cages, where they whimpered unhappily, then whirled to the boy. "Ienzo! What on earth do you think you're doing?!"

"...Cleaning the specimen cages."

"Ienzo, you're supposed to be feeding the specimens. You don't even have any cleaning
"...Oh."

Xehanort smacked a hand upside the back of his head. "Wake up, boy!"

"Yes, sir...."

The little red-haired girl watched him curiously for a while, the boy who was sitting there gazing into the fountain. Then she went up to him and put on her biggest smile. "Hi! I'm Kairi. What's your name?"

"...I'm Ienzo."

"It's nice to meet you, Ienzo! Are you sad?"

"I suppose so."

"I bet a flower will make you feel better, they're so sweet and pretty. Can I put a flower in your hair?"

"Do as you like."

"Yay! None of the other boys ever let me put flowers in their hair. Do you feel better now, Ienzo?"

"...You said that flowers are sweet?"

"Yup!"
"...Were you only referring to the scent?"

"Huh?"


"Man, you've been moping for days," Braig observed. "Lighten up, kid! There's already way too many emos around here, we don't need more. Come on, I'll take you somewhere fun."

Unfortunately, his and Ienzo's definitions of 'fun' differed drastically.


Aeleus gave the boy a puzzle to help take his mind away from troubling thoughts. Ienzo solved it in two minutes and then went back to being depressed.


"Ienzo," Ansem said gently. "There are other sweets you like, aren't there? There's no reason to dwell on the loss of this specific one. You'll make yourself ill, acting like this. Come, let's try this 'cookie cake' they sent up from the kitchen, and see if you like it."

"...My parents used to take me out for ice cream every Friday after school."

"...Oh."


CRASH
Even whirled and looked at his young assistant in horror. "Ienzo! What have you done?"

Ienzo looked down at all the broken glass now littering the floor around him. "...Dropped all the test tubes?" he said, as if it was a question.

"Get your head out of the clouds, boy!" Thank goodness they had all been empty, at least. "Clean it up."

"Yes, sir." Ienzo knelt and reached out. Then he just kind of sat there for a while.

Even finally turned back, noticing a lack of cleaning-up sounds. "Ienzo!" Seizing the boy's shoulders, he shook him a little to make him drop the large shards of broken glass he was holding, then dragged him to his feet and over to the sink. Ienzo closed his eyes as if expecting a rant, but none came.

Even washed and bandaged his cut hands in seething silence. Then he shoved Ienzo into a chair, pushed his hair out of his face, gripped his chin to make him meet his eyes, and hissed, "This needs to stop. It needs to STOP. You've been acting like a lackwit, and if you don't get control of yourself now, we are going to start treating you like one--" He stopped because tears had begun welling in Ienzo's eyes and were now dripping down his face. "Why are you crying?" Even said in exasperation.

"I don't know...."

"Ienzo, it's ICE CREAM. It is no significant loss, nothing compared to what you've endured in the past. You should be above this."

"I *sniffle* know...."

Even looked at him for a long moment. Then he sighed and put his arms around the boy.

He was not prepared for Ienzo to throw himself into his embrace, burst into full-blown tears, and start sobbing out a string of difficult-to-distinguish words. "I know I shouldn't let it bother me but I can't control my feelings, just thinking that I'll never taste it again, except it's not so much the mere taste because it's true there are other sweet-flavored things but it's just not the same and I was trying to think why and you see Master Ansem always rewards me when I do well and it's so hard
to keep up with you when you're so much better than me and I thought if I worked hard and studied I could be just as good because it doesn't matter how old I am but it does, it does, I can't focus on things like you do and I can't work as long as you do but I feel so out of place and unwanted among others my age because I know I'm smarter than them and they're idiots but they still talk about things I don't understand and they act like I'm strange and don't want me but I suppose from their point of view I am strange because I'm so different from them but I don't WANT to be like them because they're so stupid and care about all the wrong things and get so worked up about things that don't even matter and they don't understand what I say I suppose because my vocabulary is more elevated than theirs but it's because they don't read, they don't READ, the books are right there, there's an entire library that the public has free access to but they don't even care, I only feel at home here with you all but it's still difficult and I like it but sometimes it's a relief to just relax with Master Ansem and some ice cream but we can't have ice cream anymore, and thinking of how I lost it forever keeps making me think of, of other, of other things I lost f-forever and, and, I don't, I...I..." Then he gave up and just cried.

"...Hm." Even was not sure what to do except crouch down into a more comfortable position and keep holding him, so he did.

"...I really miss ice cream, Professor," Ienzo whispered after a long time.

"Yes, I can see that."

Ienzo seemed to recover soon after that. He was still somewhat withdrawn and less talkative than before, but he resumed performing his duties with competence and punctuality, and was once more able to usefully participate in his master's work.

"Are you sure you're all right, Ienzo?" Ansem asked more than once.

"Yes, Master." Ienzo continued to offer the tray, his face expressionless.

"...I hope you save some room for dessert tonight. The cook wants us to try her new strawberry pie recipe; it's supposed to have something called 'Jell-O' in it."

"...."
Ansem sighed. "Maybe you should take the rest of the day off."

"I apologize deeply for having failed your expectations."

"That's not what I meant!"

.o.o.o.o.o

"Man, what's with you and ice?" Braig laughed, coming over to peer at the concoction. "You're almost as bad as that Demyx kid and fountains."

"Braig, get out of here, your assistance is not required."

"Hey, this kind of looks like ice cream...."

"Don't you have a gate to guard, or a maid to flirt with?"

"Dude," Braig said, looking at the recipe pinned to the cork board on top of other ones that were heavily annotated, "you're gonna need a lot more sugar than that." He picked up a container of white granules.

"Braig, no!" Even shouted, but it was too late. "You IDIOT, that was salt, not sugar! This is why I tell Master Ansem over and over again that a laboratory is no place for brainless, muscle-bound, nosy palace guards...!" Even shoved Braig away and started fussing with the little side-experiment he'd started in his spare time. "...Hm."

"What?" Braig said idly, inspecting a human skull sitting on the shelf.

"This actually...doesn't taste so very bad...."
"Yes, yes, greedy things," Ienzo cooed at the enthusiastic Ein and Zwei. "It will be ready in just a moment. And no complaining about the lack of fish tonight, please - orders are orders, and you're not pets, you know."

"Ienzo," Ansem finally spoke, smiling.

"Oh - I didn't see you there, Master. Wait just one moment, I have the reports ready...." Ienzo hurried over to the printer, stapled the papers that had just emerged, gathered up several more packets that were on the table nearby, and brought them to the king. "I also took the liberty of footnoting the results with appropriate references to the previous trials. I thought it might save you some time during the review."

"Why, thank you, Ienzo, that will be quite helpful."

"It also occurred to me that the C-T models might be causing interference in the FF-7 group due to the adjusted A-string tuning. You might consider the use of Z-A at some point - they're older models, but it might give more accurate readings, considering the nature of that test group."

"Why, I hadn't even thought of that. You're so clever, Ienzo - but I hope you're not overworking yourself just for a reward, since I'd come to tell you that you've already earned it."

"It was merely what I thought of in the course of my regular work, not something done out of extra effort...."

Ansem chuckled and held out a hand. "Come."

Ienzo, not yet weighed down with worry about the schemes of his fellow apprentices, remained confident and outspoken for some time. He even smiled on occasion, usually when he was enjoying some sea-salt ice cream, and Ansem made a point to express his great appreciation to Even. "I am so grateful that there's at least one ice cream flavor Ienzo can still enjoy. You don't know how much it means to me to see the boy in high spirits again."

"I am honored to serve you, Master. Now, with your permission, I would like to return to work, since these beams are on a timer."
"Ienzo!"

He turned and waited politely as the little girl ran up to greet him.

"Hi!" Kairi said, beaming.

"Hello."

"Hm...you feel better now, don't you," she said, studying him.

"Yes."

"I knew it! I can tell," she said happily. "But you know, flowers are still good for you even when you're happy."

"Is that so?"

"Yup!" Kairi tucked a primrose behind his ear. "There you go!"

"Thank you."

"Say hi to the king for me."

"All right."

"Can I walk with you back to the castle?"

"I have no objection."
"Does that mean yes?"

"Yes."

"Yay!" She took his hand and chattered the entire way back. He did not think that any of it was important in the least, but he somehow enjoyed her companionship anyway.

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Twelve years later....

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Ienzo put his cup down in alarm. "What did you say was in this?"

"Soda and ice cream," Sora repeated happily. "You want a refill?"

"What kind of ice cream?" Even demanded.

Lea laughed. "Well, we've got sea-salt over here--"

"Duh," Roxas said, then took another huge swallow.

"I think you guys have cookies 'n cream," Riku said, glancing into Even's cup.

"We're allergic," Ienzo exclaimed in dismay.

Sora looked horrified. "You can't eat ice cream!!"

"Axel, what's allergic?" Xion asked.
"Flaming pants, I'm not off the clock even when I'm at a party," Lea groaned.

"What's your reaction?" Riku asked.

The five former apprentices all looked at each other. After a moment, Even drank more, and Ienzo reluctantly followed suit. Naminé put a hand on Ienzo's arm in concern. They all waited.

"I don't feel any ill effects," Ienzo finally observed.

"Perhaps it was a temporary condition that ran its course. We must investigate this further, Ienzo."

"Yes, Professor."

Braig laughed and took another swig. "Maybe being Nobodies cured us of it."

"Morbid thought," Aeleus muttered.

"So you're not allergic to ice cream after all?" Naminé asked, looking hopeful.

"That appears to be correct."

"I'm glad," Kairi said warmly.

Ienzo finished his cup of ice cream punch, but later confessed privately to Ansem that he still liked the sea-salt flavor best.

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**Author's Notes:** sonicdisney was the one who claimed my first FFN kiriban, and she requested a
fic about the apprentices having allergies. XD This thing was WAY too long in coming, I'm halfway to 20,000 hits already; but here is the rough draft, at least! I hope you like it, dear! 8) :hug:
Singles {Riku & Namine}

Singles
(rough draft)
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

For Valentine's Day, 14 February 2013

**Summary:** Well, it's not like they have anyone else to spend Valentine's Day with... Platonic Riku/Naminé.

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Naminé was very surprised, and almost too confused to be pleased, when Riku came home early that day, handed her a bouquet of flowers, and said very dryly, "Happy Singles Awareness Day."

Naminé stared at the flowers, then at him. "What?"

"Never mind. It's a joke." He started to turn away.

"The flowers are a joke?" she said, experiencing a strange sinking feeling.

He paused. "I mean, you can keep them. I bought them for you, after all. It's just that the 'Singles Awareness' thing is a joke, you know. Because of February fourteenth."

"Why does February fourteenth make it a joke?"

Riku turned back to face her, and seemed to be studying her despite the blindfold. "...You have no idea what Valentine's Day is, do you."

"No," she confessed, clutching the flowers tightly as she stared at her feet.
Riku gave a long sigh. "What do you think, Riku, should we open this can of worms, or not?" he muttered, presumably to himself. He thought for a while, then finally nodded. "Whatever. You'll find out eventually, and you might as well hear it from me than someone else." He sat down on the sofa. "Valentine's Day," he said in his patient weary Explaining Things voice, "happens every year on February fourteenth. It's a day for...er, for people to show how much they, uh, love each other."

"Nobodies can't love, though," Naminé ventured. "So only humans do that, right?"

"...If you love someone, you love someone, it doesn't matter who or what you are."

Naminé looked torn.

"So, um, in some worlds, people celebrate Valentine's Day by boys giving girls presents, like flowers or chocolate or jewelry and stuff, and they'll go on...dates...um, they usually go out to eat dinner together. And in other worlds, it's the girls who make chocolate for the boys, and a month later on White Day in March, the boys give them presents back."

"So I should make you chocolate?" she said in alarm.

"No! No, really, you don't have to make chocolate, Naminé. A lot of girls just buy it, anyway. It's just...I dunno...everyone I saw today was being all lovey-dovey, and I kept thinking of you slaving away here all alone, and...I dunno...it's just a gift, Naminé. The flowers are free. You don't have to do anything to repay me for them, you know? I just felt like you should have flowers today."

She felt herself smiling hugely. "They're so lovely, Riku."

"You're welcome."

"That's so nice of you. I want to do something for you, too."

"I told you, you don't have to," he said in slightly amused exasperation. "You don't even know how to make chocolate, anyway."
"Do you?"

"Huh?"

"Know how to make chocolate?"

"Uh...yeah...like, cake and stuff, but--"

"Can you please teach me, Riku?"

"...Heh. Why not."

They went to the kitchen together, where Naminé remembered to put the flowers in a vase of water like Riku had taught her last time.

"Riku?" she said a little later as they were working.

"Hm?"

"I didn't understand the joke."

"What joke?"

"The single.... Um, when you gave me the flowers and said they were a joke."

"Oh. I meant-- Like, Singles Awareness Day. It's a joke because-- Like-- I mean, you know how we were talking about...um, boys and girls a while back...?"

She wasn't quite sure what he meant, but there was only one conversation topic that could get the
usually unflappable Riku squirming like this. "You mean how sometimes two people are really special to each other in a way that's different from friends or family?"

"Yes...."

"I remember."

"Okay, well...like, when you don't have someone like that, people call you 'single.' You're single, Naminé, and I'm single. And some people kind of hate being single."

"Why?"

"Well, some people just really, really, really want that special someone, so when they don't have anyone like that, they get sad. Or mad. Like, frustrated, because they can't find anyone like that."

"Are you sad that you're single?" she asked, looking worried, as if she was wondering whether she should be sad, too.

"Well, I don't think about it too much, I'm always so darn busy." He studied her again. "It's okay to be single, Naminé. As long as you're happy, that's what's important."

"Okay."

"It's just that some people aren't happy, so they get jealous when they see couples - couples are people who love each other in that special way. And they get especially jealous on Valentine's Day, which is meant for couples. So they started calling it 'Singles Awareness Day,' too, so that all the singles won't be forgotten."

"Oh. Well, that's a good thing, right?"

"I guess."

"Mm."
"...Hey, let's get these into the oven, okay? We'll have a fun Valentine's Day together with chocolate and whatever chick flick's on TV, okay?"

"Okay," she said.

The chocolate was good when it was ready to eat. And the movie was confusing but made her laugh sometimes. With Riku sitting next to her, letting her snuggle against him and explaining some of the jokes to her, she thought it probably was a good Valentine's Day or Singles Awareness Day or whatever it was. "Riku?"

"Yeah?"

"We can do this again next year, right?"

He laughed. "Well, Naminé, if we're both still around next year and neither of us has another date, sure. I'll bake chocolate and watch ridiculous chick flicks with you."

She laid her head back on his shoulder, satisfied. "Good."

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Author's Notes: Riku/Naminé is growing on me...I like this pairing more and more. X3 This story originally had a romance version where they kissed, but it kind of grossed me out and they were getting OOC and it would have messed things up for them in the future anyway, so I ended up cutting all that out and just leaving it platonic. ^^;
Summary: It was not supposed to happen this way. But maybe he's right when he says it's okay for things to be different. Platonic VenVan / Snow White; rated for implied off-screen violence.

A/N: This was supposed to be a Ven/Snow fic (platonic, though you can interpret it as romance if you want), but I ship (platonic) VenVan hard, guys, and I consider them to still literally be two halves of the same person. So...Van got jealous and shoved his way in, it's complicated, and I barely planned this fic at all. *sweatdrop*

She didn't understand. "Wh...What?"

"I'm sorry, princess," Doc said, fidgeting unhappily. "But I'm afraid that the prince has been...well, taken."

That's what she thought he had said. But she couldn't believe it. It was never the prince that was stolen away, that was just - wrong. "Oh, Doc, there must be some mistake. Isn't that evil man trying to find the Princesses of Heart?"

"Well, yes, my dear, but you're so well-guarded, you see, and...."
confusion in her mind as stifling as the darkness should have been, but since she was still here, in her home, alive and well...she felt like she shouldn't be helpless. But what could she do? "Dopey, dear, would you like to take a walk with me?"

He nodded eagerly, as she had known he would. He knew what he was supposed to do. No surprises there. It calmed her down a little, and she was able to manage a smile as she held out her hand, and he took it in an absurd caricature of a gentleman's gesture. "My dear Dopey."

They went out for a walk. It made her uneasy again, the setting sun and darkening sky. Princesses ought to take their walks earlier in the day, when the air was bright and warm with sunshine, and there were animals wandering about and butterflies going about their business. This was wrong...she and her companion seemed like the only creatures out in the open at this hour, it was too quiet...oh, why was everything so wrong?

"There's a beautiful meadow just up ahead, with the loveliest flowers you ever did see...."

Ah, this was why a princess ought not to pick flowers in the evening. They were closing as the sunlight faded, as if they were falling asleep. She didn't have the heart to reach out and pick them just when they were starting to rest. When they were off their guard. Like her husband had been when the darkness had snatched him instead of her. There was something else that was deeply wrong about this, but she was trying very hard to think about the other wrong things instead. She was a princess of the Light, and she knew what her feelings ought to be.

Dopey danced about in concerned agitation.

"Oh, Dopey," she wept. "If only I had been more selfless...because everybody was protecting me and keeping me safe, they weren't able to help my prince. Oh, Dopey, it's all my fault that he's gone. I wonder if he's frightened." If that person was even capable of being frightened. She knew that she would be, but...he was the prince. He was handsome and strong and brave, he wouldn't be afraid of anything. He would fight until he returned to her. "Oh, my...my beloved...."

Dopey was puffing his chest up, glaring fiercely in a way that ill-suited his chubby, childlike features, and miming a knight charging forward on a horse. It made her laugh, despite herself. "Yes, I just remembered. He'll fight the darkness, and he will come home all right." And that would be a good thing.

It was at that moment she realized that the darkness that had taken her true love was not the only kind of darkness. The woods beside her seemed black now, the weak rays of the setting sun unable to penetrate their dark depths. She shuddered immediately. "Oh, Dopey...we had better
return at once--"

That was when a cry echoed through the trees.

She stared, paralyzed. "D...Dopey...."

"Get back here!"

Something black, with horrid glowing red eyes, came swooping out of the woods. It gave a terrible shriek and whirled about, seeming to glare at them balefully like a gigantic deadly bird. "Help me!" she screamed.

It dove.

Her panicked gasps filled her ears, she flinched in pain as branches raked her flesh or she stumbled over stones, and she finally realized that she was running, fleeing through the woods as she had done once before, having no idea where she was going in the pitch-black. "Oh...!"

Dopey. She had left Dopey.

She stumbled to a halt, eyes wide, heart hammering in her chest. 'Dopey. He stayed behind to protect me, because I'm the princess.'

He was no match for that monster. Surely he had been destroyed, as she'd fled without even thinking. "Nooo!"

She had done something wrong she had done something wrong she had done something wrong. A girl was supposed to flee when in danger, was supposed to leave the man behind to defend her. Yet her heart seemed to twist as she thought about what she had done, about how she had left a dear friend to the mercies of a creature who would tear him to pieces, about how that sweet childlike creature wasn't even a man, about how she had left him alone, done nothing to help.

"This wasn't supposed to happen!" she cried in agony. She didn't know what to do, so she sank to the ground and sobbed.
Gradually, it occurred to her that this wasn't really doing any good. No one was coming to help her. No one was helping her friend, or fighting the monster. "Dopey," she whispered. She hunched there a moment longer, listening. Then she straightened up and peered around at the darkness.

She could see nothing. The noises were eerie in the dark, but there was nothing out of the ordinary for a forest at night. There were no animals approaching; no handsome, helpful, kind young men; not even any raging trees or forest spirits. "...Hello?" Slowly, she got to her feet.

She was in the middle of the woods, lost, alone, in the dark, and somewhere out there, her friend was being hurt.

"I have light, at least," she whispered, clasping her hands together over her breast. Even if it was only in her heart, she still had light. "Dopey...." Could she go find him again? Was that...allowed?

"...."

Did it matter?

"I'm going to find you." She listened to the sound of her own voice. It sounded strange, like something a man would say, but... Well, there wasn't a man anywhere near. She was the only one who could help Dopey. "I'm coming," she said, louder. And she began to walk.

It soon became apparent that she had no idea where she was going, and the calm began to give way to distress again. "Where...oh, where am I going...?" Perhaps Dopey would be able to hear her if she called out. "Dopey!"

Still nothing but silence, and the sounds of the forest. "DOPEY!" She began to run again, more carefully this time, which meant she was much slower. "Oh, please!" *Please don't let him be hurt, please--*'

There was a strange whooshing sound. "Will you shut up? Seriously, your voice is giving me an *actual headache.*"
She was startled when a small young man came dropping out of nowhere, landing right in front of her, seeming to carry his own glow with him. "Oh, my!"

The odd little vehicle seemed to collapse into itself and settle in his hand, now resembling one of those key-like swords.

"Who are--?" No. She knew him. "Ven! Ven, is it you?" His face was the same, and that incredible hair, but...his eyes...she didn't recognize those hard eyes at all.

"Yeah, what of it?" he said in an annoyed tone. Then he blinked, shook his head, and sighed. "Sorry...do I know you...?" To her relief, his eyes seemed to have softened, at least somewhat.

"Oh...why...I--"

"A princess," he realized. "From one of those first three worlds, I bet. Let's see...there was the sparkly shoe one, Cinder-something, and I remember Sleeping Beauty, so you're the other one...snowy...White! Snow White?"

"Oh, why, yes, that's me, but...Ven?"

He sighed deeply again, and shook his head. "Look, princess...a lot's happened since we met, I think it's just better if we go our own separate ways...."

What? The hero wasn't supposed to abandon the damsel in distress without having done anything to help her. "Wait, oh, wait, please! Please, won't you help me? Like you did once before?"

He looked annoyed again. "I'm on my own mission, you know. Speaking of which, you didn't happen to see a giant Heartless flying around, did you?"

"Oh! That must have been what attacked us."

"Where?" he said sharply.
"I-I don't know...I was trying to find my way back out of the woods, but I...I'm afraid I'm lost."

He rolled his eyes and tossed his sword out before him, where it expanded back into the strange little vehicle. She had no idea how it remained in the air without anything like wheels. "Hop on."

"Pardon me?"

He stepped onto it - it dipped slightly under his weight, but did not drop to the ground. "C'mon. I don't have all night."

It took her a minute to realize that he meant her to step onto the vehicle behind him. Gingerly, she set a foot on the metal, and gasped as he impatiently grabbed her, hoisted her all the way up, and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Hold on tight. And bend your knees a bit."

"Pardon?" she said helplessly.

The first time she fell off, she was so shocked that she simply lay there, staring up at the darkness, trying to figure out what to think. What was one supposed to think when she had fallen off a piece of metal that floated in the air and sometimes turned into a sword? 'I feel as if I just fell off a horse.' Ahhh - that was it. It was exactly as if she had fallen off a horse. "Oh! Oh, I've twisted my ankle!"

"Seriously?"

Actually, when she tried to move her leg, then the other leg, she found that neither of them hurt very much. "Oh...." Her posterior did, though. But it wasn't ladylike to mention that, so she didn't.

"I'm so tempted to just leave you here...no, Ven, no, you're a good person, you don't just leave helpless girls all alone in the middle of the woods, what kind of jerk are you...oh yeah, the kind of jerk who'd unleash hordes of dark monsters throughout the multiverse, gah, why do I even bother...."

She was very cautious as she climbed to her feet. "I think I'm all right," she said uncertainly. A little sore, but she didn't think he would have to carry her home, which didn't actually seem right, either. Wasn't she supposed to be incapacitated?
"Good. Get back on."

"What?! I can't do that! I'll fall off!"

"So? Then just get back on again. Let's go! Who knows what that Heartless is up to while we're sitting here wasting time."

He was right, but it was such a novel idea, she had to stand there and think about it first. 'If I fall... just get back up?' She couldn't think of any reason why not, no matter how hard she tried. 'I can still walk. It doesn't hurt very much. If I'm able to step back on that thing and hold onto him and fly again - why shouldn't I?'

So she did. And just as the wind was starting to blow her hair into disarray and she began to feel breathless with a strange delight - she lost her balance, and fell again. 'Am I all right?' It seemed so. Her arm hurt a bit where he had scratched her, trying and failing to catch hold of her as she fell, but she was still able to stand up. "I shall get back on again," she told him, a little hesitant.

"Come on, let's go!"

They reached the meadow. She screamed when she saw the little body stretched out on the ground, surrounded by darkness as if it was feeding on him. "Dopey!"

"Ow! What are you trying to do, break my eardrums? Get off!"

She barely even heard him. She was already stumbling to the ground and running, flinging herself on her dear friend's body and clasping him close to her breast as she sobbed. "Oh, Dopey, Dopey, please open your eyes...."

Light.

"Oh...." There was work to do. She closed her eyes and tried to remember how it had felt, when she and the other Princesses of Heart had... battled. The darkness.
Battled? That was not how it was supposed to work at all, they were as far from warriors as could be. But...what else could she call it, the struggle to repel and defeat an enemy who wanted to harm them and everything that was important in the worlds?

"I will fight," she whispered, listening to how the words sounded as she said them. She might be a girl, and small, and weak, but the Light within her was powerful, and if the darkness receded before it...it was simply easiest to visualize it as a weapon, wasn't it? It was the only weapon she could use, but it had saved many worlds before. Perhaps she needed nothing else. 'I won't let you take my friend. My silly, funny, kind friend, I won't let him fall to darkness, because I have enough light to wrap around him a hundred times over!'

And so she fought.

It was so difficult without the other six to strengthen and support her. But then she got used to it, and she could feel Dopey's heart reviving and joining her, and then - a sudden new light. Conflicted and agitated and decidedly impure, but so powerful, and with its brightness surrounding the darkness within, holding it firmly in check.

'Who are you?' she thought.

'Don't mind me. Do your Princess thing. I'll take care of the rest.'

Then, a third voice. 'We'll fight together, princess!'

'Dopey,' she realized, in shock and growing delight. Hearing the voice of his heart, his voice for the very first time - it was strange how much it reminded her of Sora, the unexpected strength and resistance to the darkness. It was not a child's voice.

'Stop getting distracted,' the conflicted light thought impatiently, 'pull it away from him so I can bash its brains in!'

She was not entirely sure what he was talking about, but she hardened her resolve and did her best.
When she opened her eyes, she felt a sense of excitement, pride, and triumph, though she couldn't think why - she was exhausted. And could not imagine feeling worse if she had fallen off a horse a hundred times.

"Here. Drink this." Something was set to her lips, and then the most delicious taste filled her mouth. She drank eagerly, then opened her eyes to find Dopey cradling her head in his lap, and Ven holding an empty bottle. "Feel better?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! My goodness, what was that?"

"Just a Hi-Potion. Figured you could use it."

"Certainly. I am quite grateful, Ven." She sat up and smiled at her smaller friend, who leaped to his feet and did a little joyful dance. "And you, too, Dopey dear. Are you all right?"

'Fit as a fiddle,' the dwarf mimed.

She smiled again, studying him, trying for the first time to see him as something other than a quaint little boy. "Dopey...you were very brave, to protect me and to help me fight the darkness."

He imitated the knight on a horse again. This time, instead of assuming it was a joke, she thought about it. Of course he would look ridiculous, dolled up in ill-fitting armor and riding a horse many times his size, but...in the depths of their hearts, when he had faced the darkness without flinching and sent it retreating in the wake of his unflagging joy and determination and loyalty...how was that different from a warrior who held to his noble principles while fighting wicked enemies?

"I'm the one who's been wrong, aren't I," she said softly.

"What's up?" Ven said, switching out some of his Accessory pieces.

"All this time...I keep expecting things to go a certain way, the right way. But they never do. Nothing ever goes right. And now I'm starting to think...maybe...the way I thought was right...isn't right at all. That maybe I haven't understood anything my whole life."
"Well, you're not the only one of my friends who's stupid," Ven said, then winced. "Sorry, um...I could have worded that better...."

"For so long, I dreamed of my true love."

"Great. Here we go."

"I knew how it was supposed to happen...it always happened the same way in the stories." She began to sing, and Ven covered his ears. "Some day, my prince will come. Some day, we'll meet again, and away to his castle we'll go, to be happy forever, I know...."

Dopey had settled into a relaxed pose on the grass, listening with a dreamy look on his face. Snow White smiled sadly at him and rested a hand on his head. "The prince is my true love. We are supposed to adore each other, and live happily ever after together in his grand castle...."

"Do you happen to know how long this story's gonna be?" Ven asked with a strained smile.

"...but...I don't understand...why it's been so horrible." Slowly, she rested one arm across her stomach, and the other across her chest, hugging herself tightly. Ven looked at her hunched, miserable figure and thought that she seemed really small. "I...I was so looking forward to the wedding...and it was truly lovely, it was. It was everything I dreamed and expected. But then...but...then...."

There was a long pause, and Ven finally frowned. "You're not talking about the, uh...night...after...the wedding ceremony...are you? Like, don't, 'cause Aqua already sat me down and grossed me out for life about all this, and I think I'll do just fine without your Happily Ever Afters, thank you very much, and--"

She was shivering a little. Her fingers curled tightly into the fabric of her cloak. Then she suddenly sat up straight and burst out, with a more poisonous expression than either of her companions had ever imagined the little princess would be capable of, "I want to kill him."

"Uh...what?"

Dopey just stared with his jaw hanging.
Then her face crumpled. "I'm not supposed to feel that way. I'm a princess of Light. But I've been wrong about so many things, maybe I'm wrong about this, too, and I maybe I really can reach out with darkness and crush him and hurt him like he's hurt me...like he hurts me so - many - times, and I'm glad he got taken, I'm glad he's gone I'm glad I'm glad and I never want to see that monster ever again!!"

Ven could feel himself shaking. He didn't...know...how to feel...about a being of light who had been so wrecked by darkness. 'Yes, you do,' a voice seemed to whisper in his mind. 'You remember what it was like. It's just that it was forced into her, but ripped out of you. Otherwise, it's the same.'

It was a long time before he was able to break free of dark memories, before he regained awareness of his surroundings and looked up and saw Snow White standing a little distance away from him, looking up at the stars. Dopey held her hand as he kept her company.

Ven got up and made his way over to them. "Hey...Snow White."

"You'll tell the others, won't you," she said, her voice completely expressionless. "You'll tell them that I'm no longer worthy to be a Princess of Heart. That there is someone I want to hurt. And I don't even have a true love. I thought he was the one--" Her eyes widened. "But he is the one! It was his kiss that awakened me...."

"Awakened?"

"When I lay in my enchanted sleep for so long and everyone thought I was dead, only the kiss of true love could rescue me, and he was the one who found me and kissed me."

"When he thought you were dead? Snow, how long did you know this guy before...?"

"Well, we'd only met that once, but I felt like we'd always known each other. I was frightened when he climbed over the castle wall, so I ran inside, but when he began to sing that lovely--"

"He climbed over-- Wait, what?"

"--and that's why the kiss worked, isn't it? Because he is my true love...."
"...So, let me get this straight. You were lying dead in the middle of nowhere, and some creepy stalker you barely know came and dug you up and kissed you without permission, so you married him."

"He saved me," she said unhappily. "My dear dwarfs were so very happy.... When they saw me open my eyes, they began to dance and sing like--"

"Open your-- They were there?"

"Why, yes. They were keeping vigil--"

"Snow White. Just tell me one thing: who do you like better? The prince, or the dwarfs?"

"Oh, my dwarfs, of course! They are ever so sweet and kind and lovely. You know, right, Dopey?"

He nodded vigorously.

"They let me stay with them when I had no home, and kept me safe, and we had such fun times in the evenings when we would sing and dance together just as if we were family. Oh, I love them so much!"

"And they love you, right?"

'Heart beats for Snow White forever,' Dopey mimed.

"It's true love, isn't it," Ven continued slowly. "You were lying there surrounded by true love, and you were kissed, and the spell was broken."

"Oh, the dwarfs can't be my true love, silly! Seven little men, and so old, and they're not handsome, and--"
"No, no. Love you love you love you, forever."

"They love you. Maybe not the way where you'll get married to them and ride off on a big white horse and live in a castle in the clouds, but they love you."

"But--"

"Family love each other, don't they? At least, they're supposed to. Friends love each other. Those other Princesses of Heart - do you wanna marry them? And if you don't, does that mean you hate them?"

It took a moment. Then, "Ohhhhhhhhh."

"Love is love. There's different kinds. But it's still love. You know?" The things that he and Aqua and Terra had done for each other, there was no other word for it. Ven knew true love when he saw it.

Snow White was quiet for a while, thinking. Then she finally said, "He was never my true love. His kiss awakened me, but only because of the love of my dear d-- my dear family. I didn't-- I didn't have to marry him."

"You shouldn't have to marry anybody."

Her eyes were distant. "It was so very romantic, the way he sang to me and made me feel pretty even when I was in those horrible rags...but once I became his wife...he stopped singing. Or smiling. I found out why he really wanted me, and it wasn't so we could be happy together. He isn't my true love. I don't have a prince after all."

"Well...neither does Alice," Ven said lamely.

Her lips formed a very small smile. "Yes. But Alice is just a little girl. She is still...oh Ven, now I'm afraid for her. She is still wishing and singing and dreaming, but what she longs for is all a - a lie."
"Pfft, yeah, Alice is wishing and dreaming, all right. About writing poems that sound as cool as the ones in Wonderland, but actually make sense. And her poems are actually pretty good, even though she's still just a kid." He glanced at Snow White. "Heck, you look like a kid. How old are you, anyway?"

"Me? Why, I'm fourteen-- Well, no, I'm not, am I. They said I was asleep for a whole year, so I suppose I'm fifteen now...."

"Heh. Sounds like someone I know. That guy's clueless when it comes to dating, too."

"Pardon me?"

"Um, like finding his true love and stuff. He's kind of making a mess of it right now."

She stared at him. "You mean, I'm...I'm not...the only one, who was wrong about my true love?"

"Snow, I think everyone sucks at it. Aladdin and Jasmine seem pretty happy together, and I guess Phillip and Aurora are, too, but Terra and Cinderella keep making cow eyes at each other when they think no one's looking. And Aqua looks at me weird sometimes and won't tell me who her 'lost love' is, and Hayner and Olette fight all the time ever since they started dating even though they got along great when they were just friends, and one time me and Roxas found these lovey-dovey letters in Master Eraqus's stuff from Lady Tremaine that she wrote, like, a billion years ago, and Rapunzel keeps saying that it was Eugene she married, not Flynn, and that he'd better figure out who he is before she decides to leave him behind on her next adventure, and Axel said that dating Larxene was the worst thing that'd ever happened to him, and, just...everyone sucks at it, Snow. I suck at it, because I don't have a true love, either, and I don't even want one. It looks like a huge pain."

She just stared at him for a while. Eventually, he got bored and went to shop with the holo-Moogle he could see hanging out on the other side of the flower field, who looked as bored as he was. Then he came back and was trying to remember which worlds had Heartless that dropped Lightning Stones, because he just needed two more before he could synthesize the new Command he wanted, when Snow White finally said in a voice of wonder, "There are many worlds, aren't there."

"Yes, Snow White," he said, trying to aim his tone more towards the condescending end of the spectrum than the scathing end. "There are lots and lots of worlds."
"Each person. Every person has their own world. And none of them are wrong. They're just different."

"Uh...yeah. I guess." He paused. "No. Sometimes they are wrong. Like Master--" That man was not his master. "...Like Xehanort. He was-- What he did to me was wrong."

"Yes," Snow White said softly. "We protect the light because it's good, and it heals, and makes people happy. The darkness is why there is evil and pain in these worlds. And the ones who cause that are...are wrong. No matter what anyone says. He was the one wrong. Not me."

"Sucks when people tell you different, huh," Ven said bitterly.

"V-Ven...why did they lie to me? His mother, and the other ladies...why did they lie when they said that this was the way things were supposed to be?"

"Because they didn't care about you. All they cared about was how they could use you. All they cared about was that you'd do what they said and not get in their way." He didn't expect her to reach out and caress his face, her fingertips as light as butterflies.

"They lied to you, too?"

"Xehanort did, yeah," he mumbled.

"But now we know the truth."

"The truth is that people are horrible, but we try to save them anyway because it's The Right Thing To Do. And sometimes it does help, and sometimes things are better because we fought even when we didn't want to. Not all the time. But sometimes. Sometimes we manage to not screw up, and everything works out all right."

"I'm so glad." She looked back at Dopey and smiled, clasping his other hand. Dopey looked very happy to see her back in better spirits again.

"Oh...I...there's so much. So much to think about." She suddenly paused. "And I don't want to go
home to think. I don't want to go home ever again."

"Uh...."

Snow White turned to look at Ven, her expression more serious than he had ever seen it. "I have no home. Those castles where I was tormented and unloved - I never want to set foot in either of them ever again."

"Well...what are you expecting me to do, find you somewhere else to live?" The sentence was barely out of his mouth before he remembered that he'd actually done that exact same thing before, the first time he'd seen her.

"Oh, yes! Oh, would you, Ven? Would you, please? I can't go back home to the little cottage with dear Doc and the others, because the darkness will find me, like my stepmother did before. I want to go and be with my friends." Her eyes were shining. "With my sisters. We were born in different worlds, but in our hearts, we are sisters."

"For crying out loud. Okay. But we'll have to take a dark corridor, because you don't have any Keyblade armor or anything."

"All right. Thank you so much, Ven!"

"It's a dark corridor, Snow! I don't even have a coat for you."

Still holding one of Dopey's hands, she reached out to take Ven's, as well. She was smiling.

"You don't listen very well, do you," he remarked.

"You're such a kind young man, Ven. Thank you again for helping me, I am ever so grateful."

"...Hmph. It's been a long time since anyone's told me that." The last time he'd heard something like that had been before he'd become whole again, actually. When half of him was still Vanitas, the despised bane of the multiverse who wasn't good at anything except being miserable and getting his butt kicked by Keyblade wielders. Of course it was the 'pure light' half of Ven that had
been thanked, the half everyone loved, the half everyone missed and secretly hated the whole Ven
for even though they never said anything about it, and even though that boy who'd 'disappeared'
wasn't him. He was this now. He had been this before. And the only ones who had ever truly
loved this version of him were dead.

"What the--?! Hey! You kissed me!" he cried, rubbing the top of his head indignantly even though
he hadn't actually been able to feel her lips through his hair.

"Oh - I suppose you are like Grumpy," she said, almost slyly. "Please be careful when you walk,
Ven. I wouldn't want you to get hurt because you've forgotten to watch where you're going."

"What are you talking about?"

Even Dopey was giggling at him.

"Ugh. Are you coming, or not?"

"Don't leave me behind, Ven."

Still hand in hand, the three of them went together into the dark corridor, and vanished from that
world.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: .....In the midst of all my AkuSai(RokuShi) fever, I got the most random urge to
finally write the Ven/Snow Shadowless Princesses fic. Like, why now???? XD It was because I
saw Amano Shiro's newest KH 10th anniversary wallpaper, of Snow White and the dwarfs playing
in the flowers with Sora, Donald, Goofy, & Jiminy. Amano may not be the best at drawing anime-
style characters, but Square Enix had to have hired him because he NAILS the Disney ones. Nails
them. Seriously, Snow White looks like she came straight from the movie. 8O So seeing her with
Sora in such a cute picture suddenly gave me fluffy feels and made me want to write her. X3 Even
though it ended up being VenVan instead of Ven, and the fic became less-than-fluffy, but
whatever.

Like I said, I didn't really have an outline for this fic, I basically just opened a word processor file
and started typing. As I was actually drafting the story, it...kind of took a darker-than-intended
turn...and I let it, since this fic is dedicated to Kiryn and I know how she feels about the Prince and pairing him with Snow. (Most of the stuff I said about him being a creepy stalker came from her written response to the movie.) So here you go, K; more reason to despise him. *sweatdrop*

At the end, Snow White is referring to when she'd kissed Grumpy for the first time, and he got all dreamy in response and kept banging into trees, falling into streams, etc. XD

"And the only ones who had ever truly loved this version of him were dead." Which is not actually true, Ven is just being a brat. (And briefly grieving again for what happened in the chapters of Before Sora that I haven't written yet.)

Ftr, Snow White is seven years old in the original fairy tale, and physically matures during her long sleep, even though she had to have retained her child's mental/emotional maturity level after being awakened. In the Disney version, she's fourteen and was asleep for a year, exactly like Sora. But dumb as Sora is, Snow is even dumber, and I think it's possible in her circumstances that no one told her the Facts of Life until the day before the wedding. Or maybe she got the romanticized version when she was young but never the more realistic, practical information. That's the impression I had, anyway. She's basically a young, less-intelligent-than-average adolescent who loses an entire year of development and life experience, and marries a pedo stalker whom she'd known for a grand total of about five minutes before they decided they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together.

And the more I think about Charming/Cinderella, the more I wish canon gave me more room to break them up and ship her with Terra instead. There's a good reason why most modern Cinderella adaptations involve the heroine and the prince getting to know and befriend each other long before the climactic ballroom scene. *sweatdrop*

Now the only Princesses left are Belle & Kairi! 8D (But sorry, K, I don't think I'm up to the alternate Belle pairing after all...it'll have to be the one you hate, because that's the one I feel like I can actually write. *wince*)

For you newbs who have no idea what I'm talking about, Dream Waltz is Terra/Cinderella (mostly romance), Eyes Like A Tiger's is Saïx/Jasmine (complicated platonic/romance), "ACW" is PLATONIC Axel/Alice, and Heart of Light is platonic Aurora/Roxas. :3
Beyond the War: Call Out To My Light {VenVan}

Call Out To My Light

(rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: It's difficult - it might always be difficult. But there's always hope, too, and Ventus won't give up as long as there's love to sustain him.

A/N: ...There's a list of activities in the third paragraph that I removed one of the items from, because I didn't want to have to give this fic an M rating just because of two words. *sweatdrop* Vanitaaaaas, y u so crude? DX I like Tali's clueless Vani better than the perv-Van my headcanon seems to have been afflicted with....

Takes place post-KH3; Ven & Vanitas have become a whole person again (he has the body of an adult in his mid-twenties, but the mental/emotional development of an older teenager, due to his long sleep; Aqua and Terra have also physically aged at the same rate). Makes more sense if you've read Before Sora.

o.o.o

He kind of liked Dwarf Woodlands best....

There was a part of him that delighted in the flower meadow, enough to where he'd sometimes hurl himself full-length on the ground and roll like crazy over the soft grass, pausing to inhale the sharply sweet scent of crushed blossoms. He'd never tell a soul about this, not even Snow White. While he trusted her to keep respecting him, he certainly did not trust her sense of discretion.

So meadow-rolling was definitely a solitary activity, and what he was often doing when everyone else had wrongly assumed he'd gone off to sulk, or steal ice cream, or angst, or tease children, or visit Chocolate, or whatever it was they thought he was doing when he went off by himself. (Well, sometimes he was actually doing some of those things, but that wasn't the point.) He liked beauty. A part of him always had, he just wasn't good at expressing it.

The meadow was a perfect place to train if he wanted, or fly, or just lie on the grass and look up at
the clouds and visualize his friends’ faces or Unversed shapes in them, whichever he was in the mood for. He could enjoy his solitude, interrupted only by the animals when they sensed he was in higher spirits. Deer would come and lick maternally at his forehead before settling down nearby to rest; rabbits would hop over and take naps on his stomach; chipmunks would play games in the flared fabric of his pants near the ankles; birds would peck with interest at the shiny munny orbs he tossed at them; butterflies would come and alight on his nose before he shooed them away. He didn’t mind the animals. They steered clear when they could tell they would annoy him.

Another part of him sought the woods, conveniently right next door. The thick cluster of sinisterly-twisted trees was dark enough to soothe and comfort and hide him when he needed to hide. No light to expose him, no ‘caring’ friends to nag at him and make him feel bad ‘for his own good.’ At the times when he hated everything, it was a relief to come here and scream into the shadows, to send Light bursting through his Keyblade like a beacon, attracting Heartless until the strongest ones finally showed up and he could start bashing away, beating all the rage and pain into something that wasn’t his own heart and blood, something that didn’t hurt to strike.

And this way, at least he was doing some good and they wouldn’t all look at him with those horrible disappointed faces when he got back, faces that made him feel like they were pinning him down and stabbing him. This way, he could feel like a bad guy but still be a good guy and get them off his case. Win-Win.

Dwarf Woodlands was the best.

Today was a Forest Day. Ventus was hurling himself between the trees with glee, driving his Keyblade again and again into one shadowy body after another. He liked that most Heartless would charge to attack, it made them more fun to crush.

Smashing darkness into oblivion, whirling to the next and the next and the next without bothering to watch their freed hearts drifting away, it wasn’t light he was interested in right now, it was darkness. Sometimes a stronger one would manage to get in a hit and send him reeling back, then he’d surge into a counter with heightened glee and tear into it. He didn’t bother with Shotlocks or Commands; too easy, waste of time. He just wanted to hit, and hit and hit, until his HP level started screaming at him and his limbs started to ache and he got tired enough to want to stop. Unfettered violence, that’s what he wanted, needed, channeling into the only targets remaining for him. "DIE!"

If she hadn’t been wearing white, he might have hit her on accident. She was smart enough to collapse the instant he whirled close, dropping to the ground too low for him to easily lash out at her. He managed to divert the force of his instinctive blow to the tree behind her, and it burst apart in an explosion of wood, leaving a jagged stump behind.
He allowed his weapon to fly out of his grasp and take out the final Heartless with a Treasure Raid, then he dropped to his knees beside the girl, seizing her head near the neck and jerking her close. Fury was surging through him, battle rage that was now turning to frustration at being interrupted. "Are you stupid?" he hissed in her face. "Do you wanna die?"

Her eyes were huge, blue, so much like Xion's that his pounding heart began to slow a little and his grip loosened slightly. She barely moved, motionless as a terrified rabbit in his hands, though her voice was fairly steady when she licked her lips and whispered, "I'm...not very good...at corridors...I'm sorry."

Corridors? Only the Organization-- Who? Blonde hair, Xion's eyes, no, clone eyes just like Sora's and Roxas's and-- Ah.

"What are you doing here?" Ventus shouted, forcefully releasing her and scrambling back to his feet.

Naminé, too, stood up, though more slowly and shakily. "I'm sorry...I honestly didn't mean to. I just wanted to visit the dwarfs...I told you, I'm terrible at corridors. I missed the clearing. I'm sorry."

Ventus swallowed tightly, then deliberately swallowed again, trying to reorient himself. 'Can't be Vanitas anymore. Playtime's over. Who am I, again?' "You're...Naminé?"

"I'm sorry for interrupting you," she said quickly.

"Shut up!" he yelled, hating the feeling of being apologized to. Then he thrust his hands over his face to cover his eyes, and opened his mouth in a silent scream. 'I hate this! I hate this! Just leave me alone! That's why I come here, so I don't have to be with you people!'

He swallowed again, trying to stop shaking. 'I'm Ven. I'm Ven. Everyone loves Ven. Because he's so sickeningly sweet...ice cream, candy, sweet gelatin ooze sliding over everything, getting it all sticky and gross and gaaah. Be ice cream, Ven.' He lowered his hands from his face and smiled. It was hard, and he thought for a second that he must look like a wolf baring its teeth, but his mouth and face quickly remembered the gesture and softened into what he knew had been something close to Ven's smile.

'I'm Ven,' he thought again, more self-assured this time. 'I love this girl. I don't care who she is,
but she's a person and she's not trying to hurt me or my friends, so I loooove her.' "I love you," he cooed at her, pretending he was talking to a rabbit. This was helping. Vanitas with all his rage was curling up sleepily in his heart; he felt lighter, more clear-headed. Still a bit annoyed and frustrated, but that was okay, he could deal with it, because he was a nice guy. Like ice cream.

Naminé was studying him, her ever-present sketchpad gripped hard in one hand. "I want to apologize again, but I know you'll get mad at me."

"I'm so not mad at you!" he gushed, even though his fingers were curling in irritation. He pressed his fists to his heart, as if trying to drag Ven out and make him do this right. 'It was so easy when I was Ven...just pranced around from world to world, smiling that stupid smile like I was happy, because I was happy, Light shining out of my heart that I didn't even notice because it was so easy, because there was no darkness to hold it back.... You walk up to random people, smile and introduce yourself, save them from Unversed, and you're best friends forever. As easy as breathing.' He wanted to cry with frustration. 'So, so, so frickin' easy. Why is it so hard now?!'

She was drawing. What the heck?

"...Okay, well...I guess I'll...leave...."

"This is for you," she said quickly. "I'm almost done."

He tried to not roll his eyes. Naminé drew pictures quickly because her pictures were drawn with all the talent of a five-year-old. "I can't wait."

He took out his weapon again and switched Keychains, turning it from the Oblivion model to Bond of Flame. 'Bond of flame...tied down to the people you love so you can't escape, so you can't ever be free again because you're always worried about them, and they're always cleaning up your messes and being disappointed in you and trying to turn you into a decent human being even though it's freaking useless since you already know you can never, ever make them happy, because the best side of you is gone forever, half-drowned in darkness I can never get rid of no matter how hard I try...Ven, I want you back, I want to be you again, and not...me....'

"Here it is."

Ventus sighed and plucked the sketchpad out of her hand to look at her crayon scribbles. His eyes widened as he stared at the picture of...himself. Ven and Vanitas, hands clasped, eyes closed in
relief at their reunion, the brighter figure's white wings curled protectively over the darker figure.

"I need you, I need you, I miss you so much I'm dying without you come back to me come back to me...."

"I've been running away all this time. And I've been...so afraid. Not of you, but of what...I'll become...if I take you back. I'm afraid of the pain, the fear, the loneliness, the...emptiness. But that's what you feel all the time, isn't it, Vanitas. It's what you were named for, what our dark master cursed you with."

"I need you! I need you! I...!"

"I have to...accept that...you're me. That turning my back on you means turning my back on myself."

"I've been missing you...so much.... Sora filled the empty place in your heart where I used to be...but...I have nothing...I have nothing...!"

"Terra and Aqua, Mickey and Sora and even Lea, Mom, everyone...none of them abandoned me. I'm not gonna abandon you, either. We have to make things right. Come back to me."

"Come back to me...!"

He was on his knees, crying, hands rigid around the piece of paper like it was made of delicate glass, his eyes too blurred with tears to see, but the image still glowing in his mind. He'd never been to his heart-pillar since then, but he knew that the image he cradled in his hands was the same image captured in that stained glass.

Naminé was crouched before him, staring in dismay. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean-- I just wanted--"

"Shut up!" He seized her arm and surged back to his feet, dragging her up with him, and began to march off through the trees. 'Let go of her arm,' he thought at himself, 'let go of her, you're hurting her, you're not supposed to hurt people anymore, let go, who cares if she runs away, it's not like you wanted her around in the first place, let go, idiot.' He let go of her arm. She didn't run away. She stumbled after him as quickly as she could, trying to keep up.
"Your shoes are stupid!" he barked at her.

"They're hard to walk in," she agreed miserably, and he swept her into his arms. "Thank you...."

"Don't thank me! Buy new shoes when you get home!"

"All right. I'm sorry, Ventus."

"DON'T APOLOGIZE TO ME!" 'After what I did to the worlds, to so many people, no one should ever have to apologize to me ever, ever again. And I'm yelling at a girl who didn't do anything wrong.' "I'm a jerk!"

He nearly stumbled when she kissed his cheek. "Ventus," she said, so softly that he had to concentrate on listening, "thank you for carrying me so that I don't hurt myself trying to walk in the dark. It's very sweet of you. I appreciate it."

"Stop making me cry!" he yelled, and barged on again, hating himself. 'I NEED YOU, VEN! MAKE THIS EASY AGAIN!!!'

He put her down at the edge of the clearing, still in the shadow of the forest but with the little bridge clearly visible. "Ohhh," Naminé exclaimed, "there's their little cottage! You brought me to the dwarfs, Ven?"

'Don't yell. DON'T YELL.' "You said you wanted to see them," he said tightly, and winced when she kissed his face again.

"I do want to see them. Thank you so much for helping me, Ven."

'Do. Not. Yell.' He swallowed hard. "You're welcome." He looked down awkwardly at the sketchpad still clutched in one hand, flipping it closed so he wouldn't have to look at the portrait of himself that had...given him so many feelings. 'Afraid of feelings, Ven?' he thought angrily at himself. 'Afraid of a few memories? You really are a loser.' He pushed the sketchpad toward her, and she took it diffidently.
"Ventus...I didn't mean to upset you. It was supposed to be a gift, but if you don't want it, I understand."

"I want it," he said past the lump in his throat.

She smiled. She had a pretty smile. Not as dazzling as Kairi's or as breathtaking as Xion's, but it was a nice smile and made him feel a bit more like Ven. He relaxed a little.

"I'm glad." She carefully tore out the picture and handed it over. He avoided looking at it, but held it close to his body in a protective way.

"...Thanks for the picture."

"Thank you for helping me so much, I'd still be lost in the woods if it wasn't for you."

"Shoes," he mumbled, "you need better ones if you're going to be tromping around in the dark." He turned away before he had to hear her voice again, and headed for Destiny Islands.

...o.o.o.o.o

He landed, deliberately, in the ocean, so that he'd have to swim the rest of the way. Surging through the water, finishing the task of tiring out his muscles that he had been unable to complete in the dark forest, it cleared the rest of his head and left him satisfactorily exhausted.

When it got too shallow to swim comfortably, he stood up and trudged past the waterline, pausing by a group of children who were staying out late, trying to finish their sand castle. One boy, must have been from out of town, gave him a vague look; the other boy crouched frozen, staring up at Ventus fearfully; the girl spread her arms protectively and glared at him. "Go away! You're a bad man!"

Ventus grinned. They should know better than to bait him like this, especially when they were so very, very weak and helpless. He made a sudden movement as if to crush the castle; he wanted to do it so badly, and had to work hard to just leave it as a feint.
"NO!" the girl shrieked, and her brother gave a huge gasp as if he was about to cry. Their out-of-town friend was starting to look alarmed.

"If I'm sooo bad," Ventus teased, "then I ought jump on your castle 'til it's nothing but a bunch of footprints."

Now the boy really was crying. The little girl put her hands on Ventus's stomach as if to push him away. "Mama said you're bad and to stay away from you cuz you hurt people and break things and steal! Ms. Lulu said you can be nice and to give you a chance, but she's wrong, cuz you're nothing but mean, mean, mean!"

There was a sudden flaring ache in Ventus's heart at the sound of the name. Lulu was nothing to him but an old acquaintance now, but to hear that she still supported him, even though they'd barely spoken to each other since his return; that she, amongst all the hostile villagers, still believed in him....

He whirled away without a word and marched home.

His mother was hard at work in the kitchen. Ventus started to come in to kiss her hello, but then caught sight of the tray of clams on the counter and hurriedly tried to veer back out.

Of course she caught him before he could escape. "Ven!"

He flinched, then stuck his hands in his pockets and turned back to her with one of his Vanitas grins. "Hi, Mom."

"Perfect timing. Come shuck these clams for me."

"...What if I say no?"

"Then you won't eat here," she said briskly, "and if you run off to steal or beg something, you won't sleep here, either."
These days, ever since coming back home, he seemed to get tired of the fighting pretty quickly. Yes, he dragged his heels when it came to housework, out of habit; but he also had an uncomfortable awareness of his parents' love that he'd lacked as a child, and striving with them was disheartening in a way he'd never used to notice. He gave up and went over to kiss her cheek as he'd originally planned, and she put down the chopping knife to turn and wrap her arms around him, squeezing him tightly. "You're so big," she whispered.

"I knooowww, Mom. You tell me that, like, three times a week."

She just kept squeezing him, then finally pulled back and fussily pushed at locks of his hair with her fingertips, as an excuse so she could gaze at his face.

He submitted quietly, gazing back in return. So many long, dark years, where he'd missed her so much and had never seen her and had almost forgotten her, and now here she was again, a figment of his past brought to life, yet so warm and solid and real that he couldn't keep believing she was just a memory.... "I love you," he said, so softly that he could barely hear himself.

She kissed his forehead. "I love you, too, sweetheart. Every day, I thank God you've come back to me."

He shook his head. "Guess you still haven't realized that your life's taken a turn for the worse, again...." He was startled when she gripped his face.

"I love you more than you love yourself," she said sternly. "Deal with it."

He yanked his face out of her hand before she could see the tears in his eyes.

"How's Roxas?" she asked, picking up the knife again and gesturing with her head at the clam tray.

Ventus sighed and trudged over to the counter to start shucking. "How should I know? I never see him."

"Well, you should! He's family, and when you've got that flying skateboard thing that lets you travel to whatever worlds you like--"
"It's not a flying skateboard, Mom. It's a Keyblade."

"It's flat, you stand on it, and it flies."

He sighed again, though he was grinning a little this time. "Whatever. I don't feel like skateboarding to stupid Radiant Garden all the time just to see some kid I barely know." Xion, now, he'd like to see more often, but it was such a pain having to put up with the three guys every time he went there, he had to be careful about what sort of mood he was in. Xion got mad at him when he got into boss battles and made Lea late for work and distracted Isa away from studying and ticked off Roxas so he wasn't 'fun' anymore.

"He's your family!" It was kind of funny how she never quite knew how to refer to Roxas - to all of them, actually; these Nobodies and replicas, linked so strongly by bizarre, complicated bonds that neither of their languages had a specific name for. "If you're not comfortable around him, just talk to him! Get to know him!"

"Talk about what? The only thing we have in common are Keyblades and skateboarding. Every time I go there, all they want me to do is leave again."

"Now, honey, I know that is not true. Xion likes you, and I've seen you get along perfectly fine with that Lea man."

"You just don't get it, Mom." Roxas had always had his own family, he had never belonged to the Islands. Just because he was the Nobody-turned-Somebody of Ventus's adoptive brother didn't mean he was any more interested than Ventus was in being twins or whatever people expected them to be.

"Do you always have to contradict everything I say?"

Ventus realized, with mild surprise, that that was exactly what he had been doing. Again. "...I went to Dwarf Woodlands today," he said, trying to change the subject to something, anything happy. Not that raging in the dark woods was exactly happy, but he could make it sound so while talking to his mother.

"Really? You like that place, don't you."
"I guess... I was fighting Heartless and stuff."

"You seem to enjoy it," she said, half-questioning.

He smiled a little. "Yeah... Sort of. It's fun to...." 'To hit things when I'm mad.' "I like feeling like I'm not being useless."

"I'm glad to hear you're being so helpful to your brother and his friends," she said warmly.

'And not wasting my life like the unemployed loser I am, you mean?' "It's just a way to kill time."

"Darling," she said, and at her tone, he paused to give her a wary look. "What is it you're waiting for?"

"Huh?"

She wiped her hands and came over to him. "Ven, my love," she said softly. "I don't mind you living here - I like having you back. I'm so glad to finally be reunited with both my precious sons."

"Pleeeaaase don't get mushy."

"I'm just wondering what you're-- Ven...I don't mind waiting as long as it takes, but what are you waiting for? Why are you 'killing time'? Killing time until what?"

Ventus's eyes widened as he tried and failed not to think about it. 'Killing time...just...stalling. Waiting until I die.' He wasn't a kid anymore, but he was still so young. So many long, long, pointless, empty years left to live. 'I'm hiding,' he realized, and immediately shied away from the thought, angry because he knew it was true. 'Xehanort's dead, he's dead, he can't do anything to me anymore and I'll kill him if he does, but...I....'

He looked down at the knife in his hand and toyed with the thought of using it for something other than clams, of using a sharper knife that could actually get the job done, yet knowing that all these freaking people surrounding him now like a net would never, ever let him escape for good. Knowing that he didn't have the heart to truly go through with it, anyway. 'So, so, so weak, Ven....'
Too traumatized to live, not broken enough to die, this truly was some sort of twilit half-life, and he couldn't imagine it going on forever, just as he couldn't imagine living any other way.

Yet...what else could he do? 'I don't want to do anything. There's no one left to punish except Heartless. There's no one to chase, no one to miss, no one to escape from. I'm...just...here. Home again. Where's it's safe. Because there's nothing to run away from, and nothing left to fight...the darkness is inside me, where I can't reach it.'

He clenched a fist over his heart. 'Getting you back was supposed to be my Happily Ever After. But I'm still miserable, and I was miserable when I was Ven and I was miserable when I was Vanitas, and I was miserable before I was either of you, and I've never been happy my entire life, have I.' "I miss Chocolate," he found himself unexpectedly whispering.

"Ohh..." She touched a hand to his back, and he braced his hands against the counter and bowed his head so he wouldn't pull away. "Sweetheart - are you ready for--?"

"No! I don't want another dog, I told you!" Clams finished, he threw the knife down beside the tray and stormed out of the kitchen.

Sora was holed up in his room, looking as miserable as he was capable of being. "Veeeeeen," he gasped in relief, tossing down the textbook and holding out his arms as if he expected Ventus to sail into them and glomp him or something. "Save me!"

Perfect. "All right." Ventus strode over and seized his younger brother in a headlock. "Spar with me."

"Huh? Wait, but--!" Sora squirmed playfully, and their horseplay got rougher as they started using more strength. Their laughter and the noise of things crashing out of place disguised the sound of their mother marching up the stairs.

"ENOUGH, BOYS."

They broke apart guiltily.

"Out, Ven," Sapphique ordered. "Your brother's studying."
"Moooommmm, my brains are turning to mush!" Sora wailed pathetically.

Ventus added in a serious tone, "And he has so few of them to begin with, you should let him off the hook now, before he gets even more stupid." He laughed as Sora pounced on his back, and quickly rolled to pin him to the ground; then they froze again when their mother stamped her foot quite close to their heads.

"I am not playing around."

"Mom," Sora said in a small voice, "please, I've been studying all day, I just need a little, tiny, iiiitty-bitty break...."

"The deal was you study until dinner, and dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Just a little longer, Sora."

Sora dropped his head back with a groan. "Man, Ven doesn't have to study...."

"The circumstances are different," Sapphique said tightly. "You chose to drop out of school in order to save the world, which is fine, but now that the world is saved, you have got to earn your HSE certificate if you don't want to spend the rest of your life laboring in minimum-wage, dead-end jobs."

"Or I could just kill Heartless for...forever," Sora grumbled.

Sapphique rolled her eyes. "Sora, Riku's already earned his, and Kairi managed to run around with you on your last mission and graduate with her class. Don't you want to catch up to your friends?"

"Riku and Kairi are smarter than me," Sora pouted. "They can ace school, and I can make friends and chase off darkness."

"Failed~" Ventus sing-songed, raising a hand as if to point out the darkness he himself still struggled with almost constantly. "I think your darkness-routing skills need some work."
Sora grinned and suddenly flipped on top of him so that their positions were reversed. "You don't count, bro. You're just normal human again, like everyone else."

Ventus stared at him. Then he gestured a Hareraiser into existence. His mother squeaked in alarm and backed up a few steps. "...Normal humans don't make monsters of darkness out of thin air."

"They don't split themselves in half to finish off evil madmen with an awesome Twins of Light & Darkness move, either," Sora shot back with a grin, making Ventus blush a little as he remembered the little trick he'd somehow pulled off during the final battle.

It had been so weird - and cool - briefly splitting apart of his own choice, beholding himself from two sets of eyes, sharing an identical grin with someone whose thoughts and heart and blood beat in perfect unity with his own, able to fight as one mind in two bodies until the man who'd hurt him/them so very much had been destroyed...it had been awesome, but he hadn't been able to bear it for long, feeling so exposed. Seeing and feeling the pure light in his heart who was nothing like he could ever aspire to be; seeing the very worst of himself in concentrated physical form, open to the world's hatred and rejection. He'd rejoined again as soon as he could, shivering as his two halves resettled together, hiding his shame and weakness again. The Ven he could never be and the Vanitas he could never escape. He didn't want people to see them ever again. It was a pain and a pleasure he would only relive in memory.

"Somebody's angsting again~" Sora teased, prompting Ventus to renew the wrestling match until they both heard the bedroom door slam and the knob rattle as something was shoved against it to keep them locked in.

Sora gulped. "I think we're gonna miss dinner. And I'll be stuck here for hours and hours and hours, instead of just fifteen minutes." He grimaced at his desk.

"Hmph." Ventus summoned his Keyblade.

"Ven! We can't break out of here!"

"We can break out of here easy." He pointed his weapon at the doorknob.

"Veeeennn, it's cheating. Don't be a cheater."
"I'm not a cheater!"

"Stay and help me study, then. Maybe Mom'll let us out to eat if she hears us being good."

Ventus rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Twenty minutes later, Ventus, sprawled on the floor in a bored pose, was reading from a list of vocabulary words. "Autobiography."

Sora's brow was furrowed in concentration. "One of them is the, the true story of a real person's life written by that person, the other one is written by someone else...." There was a pause. "Which is which?!"

"You tell me!"

"Aaahhh, I don't know!" Sora eyed the Hareraiser, which had been slapping him with one of its ears every time he got a wrong answer. He'd have killed it ten minutes ago, but he refrained, knowing that it physically hurt his brother every time an Unversed was damaged or destroyed. Not that Ventus ever batted an eyelid, but...Sora could sense it a little, too. Not even the restoration of Ventus's heart could fully sever the close bond that had formed between him and Sora over the long years they'd spent together.

Sora drew in a deep breath. "Biography is...written by...other people...and autobiography is...written by...the person it's...about?" He shut his eyes and cringed in preparation for the blow.

"YES!" Ventus yelled, tossing the list in the air. "Finally!" He waved his hand and dismissed the Unversed.

"I got it right?!" Sora cried in astonishment, kneeling up and staring at his brother.

"Yes! About time!"

"I GOT IT RIIIIIGHT!" Sora stopped in mid-crow when he finally noticed that the door was open, and his mother was leaning against the doorframe.
Ventus frowned and craned his head so he could see her, too. "What?" he said defensively.

A little smile was playing around her mouth. "I love seeing you two together...."

"Don't get mushy!" Ventus surged out of the room like a trapped cat making a dash for freedom.

Sora stayed on his knees, bringing his hands back down to the floor and gazing beseechingly at his mother. "Please, pleeeeeease, Mom, I studied, please let me eat...?"

Sapphique laughed. "You look just like Ven when you use those Puppy Eyes.... Come on, love, help me set the table."

"YES!!! I LOVE YOU!"

After dinner, the liberated Sora took off for the beach so fast that even Ventus had to struggle to keep up with him. "Slow down, moron!"

"Beeaaaccchhhh!" Sora yelled, like a starving man making a beeline for food.

Ventus couldn't help laughing when they hit the waterline and Sora, splashing forcefully ahead, accidentally sprayed ocean water in his face. "She really did keep you cooped up all day...."

They swam and horsed around for a while, then settled down as Sora got calmer and were actually having a serious conversation as they tread water, until Sora let out a yelp and disappeared underwater with no warning.

"Whoa!" Ventus plunged down and then let out a silent cry of exasperated outrage when he saw the third figure pulling Sora down. There was a struggle, then a blinding flash of several Keyblades being summoned, and all three young men finally burst out of the water, laughing and yelling.

"Riku! That was SO not fair!"
"Didn't Master Yen Sid tell you to never let your guard down, Sora?" the older boy teased.

"We're in the middle of the ocean!"

Ventus, too impatient to think of what to say, simply swung his Keyblade toward Riku's head, and it turned into a three-way mini boss battle.

The sound of girls' laughter finally drew them back to the beach, where Kairi and Naminé were watching from lounge chairs.

"Hey!" Sora exclaimed happily, running over to greet them.

"Hi, Sora," Kairi said warmly.

As he threw himself down on the sand beside her to chat, Ventus gave Naminé a wary look.

She smiled at him. "You look like you're feeling better."

"I'm fine," Ventus grumbled.

She reached for the ice chest nearby and rummaged through it. "Do you guys want something to drink?"

Ventus and Riku accepted the sodas she handed them, though Riku soon pointed out that they needed to search for wood pretty quickly if they wanted to get a fire started before the sun finished setting. "Come on, Sora. Don't even try to get out of the work this time, I know all your tricks."

"I wasn't! I'll help!"

It was nice, hanging out with them. Ventus did feel just a little like an outsider, a grown man hanging out with two pairs of teenagers, but not enough to really be bothered. Everyone was acting
more like a group of friends than like couples, hanging out on the beach together, talking as the stars came out.

The girls did get cold, in their ridiculous skirts that were too short for a windy night on the beach, and of course the other two guys attempted to be gentlemanly. "Uh...sorry it doesn't have any sleeves," Riku mumbled as he put his jacket around Naminé.

"It's all right," she said, smiling up at him even though she was still visibly shivering.

Ventus rolled his eyes. "Here." He worked the towel he'd been lounging on out from under his body and tossed it over.

"Th-Thank you, Ventus."

"I was gonna laugh at Riku for not having sleeves," Sora said unhappily, "but mine's not very warm, either...."

Kairi giggled, buttoning the short-sleeved jacket around herself. "It's okay, Sora. Getting to see you guys shirtless is worth it."

Ventus rolled over so that his bare chest was hidden against the sand, and pouted when Kairi laughed again.

"Did you ever find the dwarfs' cottage, Naminé?" Riku asked as he reached for another marshmallow to toast.

"Oh! Yes, I did - Ventus helped me find it, actually."

"You went to Dwarf Woodlands today?" Sora said curiously.

Ventus shrugged. "Found some good Heartless there. Made a lot of munny."

"See, I can just beat Heartless for a living," Sora insisted. "Why do I have to take the stupid HSE
"Come on, Sora, is that what you really want to do?" Kairi said, reaching out to pat his shoulder. "I know you've killed a ton of Heartless, but it's not like it was your life's dream or anything."

"I don't even have a life's dream...."

"What about item synthesis? I thought you said you were gonna talk to the Moogles about joining their guild."

"Well, yeah, I will once I get a chance to breathe...."

"The HSE test isn't that hard," Riku said, poking at the slightly singed marshmallow. "Pretty much the same as the standardized tests they'd give us every year in school."

"I always flunked those!"

"You can do it, Sora," Naminé said encouragingly. "We'll help you any way we can."

"Great!" Ventus snorted. "So I guess you're a licensed brain transplant surgeon, then?"

"Hey!" Sora yelled. "I don't really get it, but I can tell you just insulted me!"

"Whatcha gonna do about it?" Ventus challenged, and then they were fighting again, just the way he liked it. Not trying to kill each other, but not holding back, either; both grinning wildly, enjoying the burst of energy.

"Get away from the marshmallows!" Riku yelled, picking a ruined one out of the sand to hurl at them. It actually got impaled on a spike of Ventus's hair for a second before being knocked back off.

"Nice shot, Riku!" Kairi laughed. She tied a length of seaweed into a ball and aimed it at Sora.
The brothers returned home late, and crept quietly through the dark house so as not to disturb their sleeping parents. Ventus threw himself down on his bed, sandy mess and all, while Sora went to rinse off in the shower and brush his teeth. He peeked into Ventus's room before he went to bed. "Good night, Ven."

"Night."

After a pause, Sora came in and hugged him.

"Ugh, get off..." Ventus grumbled, though he made no move to resist.

"Ven," Sora whispered, "it's really cool to have you back with us."

"Mm." Hesitantly, Ventus lifted a hand to rest against his brother's spiky chestnut locks. "Sora...thanks again...for everything."

"I'd do it again in a heartbeat," Sora said, smacking a kiss against Ventus's temple as if they were little kids.

"Ugh, seriously, cut it out!"

Sora laughed and patted his shoulder before heading off to his own room. Ventus was left to close his eyes again and lie there, drifting slowly back toward the edge of sleep....

O.o.O.O.O

Watching like I'm a stranger outside my own body, Ven perched on a tree branch like a bird with huge white wings, Vanitas looking utterly bored, lounging on the other side of the branch with his black wings hanging down on either side of him. They're watching the chicks hatching, Ven's innocent face alight with awe, Vanitas inscrutable, except he's me so I know what he's thinking - how easy it would be to place a thumb right there on the egg and press down hard, hearing the crack of death, feeling the breathless surge of power I have over something so helpless....
But it'd be pointless, too, and Ven would get mad, and I only just finally got him to trust me again, so I won't do it. I'll just watch. Sooooo boring. Why are they taking so long, just pop out already.

"It's so amazing," Ven breathes, like we're watching the most awesome thing in the world. I'm afraid of him, but I'm not Vanitas, I'm me, I'm Ven too, I can edge into his thoughts and he doesn't even notice, because he's me. I can hardly breathe, it's so beautiful, watching those warm living things working so hard and never giving up, slowly but surely being born into this world full of light and wind and music and color....

"Forget this," says Vanitas. "I'm gonna go find some Heartless to bust apart." He drops straight off the branch and only opens his wings just in time to stop himself from breaking an ankle on the ground.

"You're missing it!" we yell after him, but whatever. He is what he is, we can't make him different.

I blink, and realize it's been so long, and where's Vanitas? Why is it so dark? He left me....

I start walking, not sure what I'm walking on 'til I see the stained glass under my feet and we're back in the Dive. Our two figures clasping hands as they sleep, Keyblades crossed as if in salute, I like seeing us together but at the same time it makes my heart ache, like I can still feel the half-healed crack where we were torn apart....

Whose heart is this?

I look down at my hands - gloves. This familiar, stiflingly tight suit, vision clouded by this helmet.... I tear it off so I can see again, and grit my teeth. I didn't want to be Vanitas, but whatever. I just need to find Ven...we need to go find Sora again before we get lost in the maze of stained glass and darkness....

"Ven?"

How long have I been walking?

"Ven--" I summon my Keyblade - the Kingdom Key, what? - and raise it high, trying to call to his light with my own.
Light flashing so I can't see, surrounding us - me - who am I? - and making my skin tingle with slightly electric warmth, what the heck why am I naked? As soon as I realize that I'm suddenly wearing a dress, and I get mad and force the dream to give me some real clothes.

Dream?

I'm dreaming....

Who am I? Ven, Vanitas, or someone else? I can't be...Sora, can I...? Tangled up in his heart for so long, oh God what if we've got pieces of each other mixed up and we can't ever-- "VEN!"

I'm running again, throw the Keyblade away from me because it's Bond of Flame now and it doesn't make any freaking sense. "Ven! Ven! VEN! I need you!"

Flap my wings - wings? Do I have wings? Not a second ago, but I do now, I guess, but it's still too bright and I can't tell if they're white or black. I can hear Vanitas breathing down my neck as he chases me and I yell at him to go away.

"Can't, Little Wind. Cuz I am you, heh."

Of course I am. Eyes burning gold, no one's chasing me except memories, no, Unversed, with all their pain and grief and terror-- "GET AWAY FROM ME!" I want Ven, need him so bad, but I can't find him and I have to fight. I whirl with a Keyblade in my hand again, refuse to see which shape it has, freaks me out that I'm wielding it reverse grip so a second Keyblade appears in my other hand and that one's the right way up, okay, I can do this.

Hurts to destroy the Unversed, more than if I was Ven but not nearly as much as if I was Vanitas. Am I Sora, or what? The weapons in my hand are Oathkeeper and Oblivion.

This is a dream, Kazé. Remember? You can choose what happens.

Unversed gone in a rush of wind, standing on a quiet beach under the night sky, sand crumbling beneath my bare toes. I don't look down to see who I am until I've already imagined myself wearing a pair of blue jeans and a gray T-shirt, something any of us could be wearing. There's a
silver chain around my neck like Sora's, but the pendant's tucked out of sight and I don't pull it out to see what shape it is.

"Xion?" I try. But it's Kairi laughing on the beach, four years old, running off in the distance like a ghost, with baby ghosts Sora and Riku running alongside her. They're talking about coconuts, and then they disappear. Roxas is standing on the beach, holding a bucket so Xion can put seashells in it, but they keep blurring like holograms, and when I reach out to touch them, they disappear.

"VEN."

Now it's just dark. No stained glass at all, just dark, dark.

For a minute, I think I can feel a Gummi ship's controls in my hands, but a huge Heartless swirls into view and opens its gigantic mouth and swallows the ship whole.

I can't move at all, curled up like a fetus in an egg prison, soft wings brushing over my skin and my mother's voice whispering to me...a distant bark I recognize, an old woman telling me I'm a good conversationalist...I scream and thrust out my arms and legs and I'm falling through the Caverns of the Dead in the Underworld, no no NO I'm not dead Mom help me Sora Aqua Terra Xion VEN, freaking Roxas, Merlin, Master Freaking Eraqus, Braig, I don't care who; just please someone help me....

o.o.o.o.o

Ventus was out of the house before he even fully awakened, flinging his Keyblade into Glider mode, leaping onto it, dashing for the Lanes Between.

The journey was long enough for him to clear his head a bit, but once the terror and fury faded, it went to tears, and he was disgusted and exasperated with himself but he finally gave up, and came stumbling into the Land of Departure half-blinded and wanting to beat something up.

Aqua twitched and shifted in her sleep when the bedroom door banged open, and was starting to open her eyes when Ventus seized her shoulders and screamed into her face, "Get up before I kill you!"
"Put on s'more clothes," she said sleepily, struggling free of his grip and groping for a bathrobe.

"Gaaaaahhhh!" He swept his Keyblade across a desktop, sending the items there cascading to the floor.

"Not here, Ven," Aqua snapped, suddenly wide awake. "Wait just a few seconds for me to grab some Commands--"

His next blow was aimed at the bookcase, and Aqua impatiently shot a spell at him. Encased helplessly in a block of ice, Ventus watched her for a second, then started to struggle as best he could. He wasn't able to escape before she was fully ready, and she seized his arm as soon as he was free and hurled him straight out her open window. Senses blazing with alertness, Ventus summoned his Glider and flipped around to land on it with steady footing. His lips stretched in a wild grin - that was the nice thing about Aqua - she could tell when he needed to play rough, and wasn't afraid to act on it.

At the top of the mountain, he leaped off the Glider and hit the ground running, whirled with his Keyblade flashing in his hand, blocked Aqua's heavy strike with a clash that hurt his arms.

"Are you going to tell me what happened first, or am I going to have to wait to figure out what's going on until you're an exhausted mess?" she asked.

He always got in trouble for saying I hate you, even when it obviously wasn't true, so he screamed "I hate everything!" and swung again.

As usual, he stuck to physical attacks, trying to beat the nightmare out of his mind, but she had no qualms about relying heavily on magic. He was frozen, burned, electrocuted, sparkled, and still the rage and terror kept him going, beating at her whirling graceful form and beating and beating until one of his strikes finally connected.

As usual, he hadn't been expecting it. They always concentrated on defense when he got like this, letting him vent while using most of their strength to protect themselves so that it felt impossible to land a hit. But it was always just a matter of time, and even though Aqua’s wince, grunt, and stumble were very slight and she was steady again the next instant, Ventus froze, horrified that he had actually hurt her.

"Ready for more?" she said in a jeering tone, compassionately trying to antagonize him in case he
wasn't finished yet.

He burst into tears and attacked again, but his will to fight was gone now, and she quickly disarmed him. He didn't even watch his Keyblade go sailing off but collapsed to his knees on the grass, screaming out the pain in his heart and blinded by tears. He sensed her hovering, unsure whether his transition was complete or not. It wasn't, and her hovering provoked him; he dove at her legs and she kicked him aside before he could damage flesh, dropping to her knees and seizing his hair before he could recover. "Sweet rain, you're down to 10%," she murmured. "Ven, love--"

"Don't touch me!" he screamed, craving her touch. From the way he didn't struggle, she sensed it, too, and relaxed her grip in order to slide her palm across his tense back.

"Ventus," she said, in a stern tone to compensate for the caress, "it's not very fun to get dragged out of bed at two in the morning."

The angry protest died on his lips and he slumped, crying even harder. She was finally able to embrace him as she'd probably wanted to do all along, pulling his now limp body into her arms as if he was a small child. He nestled against her like a child, too, the need for violence finally exhausted, able to relax and grieve freely and accept her comfort. "I couldn't...find him...I can't find Ven...I can't find Ven...."

"In your dream?" she murmured.

He lifted his arms to clutch at her. "We were together...but then he left...I couldn't find him...."

"It's all right, Ven," she assured him, starting to rock soothingly.

"Don't - call me Ven! Ven's gone, I'm not your precious Ven...."

She kissed his temple and he closed his eyes. "He's still there, sweetheart. He's always there, because he's you. That's why you think you can't find him, dearest, because he's already there."

"I'm not Ven," Ventus wailed, pulling away and pressing his hands over his face. He flinched when a blanket was placed around his shoulders. He clutched it tightly around himself and glared up at the barefoot, pajama-clad man who'd put it on him. "I'm not cold."
"Well, I am," Terra said easily, putting a blanket around Aqua, as well, who thanked him with a smile; then himself. He sat down, scooting close until Ventus felt safe, closed in between them. "The days are warm, but it gets chilly after the sun goes down."

"Weakling," Ventus muttered, still huddling in the blanket.

"Ven, stop insulting someone who's trying to help you, unless you're ready for Round 2," Aqua said. "And yes, I'm calling you Ven, because that's who you've always been to me, and that's who you still are."

"Veeen wouldn't come barging in at two in the morning trying to kill you," Ventus said resentfully. "He was so perfect and sweet and freaking loveable. I'm not Ven. We were watching the birds hatch together and then he went off, except I think it was Vanitas who left first but then I was Vanitas and I couldn't find Ven...all the wrong Keyblades, like I got mixed up with Sora and Roxas and Xion, too...."

He drew in a shaky breath. "There's no way I can ever be Ven. I can't do it, it's too hard. The only, only, only time I was ever able to be good and nice was when I was Ven, but now he's just me and I knew freaking Vanitas would drag me back and he does, I can't do it anymore...."

"You're doing fine, Ventus," Aqua said softly. "It's hard for everyone to be good. Everyone, not just you."

"People don't look at you and start closing curtains and pulling their kids away, like you're some kind of rabid dog!"

"They judge you based on your past," Terra sighed. "You can't blame them, Ven.... When they've seen you do terrible things, of course they're gonna be on their guard, even if you came back wanting to help."

Ventus's retort died unspoken when he saw the sadness on his friend's face and realized that Terra knew exactly what it was like, too. He leaned his head on Terra's shoulder. "So what, then? Just give up and go find a new world where no one knows you?"

Terra smiled a little. "Just do your best, Ven. Even if it's hard and they hate you, don't give up. There's always someone somewhere who still loves you and believes in you, someone who can see
the light in your heart even when you can't see it yourself."

Ventus slowly released the edges of the blanket and pressed his hands over his own heart. "The light in my heart...I guess it's still in there...."

"Of course it is," Aqua said affectionately. "Light is always stronger than darkness - your light can't ever be snuffed out, Ven. It's part of you, it's who you are."

"Then why can't I feel him anymore?" Ventus asked, tears pricking his eyes. "I try to talk to him, ask him what he would do, but he never answers me, and I never know what to do even though I know he does...." 'It makes me feel so alone.' Except that he didn't feel alone now, with Terra and Aqua so close.

"What, does Vanitas answer you, then?" Terra asked curiously.

Ventus grimaced. "I don't know. I try not to talk to him." He sighed. "Everything was so easy when I was Ven, I didn't even think about it. Now, it's like...every time I talk to someone, even look at someone, I have to figure out what the right thing to do is. And it's hard and sometimes I don't want to stop and think, and I keep screwing up and everyone gets so mad at me. I hate it. I wanna get rid of Vanitas again, I don't want him screwing up my life! I knew he'd drag me down if I took him back, but I took him back anyway because it was the right thing to do and he was hurting so much, but now I'm the one hurting and I liked not being so scared and mad all the time, but now I'm stuck with him again and I'm scared and mad again and I hate being me...."

"Well, just trying to escape the darkness isn't going to work in the long run. You have to face it and actually deal with it, Ven."

"I don't want to," he pouted.

"What is it you're even scared of?" Terra wondered. "Xehanort's gone, he can't come back. We made sure of that."

"It's not Xehanort, geez."

Ventus lay down with his head in Aqua's lap and had to think about it for a long time. Then when he finally decided what it was all about, he didn't want to tell them, it was so stupid. 'I'm afraid of
being abandoned...locked in the dark for so long, stomach twisting with hunger.... I'm afraid of having a new mom, what if she doesn't like me, I don't know the rules, I don't know how to make her love me, I'm terrified every time she gets angry.... I'm afraid of the kids at school with their hostile eyes, of no one respecting me, no one thinking I'm worth anything; I'm afraid of losing what little I have that's precious to me, I'm afraid that the few people who love me will turn their backs and leave me like she did, will be torn away from me like they were, it's all my fault, if I hadn't been so stupid, it's all my fault....' "I'm done talking," he finally choked out, clutching hard at Aqua's robe. "I'm not talking. I'm not talking. Go away. I don't want you here. I want to be by myself." 'Leave now while I'm telling you to, so it won't hurt as much as you leaving when I'm not expecting it.'

"Well, you know," Terra remarked, gently touching Ventus's clenched fist, "I don't think we could leave even if we wanted to, the way you're holding us back...."

Ventus let out a dry sob, but couldn't make himself let go.

"Ven," Aqua said, "do you want us to leave? Do you truly want us to leave? Or do you want us to stay? Because if you want us to stay, we will stay."

There was a long pause.

"Yes," Ventus finally whispered, because that's what Ven would have said. "I want you to stay. I need you. If you leave me, I'll die."

Aqua stooped to kiss his temple. "You won't die, love. You're very strong. But yes, of course we'll stay."

"As long as you need us," Terra added, patting his back.

Ventus smiled a little and relaxed. They eventually returned to the castle and fell asleep together on the living room floor and couches, and when Ventus awakened a few hours later, both of his best friends were still there, just as they'd promised they'd be.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: In the final drafts of both this and Before Sora, I'm debating about whether to
just make Lulu a random OC, since I don't feel comfortable using her. :/

If you notice Ventus's angst being a little contradictory at times, that was purposeful. XD

"HSE" stands for "High School Equivalency."

"Kaze" is the Japanese word for "wind." In my headcanon, Xion started calling Vanitas that sometimes so she wouldn't have to keep labeling him as 'empty.'

The story was supposed to just be that last scene with the BBS trio, in which case I'd intended to launch another series (not for a theme challenge or anything) focused on Terra, Aqua, Ven, & sometimes Vanitas. However, I felt like I needed to lead up to the scene rather than just plunge right in, and of course the characters were screen hogs and talked way too much. Between Naminé, the Destiny trio, and Sapphique (my OC mother of Ven & Sora), I figured this had disqualified itself as a BBS trio fic, so I decided to put it in the After the Battle series instead. *sweatdrop* (It's also supposed to fit fairly well with the AkuSaiRokuShi-focused BbF&ML stories.)

I started writing this story very spontaneously, because I was talking about VenVan with my friends and did not have time to properly express my feels, so I wrote a fanfic instead. XD (It took longer than I thought to finish, though. DX) I may be able to clearly and thoroughly articulate my opinions in an essay if I OCD over it enough, but it's in stories that I feel like I'm better expressive and can convey the heart of the information best. Plus, I feel like I can just write a story and be done with it, rather than repeating myself over and over again in scattered mini-essays and rants. :/

Vanitas' Love Story by SorasPrincesss got me hooked, and since then, platonic VenVan's become one of my OTPs, and my favorite KH pairing that's unrelated to my OT4. It's so deeply meaningful to me, I LOVE all the thematic stuff they've got going on in their relationship, and...whatever; I just wrote a fic attempting to express it, I don't need to try to re-create the explanation in an essay. XD

Poor Aqua...no one should be forced the read minds the way she's forced to read Ventus's here. :/ But she puts up with it because he's her baby and she loves him.... (Ftr, not everyone means the opposite of what they say, and even when they do, it's not consistent. You really do have to know them intimately enough to be able to read their minds, and there's probably some times when it's more productive to not even bother and to try to just cut to the heart of the matter, but.... I think what I'm trying to say is that I was going more for exploring thematic issues rather than a practical demonstration of counseling methods or whatever. ...I'm not making sense, am I. orz)
The thing about Vanitas feeling the physical pain of his Unversed is from the novels, I didn't come up with it.

I really wanted this whole fic to be platonic love...honestly, there are some couples in here, but I tried to at least leave room for platonic interpretations. :/

"What about item synthesis? I thought you said you were gonna talk to the Moogles about joining their guild.” A reference to my fic Sora's Job Quest. XD
After the Battle: Chain (theme 3) - Belle {Belle & Beast}

After the Battle

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Summary: Luckily for everyone, Xehanort is finally dead. Now they can get on with their lives. Series of post-canon one-shots; no slash.

Introduction: I decided to take on Xaina's 50 Lives Challenge to show what fifty KH/Disney/FF characters are doing after the final battle with Xehanort.

Then I realized that it would also be a good series for any post-canon fics that don't fit anywhere else, such as stories that take place in the same basic universe as BbF&ML but focus on characters other than AkuSaiRokuShi (VenVan, Sora, Naminé, Riku, Olette, etc.). So yeah...these will all be post-canon stories, but only some for Xainagal's challenge, and not all of them will fit on the same timeline (for example, some stories might have Cinderella ending up with Terra, others might pair her with Charming).

By the way, there will be lots of pairings in this series. Canon, crack, platonic, (usually light) romance, occasional musical chairs because I don't like tying down some characters to the same pairing all the time... No slash romance, though; you guys know me.

50 Lives Challenge by Xainagal, written by Raberba girl

Theme 3: Chain (Belle) [rough draft]

Summary: Prince Adam gives Belle a gift.

It's his eyes that reassure me, and his voice. Whenever I look at this handsome stranger and feel uneasy, I remind myself that his eyes are still the exact same, and I ask him a question so that he'll have to speak to answer. His voice has lost that gruff, animal-like timbre, but the richness is still the same, the inflection...I can still hear him, my beloved Beast within the stranger-prince.
The occasional childishness is the same, too, though it's softened over all this time so that I sometimes find it endearing rather than exasperating. Like now, as he fidgets nervously and looks cute doing so. "Belle...."

"What is it, Adam?"

He always smiles when I say his name, and it lights up his face as if it's reflecting his heart. That, too, is how I know he's still the man I fell in love with, and not a stranger after all. "Belle, I...I have something for you."

"Another library?" I tease, and his eyes widen.

"I-- Er-- I can order some more books, if you like--"

"Darling, it's a joke."

He flushes, half ashamed and angry at being tricked, but also half-pleased at the term of endearment. "There's more books in the library than you can even read in a lifetime, anyway...."

"What is it you have for me, dear?"

He looks down, uncertain now. I shouldn't have teased him, he hasn't learned how to respond to it yet. "Something...small...."

"Like a peppermint?"

"What? No! That's not a gift, that's a, a breath freshener."

"Oooh, so it's more expensive than candy?" No, I shouldn't say that, then he'll think I won't be interested in little gifts that cost nothing. I only meant to reset the standard and make him feel more at ease....

He doesn't even notice, though. Wealth is like breath to him, something always available to be
taken for granted. "Of course. Ahem. Turn around."

I smile curiously and turn my back to him. After a moment, he reaches over my head, and I catch a glimpse of a lovely gold necklace before the pendant comes to rest against my skin. I can't see it anymore as it's pulled taut - he's trying to fasten the chain.

He struggles with it for a little while, but eventually manages to get it clasped, and the pendant drops low enough for me to see it again. I lift it with gentle fingers and turn back around so he can see me smiling at it. "It's beautiful, Adam."

"I wasn't sure what to choose...Lumiere and Mrs. Potts helped," he mumbles.

"All three of you have good taste," I say, kissing his cheek.

He smiles, despite himself, then reaches around my waist to hold me close and rest his face against my hair. I close my eyes and breathe him in, his strong wild scent still detectable beneath the obligatory perfume.

"I still can't get over it," he murmurs.

"Hmm?"

"Having fingers again...."

I catch my breath as I remember that not so long ago, he would never have been able to get that piece of jewelry fastened around my neck. I take both of his beautiful human hands in mine and kiss them. "There are some things that I miss about my ferocious Beast, but this is not one of them."

"There are other things I can do with hands like these," he says, in the sort of tone that makes me shiver in delicious anticipation. Then he suddenly exclaims, "Wait, what is it that you miss about me being a beast?!" and I laugh.
Author's Notes: What is it with me and adorably clueless characters...? Even with charas I've never written before, as long as they've got a trait like that somewhere, it's like I automatically zero in on it and suddenly they're fun to write. XD

I have five more of these stories drafted, but I should probably wait a few days to post them, huh. :/ You guys are probably sick of having R.girl updates popping up in your inboxes every few hours....

Complete: 1/50
Okay I know I'm a free genie now and I don't owe anybody any wishes, EVER AGAIN, but...it's Al! Al, Laddie, Al a Din, my best friend, the first master who almost didn't feel like a master, treating me like I was worth being respected...OH, not to mention, *first guy ever* who even THOUGHT about asking me what I wanted. Asking my opinion on ANYTHING. Promised me freedom without a second's hesitation and then actually *delivered* - well, okay, after being a jerk about it; but the point is that IN THE END - he came through for me. He really did. And I'll never forget that, not in a million years (literally). So....

They're staring at me all wide-eyed and cute in their wedding getup. "Genie...really?" Al says, looking awed.

"Abso-posi-LUTELY! Three wishes, for old times' sake, *my* wedding gift to YOU! No substitutions, exchanges, or refunds! Oh, and of *course* the ruuuules are still in effect: can't kill anyone, can't make anyone fall in love with anyone else (not that you two need help with that anymore, L-O-L!), can't bring anyone back from the dead 'cuz it's not a pretty picture and I DON'T LIKE DOING IT--"

Only Jaz could make me speechless, grabbing me by the beard like that so she can hold my cheek still long enough to kiss it. "Ohhh, Genie, thank you so much," she says in her sweet desert princess way that I *think* is more flirty than she knows.

"Heh heh...*ahem*, well, SO, how're we gonna divvy this up, huh?"

Al and Jaz, realizing they now have to split three wishes between two people, burst into laughter and decide pretty quickly.
Author's Notes: I'm definitely not happy with this one, but the rest of them are better.

Complete: 2/50
"Oh, Aunt Flora, I'm so glad you've come," I say anxiously, hugging my fairy godmothers as they flit over to meet me. "I tried kissing him, but it didn't work. He still won't wake up, and he looks so terrible, very pale and sweaty, and I've been so worried...."

"Come, dear, let's take a look at him," Aunt Fauna says soothingly, putting her arm around my shoulders as we hurry to the chamber where poor Phillip lies asleep.

Aunt Merryweather goes to him at once, laying her palm on his forehead and closing her eyes for a moment. She finally smiles a little and looks at me again. "Don't worry, Rose, it's not an evil spell or anything of the sort. He just has a little viral infection, that's all."

"A...a what?"

"Move aside, dear," Aunt Flora says impatiently, pushing Aunt Merryweather over. "We've got to bring his fever down at once."

"I know perfectly well how to do that," Aunt Merryweather protests, pouting a little.

"I'll make some soup~" Aunt Fauna announces, immediately heading for the door and looking delighted to have someone to take care of again.

"He will get better, won't he?" I ask, trying not to sound upset.
"Of course, dear, of course! Don't fret. Run along now and fetch some ice from the kitchen, please."

"Ice? But it's summer!"

"Oooh, sometimes I forget they're only human," Aunt Flora grumbles.

It can be difficult to tell what they're talking about at times....

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Hmmm, maybe this is the middle of the night and Rose was the first person to realize that he's sick...? And I think that's more Merlin's thing, not the Good Fairies', to miss modern technology in medieval times. ^_^; *failfic DX*

Complete: 3/50
Stepmother is the one standing in shame before the dais, and I am the one dressed like a princess, with the king himself and the king's son and their people surrounding me. Yet something in my heart still quivers when I see her eyes flashing with rage.

"You...insolent, ungrateful girl - this is all your fault! If you hadn't been rebellious and disobedient, it would be my daughter on that throne! You've stolen my children's future!"

How can she say such a thing? How? After everything, everything she's done to me...?

My supporters begin to berate her, but I speak before they can get through the first sentence, and they fall quiet. "You blame your misfortunes on me, Stepmother?"

"Of course! If you had known your place--"

"I suppose you also blame Father for dying, and so depriving you of the full amount of income you expected. Perhaps you blame the servants who were dismissed afterward, for no longer being there to maintain the estate. Or Lucifer for failing to hunt, so that my friends were able to help me in my time of need. Or the prince for choosing me over one of your daughters.

"Yet the one person you would never, ever blame, Stepmother, is the person who did mismanage Father's affairs until we became too poor to pay the servants; who raised her daughters to be so ill-natured as to turn away any man, much less one who had his pick of any eligible lady in the kingdom--"
I can tell from her face that she does not hear a word I'm saying, that I might as well be deaf and
dumb to her. I will forever be her enemy, and nothing I do or say can change that. "Don't speak
nonsense, wretched child! I--"

"I think we've heard quite enough," the king says harshly. "Take her away, and don't let her within
shouting distance of the castle ever again."

"Unhand me at once, you brutes!" Stepmother cries in outrage, but the guards take no notice as
they continue to escort her away.

As soon as she is gone, I release a breath I did not realize I was holding, feeling shaky and
triumphant and sad all at once.

"Cinderella," the prince says softly, taking gentle hold of my arm as if to steady me, "I didn't
know. If I'd known, I wouldn't have--"

"Please, it's all right. I don't think she'll trouble me again...."

Although it doesn't seem proper to do such a thing where so many people are watching, he tilts up
my face to meet his and kisses me. The king simply watches with a pleased smile, and I find that I
don't mind, either.

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Author's Notes: I'm definitely a Terrella shipper, but Charmella seemed to work better for this one.
^^;

Complete: 4/50
I like having friends. Aladdin tends to get drawn into many adventures, and sometimes he forgets to take me along, so it's nice when I have more people than just Rajah to help pass the time with until my husband returns.

The two of us are enjoying some tea in my private garden. Well, I'm enjoying it. Saïx - Isa - is sipping from his cup politely, but I don't think that he is overly fond of tea.

Rajah is jealous and has both his head and front paws across my lap, and is quite heavy...I don't have the heart to move him, though. That's the one downside to having other friends, is that my very first one now feels neglected sometimes.

"I did not say I couldn't sing well," Isa grumbles. "I simply meant that singing is not something I will do before an audience."

"Isa, there's no one here except me, you, and Rajah." And whatever guards and servants are lurking around, ready at a moment's notice to protect me or wait on me, but I think it's better not to mention them.

"Two too many, then."

"You're just making excuses because you really can't sing, but you want me to think you can without actually having the...." I can't actually say it because of the censors, but he knows what I mean. "...you don't have the guts to prove it."
"Insulting my manhood is not going to get you what you want, since I have no reason to impress you."

I sing the introduction to Giselle's Happy Working Song, and several small animals answer the summons. Isa edges away from them in distaste, and Rajah growls at them possessively. "It's so easy, Isa," I try. "You're the fairest man I've ever met, you were made...."

I pause invitingly, but he only gives me one of his you-are-sadly-mistaken-if-you-think-I'll-cooperate looks.

"Why not, Isa?"

"Because all you sparkling heroines seem to be disturbingly prone to thinking that any handsome young man who'll sing a duet with you is your soulmate. I hope I don't have to remind you that you are already married to someone else, not to mention that you are nearly ten years younger than me and would still be considered a minor in my homeworld."

Some of my past suitors had been almost old enough to be my grandfathers.... I would have been relieved enough to end up with a man still in his twenties. The fact that Aladdin is so close to my own age just makes him that much more perfect. "It's not automatic. It just seems that way because most of us find the first handsome young man we meet to be perfect for us. You, if you recall, were actually the first handsome man I ever laid eyes on, and I ended up deciding that my true love was someone else, didn't I?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep up that 'handsome' talk," he sighs, as if I only say it to annoy him. If he'd just allow me, or any of us, to fix that shaggy mess of hair, he'd be quite stunning.

"Yes, you're just so ugly, Isa, with that well-featured face of yours, those captivating green eyes, all the nicely-sculpted muscles from your years as a fearless warrior - I don't know how I can stand to look at you." He is so cute when he glares. And he wonders why we think it's so fun to tease him. "Little bread-and-butterflies kiss the tulips, and the sun is like a toy balloon," I sing, as off-key as I can. It is quite difficult, and doesn't sound as bad as I'd hoped, but it's enough for him to wince and have trouble swallowing the mouthful of tea he'd just sipped.

"Ahem...princess, please stop that."

I smile and 'sing' louder. "There are get-up-in-the-morning glories in the golden afternoon~"
He closes his eyes in a silent groan, then finally joins in, softly at first but rising a little in volume as I stop torturing him. "There are dizzy daffodils on the hillside, strings of violets are all in tune. Tiger lilies love the dandy lions in the golden afternoon--"

"The golden afternoon," I sing, properly this time.

We continue the song together. Though he has his eyes closed with a resigned expression on his face, I can't take my own eyes off of him. He does sing beautifully...and there's just something so-- I can't describe it...something so lovely about singing together with someone in perfect harmony....

"There's a wealth of happiness and romance in the golden afternoon," we finish.

In the silence, he opens his eyes again, and we gaze at each other for a while.

"...Stop looking at me like that," he finally says uncomfortably.

"Sometimes, Isa, I wish I were a man," I murmur. And that they were women, so that Aladdin could be my beloved First Wife, and Isa could be my dear concubine who can do what he likes when I don't feel like playing with him. Isa looks so amusingly disgusted as he imagines a male version of me that I burst into laughter and don't bother to clarify.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: The song is "All in the Golden Afternoon" from Disney's Alice in Wonderland.

My opinions concerning a few things in this drabble are so complicated that it'll take too long to explain them fully.... Specifically: age gaps, arranged marriages, polygamy, and SaiJaz(Al).

To sum it up very briefly, in a way that probably doesn't explain anything: I'm a devout Christian, I have a lot of negative personal family history concerning Middle Eastern culture, my opinions on certain topics will vary depending on the circumstances (ultimately, NO ONE SHOULD GET HURT), I like experimenting with tropes and making more positive interpretations of things that really bother me, both AlJaz and SaiJaz are among my top favorite pairings ever, Isa/Saix is my token asexual in the Kingdom Hearts fandom, I adore platonic love, and I hate the thought of my work coming across as racist, because that was never my intention.
This drabble was *meant* to be cute and sweet, and I like it. I didn't mean to end on a downer; sorry. :/

There's still one more drabble I have ready, but it's really late and I need to sleep. ^^;

Complete: 5/50
After the Battle: No Way Out (theme 49) - Tinker Bell {Tinker Bell & Peter Pan}

After the Battle, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork: 50 Lives Challenge by Xainagal, written by Raberba girl

Theme 49: No Way Out (Tinker Bell) [rough draft]

Summary: Unrequited love can be difficult....

A/N: Warning for language, though the word actually appears in the original Peter Pan novel.

0.0.0

Trapped, stuck in the drawer, no way out, shoving and shoving and shoving can't get out PETER HELP ME

"Aw, geez, Tink, whatcha playin' at?"

Yanking open the drawer with those big giant hands of his like it's soooo easy, jerk!

But as soon as I see his face, anger melts to love, love love love, I love him so very much. I fly up to his face and give him a kiss. A 'thimble,' he thinks they're called, no thanks to that great stupid Girl.

"Heheh, enough, Tink, that tickles. Come on! Let's go back home and tell the boys how 'Aladdin and the King of Thieves' ended."

Not as stupid a story as usual - no clumsy wretched girls, just brave handsome men. Like my Peter. Except he's not a man, will never be, but it doesn't matter because he's already perfect. Perfect in every way except he'll never love me the way I love him.
"I love you," I tell him.

"Love ya, too, Tink," he says, so carelessly that it nearly breaks my heart. He's just a child. Huge as a mountain to me, but a child all the same.

"You silly ass."

"If anyone is, it's you."

"No, you."

"You!"

"You!"

A child forever, but Peter Pan is Peter Pan - youth, joy, a little bird that has broken out of the egg, a warrior forever at play who has no use for the warmth of a lover. It hurts my heart sometimes, but I don't care, because I wouldn't love him if he was anything else.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I've been re-reading/watching a lot of Peter Pan stuff lately. I'm gonna blog about it once I finish The Little White Bird and re-watch Hook (one of my favorite movies), but I might ramble a bit now, since I'm posting this drabble....

Disney actually did a pretty good job, but that 2003 live action film...ugh. I actually did love it the first time I saw it, but the second time was a bit of a disappointment, and the third time I saw it for my recent Peter Pan binge, I got so angry, and I honestly don't think I will ever be able to sit through the whole thing again. They wrecked it. They took a story that's meant to glorify childhood (while also fully recognizing its dark side), a character who sacrifices half his life experience in order to prolong and enhance the other half, and turned it into a creepy romance with sexual undertones. It just...gah.

Anyway, my basic vision of Peter Pan in a Kingdom Hearts context is a mix of the original novel
and the Disney adaptation, since I think the two complement each other in most ways (with the Lost Boys being the biggest exception I can think of). Like Sora, Peter Pan somehow gets away with being a huge Gary Stu, yet unlike Sora, he is quite a selfish creature, so I have no idea how he does it. Neverland practically revolves around him, he excels at everything that matters in his world, and almost every female he meets falls in unrequited love with him. Sometimes it's platonic or love/hate (Mrs. Darling, the Never bird), sometimes it's romantic (Tinker Bell, Tiger Lily), sometimes it's debatable (Wendy, the mermaids). (And sometimes it's just hate, maybe with a bit of desparing admiration [Captain Hook]. XD) Nevertheless, the point is that Peter attracts virtually every sentient creature in some way, but at the same time, he doesn't really need anyone and he doesn't get overly attached to anyone - the whole world and life in general is literally all a game to him.

Anyway...I keep trying to say too much that actually has nothing to do with this drabble.... I forgot what my point was. Basically, Peter Pan, as long as he's a child living in Neverland, will never fall in love, and he likes it that way. He chose that. I hate it when people talk as if you're somehow 'incomplete' unless you've found your 'true love' and are living 'happily ever after,' or are at least trying to do so. -.‐ As Ole Golly says in Harriet the Spy, "There are as many ways to live in this world as there are people in this world," and people's choices aren't necessarily wrong just because they're not the same things you would have chosen.

Way too much rambling for such a tiny drabble, but I adore J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan, and this subject is important to me, and I haven't gotten a chance to journal about it yet....

Complete: 6/50
Summary: Lea has no idea how he went from being ripped apart by monsters in Radiant Garden to wandering around this quiet, sunset-lit town. All he knows is that whenever he does manage to make his way home, he'll be bringing these two adorable little orphan kids with him.

0.0.0

This place was called 'Twilight Town,' apparently, and their calendar was TOTALLY DIFFERENT than the Garden's, so Lea had absolutely no idea how much time he'd missed.

Or how he'd gotten here, for that matter. The last thing he remembered, Radiant Garden was being invaded by an entire army of those shadow monsters; he and Isa had been running; he'd turned back at the sound of Isa's cry of pain; hands burning as he tried to rip the shadows away from his friend; then he was on the ground feeling like his heart was being torn out of his chest. Darkness. Despair. Something like a long, long nightmare he couldn't remember.

Then waking up here on the sun-warmed pavement without a scratch on him, as if none of it had ever happened. His chest had ached for a while, something was weird about the way his heart beat - but he got used to it, and now here he was, at an ice cream shop. He was here because he didn't have anywhere else to be.

This town wasn't big, and he'd looked over every inch of it. None of it seemed familiar beyond a vague sense of déjà vu. He didn't know anyone here, and vice versa; and no one had any clue what he was talking about when he tried to ask them how to get back to Radiant Garden. Less than a handful of people even showed a trace of recognition, and even that wasn't much to go on: three teenagers who gave him uneasy looks, the blonde belligerently ordering Lea to get lost, the girl admonishing, "Now, Hayner, I know he looks like that kidnapper, but there's no way they're the same," and the shorter boy murmuring, "Man, they've got the exact same eyes, and that hair; I wonder if they're related?" Lea hadn't been able to ask for more, though. That Hayner guy really seemed to hate him.
So not counting that trio, it was just the ice cream lady who had gasped in surprised delight when he'd come up to the counter. "Ohhh, you look just like that regular of mine, the one I haven't seen in weeks! Are you two related?"

"Dunno. What's his name?"

Of course she hadn't known. And the guy hadn't really sounded familiar when she described him, either. Maybe a bit like Uncle Reno, except the tattoos were wrong.

"Well, whatever. I'll ask Mom about it when I get home."

If he ever got home. Of course he would, but...he just hadn't thought of a way to get there yet. Apparently he couldn't just take a train there, partly because none of these people had ever heard of the place, and partly because he had no munny.

Speaking of which, it was kind of amazing how important munny became when you were temporarily homeless. When you didn't have it, you couldn't ride the trams, couldn't even eat, couldn't sleep anywhere but on the street, it was crazy.

It was pretty easy to pick up an odd job here and there in order to score a meal, but Lea quickly discovered that it was going to take more than that to live. Hence the ice cream shop.... The lady had looked at him for a while, then smiled and hired him, probably as a charity case. Didn't matter. Lea mopped the floor and washed dishes and took out the trash and made deliveries all day so that he had a steady source of income that was more than a pittance. He had to start saving. Gummi blocks were expensive.

"You're gonna make a ship?" his boss had said in astonishment, pouring ingredients into the mixer as Lea stuck popsicle sticks into each compartment of the tray she'd just finished.

"Yeah. Only way I can think of to get back to my homeworld."

"Your 'homeworld,'" she'd laughed. "Are you an alien or something?"

He didn't know why he was so very sure that there were other worlds out there, and that Radiant
Garden was one of them. But he *did* know, quite strongly, that this Twilight Town place was not the only one that existed. "Maybe? I dunno. I just know I can't live here forever."

It wasn't that he didn't like it here - he actually did, a lot. But there was a part of him that felt like something was *missing*, that there were people waiting for him who needed him. *'Isa, and my family.*' They probably had no idea where he was, how to find him or even look for him. So he had to get back home and make everything right again. Maybe one day he would come back to live in Twilight Town, maybe not; but for now, he couldn't stay a minute longer than he had to. *'Just hold on, guys...I'm coming, as fast as I can. Wait for me.*' Isa, his parents, his sisters and brother.

But there was someone else, too, wasn't there? Who was he forgetting...?

On the fourth morning, Lea woke up in his new hotel room to the sound of the alarm clock he had set. He was tempted to just roll over and roll back asleep, but for some reason, it was easier to get out of bed these days, as if he somehow magically got used to waking up early. "Hooray, off to work," he grumbled. Working in an ice cream shop wasn't bad, though, and he whistled a cheerful tune as he pulled on his clothes and reached for the hair gel.

Making his way to the shop in the fresh morning air, munching on a cinnamon roll for breakfast, Lea paused when he saw the Cute Th-- The kids playing in an alley. Well, not 'playing,' exactly.... The little boy was crouched on a shed roof, a determined look in his eyes as he stared at the trash can below. The little girl was crouched similarly on the ground, eyes fixed on the same target. Both children looked to be about four or five years old.

*'Are they planning to--?'* Lea started to wonder, but then the boy let out a(n adorable) little battle-cry and leaped, landing on top of the can. Lea gasped in concern as the thing toppled over, but the boy scrambled clear as if he'd been expecting to fall. The girl was already jumping to catch the trash can, flinging her body at it to prevent it from rolling down the inclined street.

There was a pause. Then the children exchanged a look and a giggle, faces lit up as if to say, "*We did it!!*"

"Hey," Lea said, "are you ok--?"

The boy gave him a wary look and hurried to join the girl. "Quick," he said to her, and started stabbing at one of the plastic trash bags with a stick.
"Maybe there's chicken nuggets like last time," she murmured hopefully, sticking her fingers into the hole her friend had made and trying to pry the plastic farther apart.

"Are you guys trying to eat garbage?!" Lea exclaimed in horror.

The little boy flew at him with the stick. "Go away," he snarled. "It's ours it's ours it's ours, no one wants it so let us have it!!!"

"Roxas, I found a pizza," the girl called urgently, clutching a cardboard box to her chest that was almost as big as she was, staring at Lea in fear. "Let's go!"

The boy dropped the stick and tried to run, but Lea managed to catch him by the back of his shirt. The boy shrieked and struggled, but Lea kept his arm clamped firmly around him as he tugged the pizza box out of the little girl's hands and opened it to reveal a disgusting, dried-out slab of bread clinging to the inside of the cardboard by the stiff remains of tomato sauce. "You guys can't eat this."

"Let Roxas go," the girl pleaded tearfully. "Please give him back. I promise we won't eat your pizza, but please don't hurt him."

Both of them were a mess...faces and clothes smeared with grime, wild greasy hair, scabs and bruises on their flesh, including where the boy had scraped his hands and knees from knocking over the trash can....

"Flaming pants. Are you two orphans or what?"

The girl reached for Roxas's hands, and he clung to her. She braced her tiny feet on the ground and heaved back, trying hard to pull Roxas out of Lea's grip.

"Flaming pants...." Lea scooped her up in his other arm and started carrying them both toward the nearest restaurant.

"Let go! Jerk! I'll hit you!"
"Let us go! Pleeeaaase, please let us go!"

Of course he got a lot of weird looks, ordering pancakes while holding a couple of yelling, struggling small children, but whatever. As long as they got a few mouthfuls of food before the police showed up, he didn't care.

He went and shoved them into a booth, blocking their way with his body. When he wouldn't let them escape either over or under the table, Roxas finally crawled over the girl in order to stand between her and Lea, hands pressed against Lea's chest as if to hold him back, glaring fiercely.

"Hey," Lea said gently, "I'm not gonna hurt you. We're here to eat breakfast."

"I killed a Heartless," the boy growled, "me and Xion did. We can kill you, too."

'Heartless?' Lea wasn't quite sure what the word meant, but for some reason, it instantly summoned to his mind a memory of the shadow monsters that had nearly destroyed him in the Garden. "That'd be a bad idea, though, since I'm your meal ticket."

"...."

A grim-looking waitress came over and set a plate of pancakes on the table. "Here's your--"

The little girl - Xion? - instantly seized the plate and dragged it close, cramming a handful of pancakes into her mouth as she did so. Roxas quickly sat down and shoved back against her, feet braced against Lea as if to continue holding him at bay, the knife and fork gripped in his fists like weapons. He kept glaring as he opened his mouth to let Xion feed him pancakes, too.

'They're like a little team,' Lea thought, tears pricking at his eyes from the mix of admiration and squee and sadness filling his heart. 'I don't know how long they've been on the streets, but it's like they can read each other's minds, like they know each other's roles and trust each other without question....'

"Can we talk?" the waitress said meaningfully.
Lea sighed and got up, following her away from the table. Roxas and Xion were now focused on the food like starving animals and made no move to escape. "I found them on the street," he said, knowing that explanations wouldn't help but going through the motions anyway. "They're hungry. I'm just buying them breakfast."

"Uh huh." She looked doubtful, but kept glancing at the children, whose behavior didn't clash with Lea's story. "Well, when some strange guy comes strolling in, dragging a couple of screaming kids, people are gonna make assumptions--"

"I know. Okay? I know. Just keep the food coming, and I'll tell you where to send the bill."

Roxas and Xion, no longer paying any attention to Lea, were slurping milk out of the same bowl of cereal when the police arrived. Lea stood up without a word and let them handcuff him, smiling a little when the kids paused in their devouring to watch in wary confusion. "You guys just ask the ladies for whatever else you want to eat, okay?"

"What's happening?" Xion asked urgently, and Roxas stood up on the seat with the knife and fork in his fists again. For a five-year-old with syrup and chocolate and milk smeared all over his face, he looked strangely deadly.

"Hello, honey," the female officer said in a soothing tone. "Was this person bothering you?"

"Where are you going?!" Xion called after Lea, staring as the other officer began pulling him away.

"There's food here," Roxas told the policewoman, but his eyes were fixed on Lea, too.

"Do you know that person?" she asked again.

Roxas and Xion climbed to the floor and rushed after Lea, clinging to him with fingers made sticky from their meal. "Don't go away!"

"They think I'm a kidnapper or something," Lea told them.
They stared, uncomprehending.

"Where are your parents?" the male officer asked the children.

"You can't take him away," Roxas said. "I want him."

"Please please please don't take him away," Xion begged.

"Where are their parents?" the police asked Lea.

"Um...well...I don't know where their parents went, so I've been...taking care of them."

"What is your relation to them?"

"I'm...their...."

"Best friends," Roxas suddenly said, and everyone looked at him. "Best friends. We wanna be together forever. And...something sweet. And salty."

"Somewhere way up high," Xion said softly. "With the sun."

'Where have I heard that before?' Lea wondered, feeling like he had almost, almost remembered something from a dream.

There was a long pause.

"What are their names?" the police finally asked.

"The boy's Roxas. And, um, the girl is Xion," Lea said, hoping he'd guessed right.
"Roxas and Xion? Are those your names?" the lady said.

"Uh huh. Number XIII."

'Where have I heard this before?!' Lea wondered, starting to feel desperate at the strong déjà vu. 'Did I already know these kids somehow??'

"Roxas and Xion, how did you meet this person?"

'He found us digging through the trash,' Lea thought in half-amused and half-anxious anticipation.

"We're best friends forever," Xion said, clinging so tightly that Lea's leg was starting to hurt.

"And we do have hearts," said Roxas.

"Hmmm." The police eventually let Lea go, with a warning that both they and the townspeople would be keeping an eye on him and the children. Lea pretended he was Isa, trying to be as polite and respectful and obedient as he could so they'd get off his case, and felt nearly breathless with freedom when he was finally able to walk out, hand in hand with his two tiny new 'best friends.'

"Man...flaming pants, that was...."

"We got to keep him," Xion said mischievously.

Roxas grinned back at her, squeezing Lea's hand. "He's big. He can reach the high places and push over the heavy stuff."

"What am I, your servant?" Lea laughed.

At the ice cream shop, he greeted his boss, Gina, with a sheepish smile. "Hey...sorry I was late, I just, um...." He looked down at the kids, who held tightly to his hands and gazed up at Gina with huge, adorable, slightly apprehensive eyes.
"Ooooohhhh, is this your little brother and sister?!" she exclaimed in delight.

"Uh - no, but...."

"They're so precious!"

"Axel's big," Roxas told her.

"He got us food," Xion said. "Good food. I don't feel sick."

"They're street rats or something," Lea explained. "Found 'em digging through garbage on my way here...."

"Ohhhh!" she cried, now looking compassionately distressed.

"By the way," Lea said to the kids, "my name is Lea. L-E-A. Got it memorized?"

Xion said "Oh," and Roxas gave him a sulky look.

"Do you want some ice cream?" Gina asked, and the kids' faces completely lit up.

They both immediately pointed to the sea-salt without even glancing at any other flavors, and finished their ice cream bars quickly, making many loud exclamations of joy and rapture. After that, though, they got pretty restless, and it soon became clear that Gina and Lea were not going to be able to run the shop with the two small children underfoot.

"Here," Gina finally said, handing Lea a slip of paper. "Can you take the kids with you on this delivery?"

Lea read the address. "Man, that's all the way by the beach...."
"You can take your time," Gina said, and winked when Lea looked at her. "Take as much time as you need. All day, if you have to."

Lea smiled. "Man, you are an awesome boss..."

"They kind of remind me of those other two regulars, too," she murmured, watching the children affectionately. "It's just like seeing the three of you all together, except ten years younger...."

"The three of us?"

The delivery was light enough for Lea to carry on his back. Although Roxas and Xion were rambunctious and often strayed, they always came running back when he called them.

"There's a dog over there," Roxas told him.

"Really?"

"He's sooo cute," Xion gushed. "He licked me with his big slobbery tongue." She giggled.

"You guys are kinda filthy," Lea observed. "Hey, at the beach, let's go swimming, okay?"

"What's swimming?"

"What's--? You know, swimming! In the water?"

They looked at him and shrugged.

"You don't know what swimming is?!!"
"I know lots of things," Roxas pouted.

"It's fun, right?" Xion said. "It's not scary?"

"Of course it's fun! I'll teach you."

They took off as soon as they got off the tram and heard the sound of ocean waves. Lea was a bit worried when they didn't answer his call this time, but after he hurriedly dropped off his delivery, he found the kids on the beach quite soon. Roxas was shrieking happily as he alternately chased and fled the edge of the water, and Xion was on her knees in the wet sand, cradling a few seashells in her hands like they were jewels. "Look, Axel! They're pretty!"

"They are, aren't they," he agreed, crouching beside her. "And my name is Lea, remember?"

"One for each day," she said.

"Huh?"

"I don't know.... Lots of these on a pillow. There was one every day, but I don't remember why."

That made him wonder. "What do you remember?"

"Huh?"

Lea settled himself more comfortably. It felt a bit strange, sitting on wet sand while fully clothed with seawater splashing across him, but they'd been intending to swim anyway, and it wasn't like they had anything to change into. "You know. Where'd you come from, kid?"

Roxas dashed over and set his hands on Lea's shoulders, face alight with a heart-meltingly adorable grin. "The water goes up and down."

"You already look cleaner," Lea laughed. "How about you, Roxas? Do you remember where you came from?"
Roxas glanced restlessly out at the water. "It goes on forever."

Lea was starting to get the impression that they changed the subject whenever they didn't know the answer to a question. "What's the very, very, very first thing you guys remember?" he asked, and they both turned their attention back to him.

"Black," said Xion.

"It was bad, in the dark," said Roxas. "But we held on tight and woke up in the sun."


Lea was surprised to find his eyes smarting with tears again, and quickly blinked them away. "How long ago?"

Apparently confused again, their attention wandered.

"How many days were you on the street in Twilight Town?"

"Days," Roxas murmured. "Lots and lots...I counted, but I forgot."

Xion was counting on her fingers. "This many?" she said hesitantly. "Or maybe this many. We were hungry."

"Three or four? Huh," 'Did they show up in Twilight Town the same time I did?' Lea wondered. "Were you on the street a lot longer than Xion was, Roxas?"

"No," Roxas growled, and the children were gripping each other's hands again. "I didn't let Xion go this time. We're always gonna be together."

'Heh, now I'm the one confused....' "But you said you forgot how many days, because there were
"That was before," Roxas said impatiently.

"Before the dark?"

"I guess."

"Where were you before the dark?"

"I dunno." Then they said in perfect unison, "Sun and ice cream." Roxas poked at Lea's face, right under his eye, and added quietly, "And you."

"Did you...know me? Before the dark?"

"I dunno." They were getting restless again, but he sensed this time that it was because they were simply getting tired of being interrogated, of trying to chase after lost memories.

"...Well, I guess I promised I'd teach you how to swim, huh."

Xion latched onto Lea's arm. "We're not gonna go out there, are we?" she said nervously, and her eyes widened when he laughed.

Lea first rented a surfboard, since they didn't have any flotation devices. Then he pulled off all their shoes and sat the kids on the surfboard, towing them out until they were in water too deep for them to stand in. It came up to about his stomach.

They both looked simultaneously scared and excited, gripping the edges of the board tightly, yet giggling as they splashed their legs in the water. "You ready?" Lea asked.

"No," Xion said breathlessly, eyes alight.
Roxas simply watched him, tense as if not sure yet how much to trust him. Lea gently took hold of Roxas, pausing a moment to give the boy more of a choice. Roxas reached up and gripped Lea's elbows tightly, jaw clenched, looking like he was about to head into battle.

"I'm gonna take you off the board, okay?"

"Don't drop me," Roxas said tightly.

"I gotcha, okay?" Lea pulled him all the way into the water. Roxas and Xion both gasped, then fixed their eyes full of desperate trust on Lea. "Okay, so what you're gonna have to do is kick your legs--" There was a surge of churning water as Roxas started kicking mightily. Xion shrieked as she was splashed, and Lea burst into laughter.

They both picked it up shockingly quickly. Much sooner than Lea expected, the children were paddling easily around him, no longer fixated on him as a lifeline, occasionally grasping his shirt when they needed a rest. They seemed to have figured out how to tread water all by themselves.

"You guys are naturals...."

"I lived here a long time ago," Roxas suddenly said.

"In the ocean?" Lea said in surprise.

"You can hear it in the shell," Xion said.

"There was a yellow star," Roxas said. "And a race. And a boat. And another boy."

"We were all friends," Xion said. "It was really hard. But we did it." She clung to both Lea and Roxas. "It was so scary, and it hurt, but I'd rather fall in the black than Roxas or Axel get hurt."

Lea felt cold. "Let's...get back to the beach and find something to eat, okay?"

He spent the last of his munny on hot dogs and pretzels, and they sat in the sand to eat them,
shivering for only a minute or two until the sun warmed them up again.

"Aw, he's hungry," Xion said.

Lea looked where she was pointing, and gasped. "No, Xion, don't--!" It was too late - she'd already thrown a bit of hot dog bun at the seagull.

"Aahhhhh!" Roxas screamed as they were suddenly mobbed by hungry birds, "The Heartless!"

Lea was laughing as he seized the kids' arms and dragged them up to run with him.

"Run, run, run!" they were both shrieking, sounding more gleeful now.

By the time they returned to the hotel that evening, they were tired and hungry again, and all grainy from the saltwater that had dried on them and the remaining sand that had escaped Lea's dusting. They were, however, quite happy, and the kids were both significantly more clean than they had been in the morning.

"Man, what're we gonna do for dinner?" Lea wondered under his breath as they walked into the lobby.

The receptionist smiled in relief. "Oh! There you are. The, er, police were asking about you."

Lea rolled his eyes. "The kids are fine."

"We went to the beach!" Xion told her in excitement. "We swam!"

"The seagulls chased us," Roxas said, and let out a cackle of laughter at the memory.

The lady smiled. "Well, I'm glad to hear you three had fun."
"Hey," Lea said, "if we wash dishes or sweep floors or something, you think we could get some food in exchange? I already spent everything I earned today, and I won't have more munny until tomorrow...."

She eyed him. "Well, you can order room service and charge it to your bill, if you like."

Lea winced. 'So expensive....' Whatever; it was just for one night, then tomorrow he'd be more careful about budgeting his wages. "All right."

After they ate, he finally managed to get the kids settled in the other bed, where they fell asleep together like puppies after he had told them a story about a genie in a lamp who granted wishes. But sometime in the middle of the night, he sleepily cracked his eyes open to find two small, warm bodies curled up beside his own, and realized that they must have moved. "Silly things...."

"You're warm, Axel," Xion murmured in her sleep, nuzzling his arm a little.

"Man, I keep telling you my name's-- Ah, forget it; Axel, fine," he chuckled with a helpless smile. After all, it wasn't such a bad name, and something about it felt...so natural....

"Let's meet again," Roxas mumbled, also asleep, so that Lea was barely able to distinguish the words, "in the next...."

'...I know you,' Lea finally thought. 'Both of you. Whatever happened in that long nightmare I can't remember...something happened, because I had to have met you two. There's no way we're strangers. We must have loved each other enough to find each other again, and I swear I will never lose you this time.'

"Always be there...."

"To bring us back...."

Lea wasn't quite sure what to do with his new charges the next morning. "Hey...if I tell you guys to
stay here in the hotel room all day, will you stay put?"

They both gazed up at him silently.

"Heh, I'll take that as a no." He scratched his head. "Look, guys, I have to work. I have to earn munny so I can buy food for us to eat, and pay for this hotel room and stuff. What are you gonna do all day while I'm working?"

They looked at each other. Then they looked back at him and shrugged.

"Hmm...what if I give you a mission?"

They perked up at that. Not exactly as if they were looking forward to it, but as if he had said something they recognized.

"We worked really hard," said Xion.

"We're good at missions," said Roxas.

Lea got the notepad from beside the phone and wrote their 'assignment' on it. Not that they could read, but it somehow felt right to write it down, and they eagerly grasped the paper when he handed it to them. "Okay, so your mission is to stand in front of the shop and ask everyone you see if they want to buy an ice cream bar."

"Ice cream?!"

"You're asking other people if they want to buy some."

"Sea-salt is the best!"

"Here, let's practice."
Once they had memorized what they were supposed to say, Roxas and Xion took Lea's hands and trotted off to work with him. "Still have the kids," he called a little smugly as he passed the receptionist. "They're still alive and happy. Guys, say good morning."

"Good morning~! Would you like to buy some ice cream?"

"It's really yummy~"

"Guys, wait 'til we're actually at the ice cream shop first...."

Gina laughed a lot when she saw her new advertisers at work. "Looks like we're gonna have quite a busy day today, Lea."

"I'd like to see the person who can say no to those Puppy Eyes," Lea agreed.

He could probably have counted the number of them on one hand. Not that he had time to actually do so - he and Gina were both too busy whirling around the shop, getting in each other's way, frantically mixing and freezing and cleaning and chatting up customers so they wouldn't be bored as they waited. Roxas and Xion were doing their jobs quite well, accosting every passerby and trying to ask, wheedle, beg, or threaten a sale out of them.

"It's the yummiest ice cream in the universe."

"You'll be soooo happy if you eat this ice cream!"

"You might even get a WINNER stick!" (Had Lea told them about the WINNER sticks? He couldn't remember.)

"Only the best people eat Miss Gina's ice cream!"

Lea decided that enough was enough when they started coming up with stuff like, "I'll be your best friend if you buy some ice cream" and "I'll tell the Heartless to eat you if you don't buy any," not to mention, "No! Not the strawberry, the sea-salt, buy the sea-salt!"
"Nice job, guys," he said, towing them firmly inside, "but it look like it's time for you to retire."

"Nooo, we have to go make people buy more ice cream!"

"Our mission!" Xion insisted, waving the 'mission brief' he'd written for them.

Lea gave Gina an exasperated look. "You got another delivery for me or anything, so I can get them out of your hair? I promise I'll come back this time."

Gina smiled a little. "Why don't you take this box over to the daycare center on the other side of the Common? And here, let me give you the kids' wages--"

"Oh, no, man, I didn't mean for you to pay 'em or anything, I was just trying to keep them occupied. I know you're only taking me on just to be nice, so--"

"It's enough to cover the center's fee for the rest of the day," she said meaningfully, "until you get off work and can pick them up again."

"...." Lea finally smiled, on the verge of tears again from how freaking nice she was. "You really are like my mom away from home...."

She patted the top of his head. "You're working so hard, kiddo. You didn't choose to end up alone here - plus, I like you. Call it gratitude for being such a loyal customer."

Customer? "We only met a few days ago," Lea chuckled, then took the delivery and the munny and signaled to the kids. "Let's go, guys! New adventure!"

Living. Was. So. Dang. Expensive. Lea was a bit depressed as he walked back to the ice cream shop, trying to calculate how much it would cost to put the kids in daycare every day. At this rate, he was going to be using up his entire earnings just to keep himself and the children alive, and he would never get back home.
"You all right?" Gina asked when he came back in.

"Yeah...yeah, I'm fine." He smiled. "You been able to keep up with the flood while I was gone?"

"It's moving back to normal levels," she chuckled, handing him a tray. "Sticks, please."

"You got it."

He was a little apprehensive when he went to pick the kids up, wondering if they resented being stuck in daycare all afternoon, but they seemed as happy to see him as ever. "Axeeeeeell!!! *GLOMP*"

"Heh...just out of curiosity, why do you call me that...?"

"Number VIII," Xion said, swinging his hand. "We built a big tower, just like the clock tower!"

"Then we knocked it over," Roxas said with relish.

"And built it again."

"Bwsshh." Roxas mimed something tall being toppled over.

"Speaking of which - how'd you guys like to camp out tonight?"

"Camp?"

They went back to the hotel only just long enough for Lea to collect his meager handful of things, check out, and give the hotel what he'd earned that day to pay the last of the bill. Then it was off to the train station.

"Are we gonna make a fire?" Xion asked with interest.
"Well, it's pretty warm tonight, so probably not."

"Aww, but you can make good fires," Roxas said.

"...How do you know that?"

Roxas shrugged. "Big ones. Fire everywhere. You were mad, but I beat you, but it's okay because you like me again now."

The very faintest scrap of memory wisped through Lea's mind, and he paused. 'Fire...everywhere...I was so angry, so angry at Roxas, because he was tearing my heart in two, but...what happened?' He clenched his teeth in frustration, wishing he could remember more.

"Heartless!" Xion suddenly shrieked as they were passing a construction site, sounding more excited than frightened.

Lea took a startled step back, seeing the shadowy yellow-eyed figure wriggle up from the ground.

"No! I lost my stick!" Roxas looked around, then ran to the construction site, ducked under the yellow caution tape, and caught up a couple of poles from the ground, short and light enough for him to carry. "Here's your Keyblade, Xion!"

"I got it, Roxas!" she cried, grabbing one of the poles.

"Wait, you guys aren't gonna--"

Yelling their hilarious, adorable battle-cries again, Roxas and Xion flung themselves at the Shadow Heartless, beating at it with their poles.

"You guys are crazy brave five-year-olds...." Lea watched closely, ready to intervene the second it looked like one of them might get hurt (intervene with what, though? His bare hands? His palms itched to throw something, but he couldn't remember what it was he wanted to throw...), but there
turned out to be no need. The kids' bloodthirsty yells got a bit breathless and ragged by the end, but they eventually managed to damage the Heartless enough for it to burst into two orbs. "Munny," Lea gasped, scooping up the gold one and staring at it in wonderment. ‘Of course Heartless drop munny. Why did I forget that?’ He looked around to find the kids crouched beside the green orb, staring at it with interest.

"There's only one, but there's two of us," said Roxas.

Lea picked up the green orb in order to stare at it, too.

"Hey! That's ours!"

"I'm just looking," Lea murmured. The orb was squishy in a pleasant way, and had a nice smell. He rather wanted to eat it. He looked back down at the kids and asked, "Are either of you guys hurt?"

"No," said Xion.

Roxas reached up for the orb. "Gimme."

Lea smiled a little. "Let's save this for when one of us is sick or something, okay?"

Both kids sighed loudly, but then said, "Okay," and Lea carefully tucked it away.

"Axel," Roxas said, "we killed a Heartless, me and Xion. We're strong."

"You are strong," Lea agreed. "You guys are pretty amazing."

They all chattered happily until they got to the staircase behind the station, and the kids apparently realized where they were going. They froze.

Lea paused with his foot on the next step, glancing back at them. "What's wrong?"
"...You're going up to the clock tower?" Xion said in a small voice.

"Yeah. We're gonna camp out up there, it'll be fun."

Roxas plopped down to sit on the pavement, crossing his arms and legs, and said sulkily, "Bye, Axel."

"Huh?"

"We can't go up there," Xion said miserably.

Lea came back and crouched down in front of them. "What's wrong? Why can't you go up to the clock tower?"

"There's too many steps, stupid!" Roxas yelled, then burst into tears.

Xion knelt down and hugged him, also crying. "We climbed and climbed," she sobbed, "we went up and up and up, but we never got to the top, and we were so tired and we couldn't keep going and we slept and we were so hungry and then we had to climb down and down and down and we were so hungry and I fell and hurt my knee and we couldn't reach the top and I know there's a short way but we can't find it and we were so, so hungry...!"

Lea put his arms around them both and held them for a long time, until they finally stopped crying and just clung to him quietly. The clock tower...they wanted to go up there, just like I do, but they're so small, they couldn't make it on their own....' He knew he wouldn't be able to carry them both all that way, either, and then all the way back down again in the morning. And he knew, also, that there was a shorter way, something easy as magic to get up there without the steps, but he couldn't for the life of him remember it any more than they could. "Okay. Ssshh, it's okay. We won't go up there tonight, all right? We're gonna find somewhere else to sleep."

"We couldn't reach the top," Roxas said miserably.

"I know, Rox. It's okay, we don't have to climb up there tonight, not until you're strong enough."

'Where, though? Where the heck can I take two little kids to sleep all night? Not the tunnels,
they're dangerous...the two of them together can handle a Shadow, but those monsters are stronger, and there's more of them, and we'll be asleep...where do we go?'

"Are we going back to the Usual Spot?" Xion asked.

Lea looked at her. "The usual spot?"

"Where we always sleep," Roxas mumbled, "before you took us away."

They had been on the streets on their own for several days before Lea had found them. "Show me," he said.

It was a little nook between two buildings, under a set of train tracks. There was a gate, which was locked, but Roxas simply stretched up his hands and pressed them against the lock for a minute, and it popped open.


Inside was a cozy setup, as if some teenagers had made the place their hangout. The couch was the part he was most interested in - it was one of those that could be unfolded into a bed, and seemed decently clean. There were no sheets, but the 'mattress' part would still be much more comfortable to sleep on than on his spare change of clothes, as he'd been planning before. "You guys are amazing."

They hadn't had much to eat on the way home from work, so Lea took out the food he'd saved from lunch and split it between the kids. Then he spread his jacket over them as a 'blanket,' and stretched out next to them to tell another bedtime story.

"Tell us about a princess this time," Xion requested.

"Okay...um, which one?"

"A princess who kills a giant," Roxas ordered.
Was there a story like that? "Uh, well, maybe not a giant, but one time there was this princess with
reeeeaaaaally long hair, who went around beating up bad guys with a frying pan...."

The next day, close to noon, a teenage customer came up to the counter whom Lea had never seen
around Twilight Town. "Hi there!" the guy said.

"Welcome to Twilight Ice," Gina said warmly. "What can I get for you?"

"Oooohhh, everything looks so good.... Could I have two sea-salt ice creams, and a--"

After a pause, Lea looked up to see why the guy had broken off, and found him staring straight at
him. "Can I help you?" Lea said, trying to sound polite while he was on the clock.

"You look so much like Axel!!"

"Why does everyone call me Axel?"

"Do you know him?" Gina asked eagerly. "He's been trying to get to a place called Radiant
Garden."

The guy turned away from the counter and bellowed into the distance, "HEY, ISA!!!"

Lea accidently dropped the bowls he'd been cleaning, splashing himself with soapy water.

"ISAAAA! I THINK I FOUND AXEL!"

Lea crossed the shop in one leap and practically hung over the counter, eyes fixed on the figure in
blue clothing coming around the corner.
"Sora, why are you yelling, I can hear you all the way--"

"ISAAA!!" Lea screamed.

Isa stopped dead, staring at him. "Lea."

"Isa! Flaming pants!" Lea scrambled straight over the countertop, fell onto the pavement, struggled back to his feet, and ran toward his best friend.

"You're bleeding," Isa exclaimed.

"Isa! Isa!"

"I'm glad you're all right."

"LOOK HAPPY, DANG IT!!!"

Isa smiled. "It's good to see you, Lea."

"I'M SO EXCITED TO SEE YOU WHY ARE YOU NOT EXCITED TO SEE ME?!"

"I am excited. I missed you. I was worried about you."

The fact that he spoke those words aloud and without hesitation was probably the Isa equivalent of jumping up and down screaming joyfully, so Lea grabbed his hands and jumped for both of them.

"Sacred moon, stop that...!" Isa gasped, but he was still grinning like crazy.

"We found Axel~" Sora sang, doing a little victory dance of his own. "Seventeen down, four left to
"Why does everyone keep calling me Axel?" Lea demanded.

Isa shook his head. "I don't know, half of them keep calling me 'Saïx,' it's irritating...."

"Now we just need Roxas, Ven, Xion, and Demyx," Sora said, counting on his fingers.

Lea stared. "Roxas and Xion? They're at the daycare."

Sora and Isa stared back at him. "Daycare?"

Of course Gina let him leave early. Roxas and Xion, not expecting to be picked up until much later, took a while to notice Lea; but when they did, they instantly abandoned the toys they had been playing with and ran to glomp him.

"Woooowww," Sora breathed in awe, "they're so tiny, just like Naminé and Repliku!"

"More stray puppies?" Isa said in exasperation as he watched his friend cuddling the children.

"Look what I found while you were gone, Isa! Aren't they cute?!" Lea's face was completely alight as he showed off his new Cute Things, but the kids tightened their grip on him as they looked at Isa - Roxas glared, and Xion whispered into Lea's ear, "Axel, I don't like him." Isa's expression was not approving, either.

"Oh, come on," Lea said in exasperation. "You three are seriously not gonna make me choose sides, are you?" 'Not again, not again, not again....'

Sora had knelt down so as to be closer to the kids' level. "Hi, Roxas! Hi! Do you remember me?"

Roxas studied him seriously.
"Do you know him?" Lea exclaimed, suddenly nervous that Sora might know who their parents were and take them away from him.

"Yeah! He's my Nobody. I guess you're like my little brother or something now, huh?" Sora laughed.

"I'm staying with Axel," Roxas growled.

"Oh - okay. But you guys are coming back with us, right?"

"Are you gonna take us back to Radiant Garden?" Lea asked.

Sora shrugged. "If you want. Or the Islands, or wherever you all wanna go. But we have to check in with Master Yen Sid first, okay? We've been looking all over for you guys, I'm glad we finally found you."

"It's a long story," Isa said, in response to Lea's questioning look. "I still don't understand or believe much of it, but it does seem to be pretty clear that we've somehow been incapacitated for over ten years...."

"Ten years?!"

When Lea finally heard the story, of warriors without hearts and keys as weapons and gateways into other realms, he couldn't wrap his head around it, either. Yet...he also couldn't say that he didn't believe it... His dreams, for one thing. He rarely remembered them, but the bits and pieces that did keep tugging at his mind were not easy to dismiss. Plus, there was that bond he had with Roxas and Xion, unexplainable by just a few days' acquaintance; the unexpected skills he kept discovering himself to have; and his weird new obsession with Isa's eyes ("Stop staring at me." "I wasn't staring!" "Yes, you were, like you always do these days. Are you waiting for my eyes to change color or something?" "They're not gonna change color!" "Exactly!" "Stay green!" "I will! I'm not changing." "Never change, Isa! Never, ever change!" "You're the one who's never supposed to change!" "Why are we crying?!" "I don't know! Stop it!" "You stop first...!").

All that was just stuff he wondered about in his spare time, though, which there wasn't much of. He was too busy trying to adjust to how much the Garden had changed in ten years, trying to find his groove again with school, and integrating little Roxas and Xion into his family.
"Lea," his mother exclaimed, "you can't just steal children off the street, what about their families?!

"They don't have families! All they have is me." 'And that Sora guy, but I don't care, they're staying with me.'

"Lea--"

"Mom, it'll be fine. I'll get a part-time job after school, I can take care of them mostly."

"I just...."

Lea waited for the Puppy Eyes to do their work.

His mother winced. "...Well, all right. But--"

"YES!" Lea was already crowing in triumph.

"Is this a good thing?" Roxas anxiously wanted to know.

"Yup! You and me and Xion get to live with each other from now on."

"With ice cream?"

"Heh heh, I think you guys like ice cream even more than I do...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: First of all, PLEASE DO NOT TEACH SMALL CHILDREN HOW TO SWIM IN THE OCEAN, OKAY? Teach them in a pool where it's safer. X(
In case it wasn't clear, the idea was that the Organization and other Nobodies/replicas/etc. were restored to humanity in such a way that they had to revert back to younger versions of themselves (or something). ...This fic is *supposed* to be a one-shot, but I can picture it branching off into YET ANOTHER series. *headdesk*

So, R-O-K-U-S-H-I made this ADORABLE AkuRokuShi picture on devART called "AkuRokuShi: What The Future Holds," where teenage Lea is walking around Twilight Town, carrying little-kid Xion in one arm and ruffling little-kid Roxas's hair with the other. X3 It's one of my favorite AkuRokuShi pictures. I got inspired and wanted to write a story, and while brainstorming ideas for 8-14-13, it occurred to me that I could use this one. :3

Random note: Gina is black. Because even though she's supposed to just be a throwaway OC (I only gave her a name because she was onscreen too much and "the ice cream lady" quickly started sounding awkward), my throwaways have a tendency to keep showing up in other stories and develop actual personalities, and I'm tired of everyone being white, and I already have some Hispanic OCs, so Gina is black, just because I Said So. *sweatdrop*
Shine and Reflect: Meeting (event 1) {Lea & Isa}

Shine and Reflect

Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Taiyou to Tsuki (Sun and Moon) challenge by Minty Sakura, written by Raberba girl

Summary: Thirteen moments in the lives of Lea & Isa. (No slash.)

Introduction: There's no way I wasn't going to take on this challenge. XD I'm basically just gonna go down the timeline and pick significant moments for the boys to write about. I'm only supposed to do ten, but there's thirteen I want to write. ^^;

I'm posting the stories for this challenge alongside the stories for Wishing-Fire's 101 theme challenge (on FFN and MMO), but they're two different series for two different challenges. I just want to keep all my AkuSai stuff together as much as I can. *sweatdrop*

And yes, I've been taking on a million challenges lately - I'm not going to work hard to finish most of them, it's just for fun, and to see how far along I get. (This one, though, I will try to finish, since it is so short and for my OTP.)

Event 1 - Meeting (rough draft)

He looked tiny, cornered against the wall and surrounded by all those big fourth graders.

"Say that again, punk."

The blue-haired kid didn't sound scared when he said, "I guess you're not deaf, just stupid. So I can call you a rank, crook-pated ratsbane, and you'll have no idea what I'm talking about."

'Nope,' Lea thought from where he was watching behind the fountain. 'No one knows what the heck you're saying, but we know you're making fun of him. They're gonna beat you up now.'

The main bully grabbed the kid by the front of his shirt and started to hit him.
Lea hated seeing kids get hit. He hated seeing big people pick on little people. He hated seeing a weak person be brave and get squashed for it. So he ran out, yelling, and started hitting the bullies as much as he could before they stopped being surprised and started to hit back.

He felt like he was on fire. It was awesome, even when it did start to hurt. He wasn't really winning, but he wasn't on the ground yet and his fists were connecting and he was starting to see blood. 'I can take 'em,' he thought for one thrilling moment.

Then someone did knock him to the ground, and now it hurt more and he couldn't hurt them back so he couldn't ignore the pain anymore, and he screamed in helpless rage and was about to scream again when someone else's bellow drowned it.

He thought it was a new person at first, maybe a junior high schooler who'd seen the fun, but then he realized it wasn't. The other kid had been having his butt handed to him, but now somehow he was throwing them off like some kind of tiny superhero. The guys hitting Lea stopped, staring at the little blue-haired monster behind them in surprise.

Then the kid started kicking their butts, with no style or grace but sheer power and speed; he didn't seem to even notice any of the strikes they landed. His eyes looked weird. Some of the bullies ran away; the rest jumped him as a group. Lea, forgotten, grinned wildly and leaped at their backs.

When it was over, the other kid collapsed. Lea looked at him in surprise, because he hadn't thought he was that hurt. He crouched down and shook his shoulder. "Hey. Hey, Berserker. Wake up."

The kid stirred and moaned, "So tired...."

"Man, you really are a berserker, just like on TV.... Come on, let's go." Lea pulled the kid's arm over his shoulders and dragged him away.

The kid woke up when they were heading across the town square. "Ow...what happened?"

"We kicked their butts," Lea said happily.
"Oh...." A pause. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lea! What's your name?"

"Um, Isa.... Hey, let go."

Lea did, and watched as Isa checked himself. Like Lea, he was bruised and bloodied and limping, but he could walk on his own now. "My glasses!" he cried in horror.

"Sorry," Lea said uncertainly.

"Mother's going to be--" Isa shuddered. "Never mind Mother; Father will be furious with me."

Lea winced in sympathy. "Then you want some ice cream before you go home?"

"What?"

"Like, so you'll be stronger, and can take it better."

"Ice cream doesn't make you strong."

"Yes, it does! When you taste that sweet sea-salt, like eating ice cream at the beach with your friends, and even afterwards it's like--"

"Sea salt isn't sweet."

Lea stared. "Haven't you had sea-salt ice cream before?"

Isa wrinkled his nose. "That does not sound tasty at all."
"Are you crazy?!!?" Lea seized his arm and started dragging him away.

"Ow! Let go!"

"Not 'til you eat some sea-salt ice cream and start yelling that it's the most yummy thing you've ever tasted in your entire life!!"

"No! Let go! Help, I'm being kidnapped...!"

Later, Isa stared at the bar of ice cream in his hand, after having taken the first bite. "...This is delicious."

"Best thing ever, right?!"

"Of course not. I still prefer mint chocolate chip." Isa took another bite. "But this is very good."

"Best thing ever, best thing ever, best thing everrrrr...!"

o.o.o

Author's Notes: Lol, thank you to the Shakespeare Insult Kit. XD I bet little Isa came across it somewhere and had fun with it.

This drabble should be 800 words longer...my usual problem is writing above the word count, not below. o.O Hopefully I can make up for it with the extra three stories....

Complete: 1/10 (1/13)
Summary: Riku notices something in a BBS cutscene that he hadn't picked up on before.

A/N: Meta fic. The "Somebodies" that were seen in BBS are all adults here. I assume this takes place during "filming" for KH3.

0.0.0

The cast of Kingdom Hearts were hanging out in the lounge after work, before having to disperse for the night. Sora, Kairi, Ven, and Luxord were playing Spoons with an increasingly frustrated-looking Vanitas; Demyx was beating Roxas at Guitar Hero; Ienzo and Aqua were arguing over an open book in his arm as he repeatedly stabbed a finger at the open page, trying to underscore his point; and Xion was happily nestled between Lea and Riku on a couch, watching the Birth by Sleep cutscenes that were playing on the huge flat-screen TV that took up most of one wall. Lea kept nodding off, waking with a start every time his head sank too low for comfort, and Riku was lethargically working on homework from the entire year's worth of school he'd missed between Chain of Memories and Kingdom Hearts II.

Isa came over at one point. "Lea."

"*snore*"

"Axel," Xion said quickly, shaking her friend before Isa could throw a Lightning Stone at him or something, "Axel, Saïx wants to talk to you."

"S your dog, feed it yourself," Lea mumbled.

"Wake up," Isa snapped, smacking him upside the head.
"Ow!"

"Go home if you're so tired."

"No! They don't let me bring any kids...."

"Lea," said Terra, who was standing beside Isa, "we need you to settle something for us."

Lea craned his head to look up at them inquiringly.

Terra gestured at the berserker. "Isa here says that he put up with Xehanort's darkness for almost six years before--"

"Oooh, look, it's me and Riku!" Sora yelled, diving over the back of the couch and half-landing on Riku.

"Ow, Sora, what the heck?!"

"You guys are so cuuuuute," Kairi cooed, draping herself over Sora's shoulders as both of them gazed eagerly at the TV, where five-year-old Riku and four-year-old Sora were racing past Terra on the pier.

"Oh, hey, it's me," Terra realized in mild surprise.

"I suppose I win the argument by default," Isa grumbled, seeing that both his opponent and their consultant were now hopelessly distracted.

"Hey," the little Riku onscreen asked onscreen-Terra, "Did you come from the outside world?"

"Ha ha, even as a kid you hated being stuck on the Islands," Sora laughed. "Thanks for starting all our crazy adventures, Riku!"
"...You know, the sad thing is that I can't even tell if you're being sarcastic or not," Riku remarked.

"If you had no adventures, I wouldn't have existed; of course he's not being sarcastic," Roxas said decisively, shoving between Riku and Xion so that he could sit next to his best friends. Riku was now completely squashed between Sora and Roxas, and looked ticked off.

"If either of you could just move your fat butts, like, three centimeters so I can get up...."

"Must be hard, huh, stuck in one place," onscreen-Terra said.

"Oooh, so it's really Terra's fault," Kairi teased.

"Let's just say it's Xehanort's fault, because everything is," Lea said, "and call it even." This earned an outburst of 'Ooooh!'s from some of the teenagers as Xehanort, as if on cue, briefly appeared onscreen in Riku's place.

"What the heck? When did that happen?" the real Riku complained.

"Just this weird vision I had for a second," Terra murmured thoughtfully, "I didn't even have a clue what it meant 'til seeing it again just now."

"Outside this tiny world is a much bigger one."

"SEE!!!" Sora yelled, prompting Kairi to wince and cover her ears, "I'm NOT the only one who blabbed about other worlds and stuff! Terra should get in trouble, too!"

Many of the other characters had come to join them by now. "Breaking the Non-Interference Rule has become rather unavoidable by now," Ienzo mused, "since trying to mend Xehanort's meddling has become all but impossible otherwise...."

"Just Xehanort?" Naminé teased gently, nudging him. "I wouldn't call the rest of Organization XIII blameless, either...."
Onscreen, Terra had summoned his weapon.

"Your Keyblade kind of looks like a chainsaw," Hayner laughed. "Cool."

Everyone watched as onscreen-Terra made little onscreen-Riku a Keyblade Master. "It's sooooooo your fault!" several people laughed, as Terra facepalmed and Riku closed his eyes in exasperation.

"So that's what you were doing while I was waiting all by myself!" Sora yelled, grinning. "Aaaaaalll alone! For sooooo long! Because my best friend cared more about leaving the Islands than playing with me--"

"Shut up, Sora."

"You've gotta keep this a secret, okay?"

"Wait, what?" Braig laughed.

"Oooohhh," Demyx said mischievously, "some random stranger just told a little kid to keep something a secret from their parents~"

"Wow, Terra," Riku murmured, "in hindsight, that was kind of...."

"Hah! HAH!" Lea yelled. "I'm not the only one!"

"Only one what?" Roxas said warily.

"I didn't mean it like that!" Terra yelped. "I just meant--"

"Didn't your mom ever teach you Don't Talk To Strangers?" Olette teased, elbowing Riku.
"She didn't, actually...." 'If I'd ever gotten kidnapped, she would have expected me to take him apart with my bare hands and bring home his decapitated head as proof of my being worthy to be called a Child of Jenova. Sooooo, good thing nothing ever happened to me as a kid....'

"Non-Interference Rule! It was the Non-Interference Rule!" Terra insisted desperately. "It was still important back then, it wasn't like it is today...."

"I know," Aqua said soothingly, patting his back. "Just accept the fact that they're never going to stop teasing you about it." She raised her voice, tone shifting to address the rest of them, "This cutscene is supposed to end on a Moment of Heartwarming, BE QUIET."

"Yes, Master Aqua..." was the general good-natured murmuring/grumbling.

Along with a cheekier, "Yes, Master Aqua~"

"Do I detect sarcasm?" Aqua said in a deadly voice, summoning her Keyblade as her eyes zeroed in on Demyx.

"Eep, no, I'll be good, I hate fighting...!"

0.0.0

**Author's Notes:** I know I'm not the only one who thought this when I saw that scene, because I've seen a comic about it on devART. XD Oh, Terra....

Lol, Infamousplot's the one who's always mentioned how Terra's default Keyblade looks like a chainsaw.

Anyway, I've been brainstorming for the contest prizes I promised to write, and Medli45's had a scene in it that I decided I wouldn't be able to use, but I didn't want to entirely discard it, so I re-worked it into a completely unrelated one-shot instead. Frt, her prize story is going to be NOTHING like this one; this is sort of like a glorified outtake. ^^;
Btw, in case you guys didn't see my journals and stuff, I'm on AO3 now~ (Username: Raberba_girl)
Summary: For Inmate XIV's Minor Character Challenge. Story from the perspective of Sora's mother.

Introduction: I want to eventually do this challenge for Olette, and also Repliku. I'm starting with Sora's mom, though, because I've already made an OC for her in some of my fanfiction - her name is Sapphique King, and she's also Ven's mother. I thought this would be a really good opportunity to flesh out my headcanon backstory for Sora and his family. Plus, writing about Destiny Islands society is pretty fun for some reason. ^^ Although it's definitely not my favorite world from a gameplay aspect, I feel like it'd be the most enjoyable KH world to actually live in.

1. Birth (rough draft)

You don't have to give birth in order to have a child.

My very first emotion upon seeing little Ventus wasn't envy. It was delight, because he was the most adorable baby I'd ever seen before.

Envy was the second emotion. I looked at my sister-in-law cradling her newborn son, with her husband looking so proud and loving and attentive, and that baby, that sweet precious infant who suddenly seemed to be their whole world.... I wanted it so, so badly.

I never dreamed that it would become mine in a way I never expected, in a way that was horrible and dark and ugly. That isn't the way the world should work. That isn't the way people should work.

But it did, and I can look back and say that I and my family were so blessed by it, but it was also a nightmare, full of horror and grief and countless tears.

I suppose it started when my husband's brother was lost at sea. Kal and I had been trying for our own child for a while, but that plan, along with the rest of our lives, was set aside until the darkest
days were past. The widow's grief was only to be expected - as she shut down and hid herself away from the world, it was left to us to arrange the funeral, make sure Ven and his mother were taken care of, settle all the business and accounts, and the hundred other things that needed to be done.... Of course, the loss of his brother was difficult for Kal, too, and at times it seemed like I was the only one keeping our two small families afloat.

She eventually recovered, or so we thought. Her spirit still seemed to be gone, she was quieter and never smiled; but she went through the motions, returned to work, began to resume some semblance of a normal life.

I tried to check on her often. Little Ven seemed more ragged and dirty in those days than he should have been (as did their house...), but he seemed happy enough, especially since I always brought food with me. As we ate, he would chatter at me in his half-intelligible baby-talk about the little things he had done during the day, and only later did it occur to me to wonder how many of his adventures had been conducted alone - if his mother even bothered to have anyone watch her two-year-old son during the day. She certainly never asked me, even though I'd quit my job months before and could have looked after him while she was at work.

When she didn't answer the door for three days in a row, I couldn't rid myself of the feeling that something was wrong, and I ended up breaking into the house. Which was empty - or so it seemed, until I finally heard a small sound from a locked closet, and we found poor Ventus inside after we'd finally managed to break open the door. To this day, none of us know exactly how long he'd been trapped in there. To this day, none of us know where his mother disappeared to, or if she's even still alive.

That was how I had my first child. That beautiful little boy, who had represented the future joy I would have with my own children, unexpectedly became mine himself. Not from the love between my husband and I, not through months of intimate growth and hours of pain; instead, from death and loss and grief and abandonment. I don't think he's yet managed overcome it - he's simply survived as best as he knows how, through that terrible beginning and all the difficulties that followed and all the horrors he endured during the years we were apart.

For my oldest son, each day has been a struggle. Even back on our peaceful islands, with no one left to seek his destruction, where I do everything I can to make him feel loved and welcomed, he still fights as if to survive.

He's changed, though, and not all the changes are for the worse. Sometimes I catch glimpses of that sweet tiny child he used to be, the toddler who'd sit across from me in the warm afternoons, heedlessly spilling crumbs as he told me of the exciting imaginary worlds he had visited that day. Whenever he tells me now of the real worlds he's been to, or the people who keep loving him no matter how often he pushes them away; when he lowers his guard to offer me gifts, from flowers to hugs to moments of simple, unhesitating obedience; when he is kind to his younger brother or
when he looks at the star-shaped charm he never parts from....

In moments like that, I can see the real Ventus, shining behind all the pain. The light in his heart is still alive, and responds to ours. Perhaps it will take a long, long time before he feels safe enough to emerge fully - but as long as he keeps his eyes on the light, keeps reaching out, keeps taking those steps one by one....

We wait patiently for him. Even if the rest of them give up, I will keep waiting for him, because he is my son, and nothing in all the worlds could ever destroy my love for him.

0.o.o

Author's Notes: This challenge series is a hybrid in that I'm not planning for it to be a real multi-chapter with a continuous storyline or anything, but it's not gonna be a bunch of random one-shots like most of my other challenge series are, either. I'm planning for the installments to be standalones, but which all take place in the same "universe."

Random writing update: I've been trying hard to stick with my Back To School Plan (where I work and write during the week, answer messages on Fridays, read my friends' fanfiction on Saturdays, etc.). It's very difficult right now, but it seems to be working as well as can be expected, and I'm hoping that it'll get better once I get used to it (and once I start getting more dang sleep on a regular basis).

When writing on the computer, I've been mostly focusing on sonicdisney's Ansem/apprentices contest prize (lenzo's the main character). I have a daily plan for it that I hope will mean it'll be finished before the end of the month. Other high priority fics for September are Medli45's contest prize (Terra/Riku) and the ZekuNami fic I'd intended to write for my friend Mirae over a year ago. *facepalm*

When I don't have computer access, I've been wildly scribbling out an all-platonic Aqua/Zack/Xion/Vanitas/(Axel/Saïx/Ven/Terra) modern fantasy AU in my notebook. It's for a challenge (not a theme challenge), I've written three chapters (out of five total), and I forgot how much fun multi-chapters can be~ They're harder than one-shots and drabbles, but better. (It'll be a short multi-chapter, though; probably less than 10,000 words. So it could have been a one-shot, but the challenge specifically called for a multi-chapter. XD)

I also finished planning out the RokuKai/SoNami multi-chapter I'm doing for Cherished Tenshi's Reversal of Hearts challenge, as an early NaNoWriMo project in October. I'm excited for that one, too, and I hooooooooooootttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt
Why I Ward Off Darkness {Sora, Riku, Namine, & Kairi}

Why I Ward Off Darkness

(rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Attempted/failed fic for Sora/Kairi Day, 17 September 2013

Summary: Sora really is clueless when it comes to having a girlfriend.... (Platonic Sora/Riku; Riku/Naminé; Sora/Kairi. In that order. *sweatdrop*)

A/N: Takes place post-canon, though there's a timeline error that's been noted at the end of the fic. Oh, and in case you haven't read Sora's Job Quest, Sora & Riku work for the Moogles, now that the war with Xehanort is over and they're done with school. :p

0.0.0

Even though Sora and Riku both worked for the synthesis guild now, they were not often assigned together. That was why Sora was absolutely delighted when he finally partnered with his best friend on a mission, and why he was so cheerful throughout the entire day - even though the giant Heartless took their combined full-strength efforts to defeat it, and they were both gasping, sweat-soaked, and exhausted by the end of the battle.

"Heh, Team Destiny Islands for the win," Sora panted, smiling as he weakly pumped a fist in the air.

"Ugh, how are you even moving?" Riku groaned from where he was sprawled flat on his back on the ground, where he had collapsed as soon as the Heartless began dissolving into sparkles. "I'm too tired to blink...."

"Potion, Potion, where's my Items...." Sora already knew they were all used up, but he checked anyway, and smiled ruefully back at Riku once he had confirmed this. "Sorry, Riku, I don't have anymore healing stuff. I can Cure you once my Command finishes reloading, though...."
Riku groaned again and rolled onto his stomach. "Tired...."

They eventually managed to drag themselves out of Neverland and over to Traverse Town, where the guild headquarters were. They turned in the loot they'd picked up, received their pay and rewards, and then headed back out.

Sora was surprised to find Riku walking in a different direction than where their ship was parked. "Where are you going, Riku?"

"Shopping."

Sora shrugged and hurried to catch up.

They hit the Item shop first to restock, and then Riku went to look at Accessories next. He took a pair of snowy white earrings off a rack and examined them thoughtfully.

"Blizzard Defense boost?" Sora inquired, peering at them as well.

"Yeah. I've been checking out places to take Naminé for our next big date - the one I've had my eye on tends to have ice-based Heartless around, so I figured these'd come in handy."

"Ooooh, that's a good idea. I'm gonna get some, too! Well, I mean I have some good Blizzard Defense already, but I think I need something for Darkness. I've been popping into Anti-Form a lot lately, it's annoying."

Riku glanced at him. "Still? I thought you were supposed to be over that."

"Yeah...I think it depends on what kind of mood the others are in. Especially when Van's ticking everyone off. So when Ven wants to strangle him and Roxas wants to beat his head in and Naminé's scared and Xion's screaming at them all to shut up, all at the same time, I can feel it even when I'm not on the Islands, and it's kind of...overwhelming...."

"...Sora, I do not envy you."
"Heh." Sora picked a bracer off the shelf, nodded in satisfaction, and went to go pay for it.

Even then, Riku did not head for the ship. He went to a gym instead. "Riku?! You're gonna work out?!!"

"No way!" Riku absently squeezed his own biceps as if they were sore, even though they'd already healed up from the battle. "I don't even wanna think about exercise until tomorrow. I just need to shower."

"Shower?" Sora trailed after his friend in puzzlement as Riku went to the men's locker room and started undressing. "Can't you just shower when you get home?"

"Yeah, but Naminé'll probably be waiting to greet me. I don't want to be sweaty and disgusting if she is."

"Oooohhh. You're so smart, Riku! Why didn't I think of that?"

Riku, who had grabbed a towel and was heading for the shower area, paused to glance back at Sora in surprise. "So you just shower at home every time you come back from work?"

Sora had started undressing, too. "I mean, yeah, I never thought I'd have to, like...."

Riku smirked a little, waiting for his friend to catch up. "Does she flinch and grimace when she kisses you, or does she even give you a welcome-home kiss at all?"

"She kisses me!" Sora paused. "Just kind of...pecks my cheek and backs away.... I never realized 'til now, but she never hugs me 'til after I've showered."

Riku shook his head. "You're such a clueless dork...."

"Axel said that's what makes me cute," Sora said defensively. They'd reached the showers, and he turned the water on.
"It's like that guy doesn't even think before he says anything..." Riku muttered.

"Huh?"

"Nothing." Riku rolled his eyes. "Well, so here you are, cleaning up before coming home for the first time ever. Maybe Kairi'll reward you with some tongue."

"That's only for really special occasions," Sora said, blushing. He suddenly paused. "Wait, how do you and Naminé usually kiss, then?!"

Now, incredibly, it was Riku who was blushing. "I've actually...never like that...yet.... She's so..." He seemed to be lathering his hair with shampoo more vigorously than was necessary, and now shoved his head under the stream of water, effectively silencing himself.

Sora waited patiently. All the shampoo seemed to be gone after a while, but Riku still kept rinsing. Finally he came back out. "She's so what?" Sora asked promptly.

Riku groaned in defeat and squirted more shampoo into his hand. "She's so - pure. Like a-- I just feel-- I can't kiss her like that, not unless she does it first, but she doesn't even know people can kiss like that, and I can't tell her, and it's stupid to ask someone else to tell her, and I...." Riku ducked under the water again.

Sora waited. It suddenly occurred to him that he ought to be washing his own hair, too, but if he did that, he might miss the moment when Riku came back out again and could hear more questions. Come to think of it, there wasn't even anything to wash his hair with except the bottles that Riku had brought in.... "Why'd you wash your hair twice?" Sora asked, forgetting his original question.

Riku looked surprised again. "...Because you have to wash it twice before you can wash it three times?" he said dubiously, as if he had no idea why Sora thought this odd. He squirted more shampoo into his hand.

"You wash your hair three times?!!"
"You don't?!

They stared at each other.

"Oh," Sora remembered, "I don't have any shampoo. Can I borrow yours?"

"Sure." Riku handed over the bottle.

"Wow, this stuff smells good...." Sora idly turned over the bottle. "WHOA!"

"What?!” Riku yelped, Keyblade instinctively materializing in his hand. The other men showering looked over at them in astonishment, and when no immediate threat made itself apparent, Riku sheepishly dismissed the weapon. "Why'd you yell like that?” he hissed at Sora.

"This shampoo cost 350 munny?!?!

"Yeah, so?” Riku said uncomfortably.

"My shampoo at home costs, like, 7 munny!"

Riku actually dropped the bottle of conditioner he'd been about to use. "What?!”

"Where do you buy this stuff?!"

"I don't - my father brings boxes of it home from work."

"But-- But even if you're not paying for it, someone is! Who'd spend THREE-HUNDRED-AND-FIFTY MUNNY on shampoo?!"

Riku just stared at him.
Sora stared back. Then slowly grinned. "No wonder you guys always have such perfect hair."

Riku took the shampoo bottle out of Sora's hand and looked at it for a long time. "...My family really are crazy, aren't they."

Sora patted him on the back. "It's okay, Riku. I'll still be your friend even though you waste tons of munny just to make your hair look pretty."

"Shut up," Riku mumbled, ducking his head in embarrassment.

o.o.o.o.o

The girls were still waiting for them on the beach, though instead of alertly watching the ship's descent as usual, Kairi appeared to be asleep on her beach towel, and Naminé was putting away her sketchbook.

"I'm glad they didn't give up and go home," Sora said in relief.

"Would've served us right if they had. Would've served you right," Riku amended.

Leaving his friend to actually power everything down, Sora bounded out of the ship as soon as it landed and raced over to his girlfriend, who was yawning as she approached him. "Kairi!"

She smiled. "Sor--" She stared. "Sora?!

"Kairi!" He reached her and seized her hands, gazing with beseeching urgency into her eyes. "I'm sorry sorry sorry we're so late, I just didn't think of bringing clean clothes, so we had to wash them at the gym, and they took forever to finish--"

"What happened to your hair?!!" Amazed, Kairi touched one of the long, smooth brown locks swinging to Sora's shoulders - then her eyes widened and she buried both hands in his hair, sliding her fingers through it over and over again. "It's beautiful! It's all silky like Riku's--" She sniffed.
"It smells like Riku's, too. I mean, it's a good smell, but-- What happened?"

"Did you know that my CLUELESS DORK best friend spends 350 munny on shampoo, and 425 on conditioner, and 390 on detangler, and 300 on some super-special hair gel, and other numbers I forgot on other bottles I forgot, and didn't even know that that's weird?" Sora cackled.

"Huh???"

Meanwhile, Riku had also come out, and was going to greet Naminé. She reached out with a smile and put her arms around him, and he gave her a quick, chaste little kiss before returning the embrace.

"I'm glad you're home, Riku."

"Sorry for making you wait. Sora was...."

"You guys had fun, didn't you," she said affectionately.

"Yeah...it was good having a mission together, for once." He shook his head. "It was definitely a good thing to have a partner I could trust, that Heartless was strong...."

"Are you all right?"

"Of course."

Riku smiled a little and drew out his earlier purchase. "From Neverland. Well, Traverse Town, really; but the mission was to Neverland."

"They're beautiful," she said softly, fingering one of the earrings as if almost afraid to touch it.

"Wait," Sora exclaimed, "those were for Naminé?!"
Riku eyed him. "Of course. You think I need extra protection from ice monsters? I try to bring back a gift for Naminé at least once a month, since she doesn't get to see those other worlds as often as I do."

"Whaaaat?!" Sora stared at Kairi in horror. "I never even thought of getting you anything!"

"Really, Sora, it's okay," she laughed, simultaneously a bit exasperated.

"It never even occurred to me...!"

Kairi finally just kissed him to shut him up. "Mmm, you really do smell amazing..." she murmured.

Riku turned his attention back to his girlfriend. "Do you...wanna put them on, or do you...think you'll need help...?"

"Oh...." She smiled slightly, eyeing him through her golden bangs. "They look a little difficult. Do you think you could manage them for me, Riku?" she asked, shyly flirtatious, sounding and looking cute enough to send a pink tinge into his cheeks. He worked the earrings free of their packaging and then gently tilted Naminé's head, moving very carefully to set the jewelry in place. Naminé's eyes closed, and the hand she'd been lightly hugging herself with tightened its grasp on her other arm, and slid slowly upwards in delicious response to his touch on her skin.

Then she opened her eyes again and gently cupped her hands around the earrings, still as if in awe of them. "They feel perfect.... Are they Accessories, too?"

"Yeah. I won't tell you what they do yet, though; it might give it away."

She smiled again and stretched up on her toes to touch her lips to his.

"Man," Sora remarked as he watched them, "I really am a crummy boyfriend...."

"Stop comparing yourself to Mr. Perfect," Kairi ordered, starting to tug Sora away. "Let's go somewhere and be alone, all right?"
They found a nice spot on the beach further down. Sora sat on the sand, and Kairi sat in his lap and put her arms around him. "You're so warm...."

"Riku's just good at everything, even at having a girlfriend," Sora said unhappily. "I didn't even know it was gross when I'd come home and say hi to you before showering, or that I was supposed to bring you presents, or--"

"Sora," she said, gently touching her fingers to his lips to silence him, "Like I said, don't compare yourself to Riku. You're not him, and I'm not Naminé, okay? I love you because you're you."

He pulled the bracer out of his pocket and looked at it. "I bought this today, when Riku was buying the earrings. I'd give it to you, but...I mean, it's just a Darkness ward, you don't even need it." He smiled sadly at her. "You're a Princess of Heart, the darkness can't even hurt you, at least not in a way this could protect you from. I'm the one who's got darkness in me...turning me into a crazy monster half the time, messing up Roxas and the others...."

He was surprised when she kissed him. "Put it on my wrist," she said affectionately.

"The bracer?"

"Yes, silly."

He did so, giving her a confused look.

She held her arm up to the last rays of sunset. "It's a beautiful gift, Sora."

"Uh...I mean, you can have it if you want, but it's not very pretty. I should have gotten earrings or a circlet or something...."

"It's beautiful because I can see your heart in it, Sora," she said gently. "A heart that cares about me and always wants the best for me, and for all the rest of our friends. You want to be free of darkness so you can be stronger and keep us safe, right?"
"Yeah." He brightened a bit. "Yeah. I mean, I guess that is why I don't like the darkness - because it makes me not myself, and I forget everything that's important...." He looked at her. "You're really important to me, Kairi. I know I mess up a lot and Riku's cooler than me, but...I love you, Kairi. I really do. I want you to be happy."

"You make me happy every day, Sora."

He smiled.

"Kiss me, Mr. Keyblade Master," she ordered with a twinkle in her eye.

Grinning back at her, he pulled her close and obeyed.

Author's Notes: ...You can tell when I don't like a pairing, because I'll attempt a story for their Pairing Day which gives more screentime to other pairings. *huge sweatdrop* In this case, SoRiku and RikuNami instead of SoKai. *sigh*

Sora & Riku should have had these conversations (about Riku's hair products and such) long before now, but I had to have the story occur at a later point on the timeline, so...timeline fail. *sweatdrop* Speaking of two guy friends chatting as they shower in a communal area, there I go again writing about stuff I have no clue about.... I just browse through Google for a while and then start writing whatever makes sense to me with the characters, context, and research. *huge sweatdrop (again)* Is that totally off...would that never happen...?

Oh, and as was very vaguely implied, Riku's dad is Sephiroth (and his brothers are Kadaj, Yazoo, & Loz). XD There's a bit in Final Fantasy VII Crisis Core that talks about Seph using an entire bottle of hair conditioner or something every time he washes his hair, and I figured his kids might take that kind of thing for granted. :p

Anyway, so I wanted to write a SoKai Day fic for two reasons - one, my SoKai Day drabble last year was really late; and two, someone fairly recently made a comment.... As my Rurouni Kenshin readers (...probably haven't...) learned, hearing people express dissatisfaction with any character or pairing in my stories makes me want to write them more. *sweatdrop* (As in, when they dislike it solely because of the character/pairing, with no relation to writing quality.) So I tried to brainstorm a SoKai fic idea.
...The problem is that SoKai is FREAKING BORING. It took ages to come up with an idea I could actually write (without falling asleep during the drafting process), but of course I was much more interested in Sora's friendship with Riku and Riku's relationship with Naminé, and I realized that most of my plot bunnies were actually for them. I just *don't know what to do* with SoKai, they're pure cliché and there's nothing interesting about them to catch hold of. *sweatdrop*

But I tried, and had a lot of fun with Riku in the process, so yay for that.

...I also had to cut out the scene where Sora was urging a confused Naminé to give Riku some tongue, as an embarrassed Riku threatens to hurl a Keyblade at Sora's head, because it made me uncomfortable; but if not for my conscience, Naminé & Riku would be having QUITE an interesting time over on their side of the beach. *huuuuuge sweatdrop* Gah, I wish everyone was asexual; it would make things so much easier. X( 
Summary: In her final moments as a single woman, Cinderella wonders if the man she's about to marry is the man she truly loves. Post-canon.

Part 1 - Mirror (theme 94)

"Are you nervous?" Jasmine asked, reaching to adjust the veil.

"A little," Cinderella admitted, "but everyone's a bit nervous on their wedding day, right?"

"I was nervous at first," Aurora remembered, "but everything went beautifully. And, honestly - even if the cathedral had come down on our heads, I would have hardly noticed, I was so happy to finally be marrying Phillip after all those delays."

"It's going to be a dream come true for you," Belle reassured Cinderella, fluffing out her skirts so they weren't bunched up by her shoes. Snow White broke out into a spontaneous song about true love, and the other princesses smiled indulgently.

"True love," Cinderella murmured. "That's one of the things I'm worried about: the mirror."

"The one that shows the true love of the bride and groom?"

"Yes...."

"You think that Prince Charming isn't your true love?" Snow White gasped, looking scandalized.

A look of distress crossed Cinderella's face. "It's just...the night of the ball was so magical, from the moment my fairy godmother appeared to even long afterward, when each memory made me feel like dancing on clouds. But...when I finally did see the prince again...in daylight, wearing my ordinary clothes, without the music and the sparkling lights and Fairy Godmother's magic...." She shrugged helplessly. "How do you know whether someone really is your true love when you've only spent about a week's time with him?"

"He's your prince!" Snow White insisted. "He came for you during the Heartless attack! He danced with you and he wants to marry you and make you his queen, to live happily ever after in his castle forever! My dear prince is just like him."

"Snow," Belle said gently, "how many times have you actually seen your prince?"
"Five times," Snow White said proudly.

Jasmine frowned. "Wait, haven't you been engaged for months? I know that Aqua advised you to wait to marry until you were older and wouldn't be violating her world's 'statutory rape laws,' whatever those are, but aren't you two at least taking the chance to get to know each other in the meantime?"

"Oh, there's no need for that. My dear prince says that I already have everything I need to be his wife, and nothing else matters."

"...I think we might have to get the boys to have a little talk with your prince," Jasmine said grimly.

"In the meantime," Aurora said, "this is your day, Ella dear. Do you think it's just wedding day jitters, or are you...really having second thoughts?"

"...I just...I just wonder," Cinderella said slowly. "Soulmates, two people who were made for each other...is that real? Or is it...possible to...to love two people? At the...same time," she trailed off, flushed with shame.

Aurora and Belle looked at each other with wide eyes. "Two?"

"It's possible," Jasmine murmured, a little dreamily.

"What?!!"

Jasmine grinned. "Oh, it wasn't too difficult to choose - Aladdin truly is the other half of my heart. I just--" She shrugged. "--don't think I would have been miserable with the other one, either."

"What other one?!!"

"It's a secret!"

"But--!"

"This is Ella's day, remember?"

Yet Cinderella was lost in thought. "Another man...one who makes me happy, and smiles as if he treasures me...?"

"Who is it?" her friends asked breathlessly.

Cinderella straightened her shoulders and met their eyes again. "Well, if it really is the prince I'll see in the mirror, then it won't matter, will it?"

"Ellaaa!"

"But what's wrong with Prince Charming?" Snow White said in bewilderment.

"Oh, nothing, of course, nothing! He's just...not very big, is he?"

"Small men can still be manly," Jasmine pouted.
"Ella wasn't insulting Aladdin," Belle laughed. "She's just picturing someone in particular."

"Are you?" Aurora questioned Cinderella, her eyes sparkling.

"No! Well, yes...but it's not how he looks, you know! Even though the two of them...do look quite different...."

"Let's get the mirror," Jasmine said suddenly.

"What?! No!"

"Why not? It would be better to find out now, in private, rather than during the ceremony when everyone's watching."

"Ohhh," Cinderella wailed, covering her face.

"Let's do it!"

Aurora, Belle, and Jasmine came out of the dressing room, caught between marching resolutely and sneaking guiltily. They made their way into the cathedral, where seating had already begun. "We certainly could have had better timing," Belle murmured uneasily.

"I've been talking to Nani a lot about her world's courtship rituals," Aurora said quietly. "The three of us seem to have been fortunate, but the more I find out, the more I start to question the way we princesses find husbands...."

"Let's make sure that Ella doesn't make a huge mistake," Jasmine said.

The mirror was in an anteroom near the head of the sanctuary, but now the three young women had a problem.

"It looks so heavy!" Belle exclaimed in dismay. "Even if the three of us carried it together, do you think we could get it all the way to the dressing room?"

Aurora, who was smiling at her husband's image in the glass, didn't answer; Jasmine unhappily surveyed their three sets of slender, delicate arms. "A man would come in handy right about now."

"Aha! I knew I saw you guys come in here."

The princesses jumped, and turned to find Ventus watching them from the doorway.

"Ven," Aurora said happily.

"Hi, Rose."

"Oh, Ven dear, would you please be very, very sweet and help us with something?"

"Sure! Did something happen to Cinderella?"

"No, not at all! We were just, er, talking about the mirror, and we...well, we need to get it to the bride's dressing room."
"The bride's dressing room?"

"It would be so very helpful," Belle said.

Ven, beset on all sides by Princess Puppy Eyes, offered no resistance. "Well, sure, but...it's kinda heavy, huh? Maybe I can call up a wind and blow it along...."

"It might break," Belle said unhappily. "We need a more stable method of transportation."

"I wonder if Terra could carry it," Ven said thoughtfully. "I bet he could, he's strong. Want me to go get him?"

"Oh, yes! Thank you so much, Ven dear."

"But you sang a duet together!" Snow White remembered. "Surely that's proof enough?"

"Well...Ariel and Sora sang together as well...do you think that Sora is Ariel's true love?"

Snow White gasped in surprise, then burst into giggles. "Oh, certainly not!"

"I don't think that singing is proof, then," Cinderella said, resting her chin in her hands.

The dressing room door opened. Cinderella saw the reflection in the vanity mirrors of her friends returning, then when she saw the fourth figure struggling to enter after them with a heavy load, she gasped and whirled around.

"We got the mirror!" Belle said eagerly.

Cinderella felt pinned in place, frozen with delight and apprehension. "Terra," she whispered. He looked even more gorgeous than she remembered.

"Yaaargh!" Terra gave one last heave, managing to get the mirror leaning upright against the wall. He turned to face them, and the friendly smile on his face dissolved into awe when he beheld Cinderella in her wedding gown.

There was a long moment of silence.

Belle finally leaned over and whispered to Jasmine, "It's Terra, isn't it."

"The way they're looking at each other.... It can't be anyone else," Jasmine whispered back.

"He is bigger than Prince Charming," Aurora added quietly, and all three fought to stifle a burst of giggles.

"Cinderella," Terra said breathlessly. "You look--" He cleared his throat. "You look absolutely beautiful. Charming is a...a lucky guy."

"Thank you," she whispered. "You look fine, too."

"Well, I tried to dres nice for the wedding and all," he said, blushing cutely. "Thanks for inviting
me."

"I...wanted you to be here."

There was another long pause, then Terra abruptly cleared his throat again and said, "Um, well, I'd better be, better be going...."

"No," Belle said quickly, "stay - we'll, er, need you to carry the mirror back again when we're finished."

"Yes, yes," Aurora said eagerly. "Please take a seat, Terra."

"Oh...um, okay."

After a while, Cinderella realized that everyone was staring at her expectantly. She gasped, gave a nervous laugh, then stepped up to stand before the mirror.

It was Terra reflected there, just as she had feared and hoped he would be. As she watched, the reflections of Phillip, Adam, and Aladdin drew close and put their arms around Terra like brothers - well, sisters; it was really her fellow princesses embracing her. "I knew we should have checked the mirror before the ceremony," the image of Aladdin chuckled in Jasmine's voice.

Snow White had come up beside them and was staring in astonishment. "Why, that's not Prince Charming, that's-- Aaahh!" There was a collective wince at her high-pitched shriek. "Where is my prince?! Where is my prince?! All I see is me!"

"Oh, Snow darling," Aurora said, transferring her embrace to the younger girl, "it seems like you haven't found your true love yet, dearest."

"But...but the prince! I don't understand."

"I've been thinking, Snow," said Jasmine. "We'll talk to Nani and see if we can set you up on some 'dates' with nice boys a bit closer to your age."

"Dates? What are...?"

"Oh, Nani told me all about it, it sounds quite fun."

As Aurora continued to try to soothe Snow White, Cinderella turned slowly to face Terra, who was watching them with a puzzled frown. "What's wrong, Cinderella?"

"...Terra," she said quietly, "this is a magic mirror. Anyone who looks into it will see the face of their true love, the one they most want to marry and spend the rest of their life with. I...when I looked into the mirror just now, I saw the one I love...and the man I saw was not the same man who's preparing to marry me today."

Terra's eyes widened. "Then who...who was it?"

"Who do you hope it was?" she whispered through dry lips.

He flushed red and looked away.
"Cinderella asked you a question," Jasmine said sternly.

"You'll all laugh at me if I answer truthfully," Terra muttered.

"Why don't you come look in the mirror yourself, then?" Belle challenged.

Terra gave a helpless little chuckle. "Isn't it the same?" Yet he got up and went over and looked in the mirror, and as he and Cinderella gazed at the reflections of her and himself, their hands shifted and clasped.

"What on earth am I going to do?" Cinderella said helplessly. "I'm supposed to marry the wrong man in about fifteen minutes."

"Not if we have anything to say about it," Jasmine said.

Prince Charming turned out to be surprisingly understanding, especially when he glanced at the mirror out of curiosity and only saw himself. "Guess I don't even have a true love at all," he said sheepishly.

"I'm so sorry...."

"It's all right, Cinderella, I'd hate to stand in the way of a good person's Happily Ever After. I'm not even ready to settle down, anyway - I only agreed to all this because Father was so insistent, and you were the first woman who didn't jump at me like a beast trying to sink its teeth into a juicy hunk of meat."

"I was so happy to simply be at the ball, I wasn't even thinking of doing more than catching a glimpse of the prince...."

"Well, I do appreciate it, Cinderella," he said warmly, "and I wish you happiness."

"Thank you so much," she said gratefully, gripping Terr'a's hand tight.

"All I'm worried about," Charming continued, "is how Father's going to get grandchildren now. He's really had his heart set on it for a long time, and he's not in the best of health; I'm not sure how much longer he can wait...."

"Maybe you can marry Snow instead," Jasmine said dryly.

"What are we going to do about the wedding, though?" Terra said nervously. "There are so many people here, and it looks like so much munny about to go to waste...."

The prince frowned thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "If we can figure out a good way to stall, I think I can work something out."

"Really?" Belle said in delight.

Jasmine smiled and raised her hand. "I'll take care of the diversion." She raised her voice and called, "Genie! I need you!"

And so, the wedding guests were treated to / suffered through a very lively performance by Genie, Aladdin, Abu, Carpet, and Iago, as Prince Charming and Phillip good-naturedly explained the
situation to Charming's father and nursed him through the subsequent tantrum; Belle explained the change in plans to the priest and a few others; Adam's servants and Cinderella's animal friends feverishly worked to put together a wedding suit for Terra, groomsman suits for Ven and Charming, and a bridesmaid gown for Aqua to match those of the rest of the wedding party; and Ven was given a crash course in how to be a best man.

At last, the organ music started, and the delayed ceremony began. There was a confused rustling as Terra and Ven came down the aisle, then again, behind the usual awed tittering, when the bride made her entrance on the arm of Prince Charming. Everyone who glanced up at the king to see his reaction seemed half-soothed when they saw him watching in a very sulky pose, but with no sign of surprise or alarm.

The music came to a close, and the priest began speaking. After the introduction, he asked, "Who gives this woman away in marriage to this man?"

"I do," Charming said, loudly and clearly. He and Cinderella shared a smile, then he kissed her cheek and gave her hand to Terra before taking his place by the other groomsmen. The crowd was quickly shushed by an obnoxiously indignant Genie, and the ceremony continued. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...."

The crowd and even the king seemed to soften when it came time for the bride and groom to behold themselves in the magic mirror, and it was each other they saw, looking radiant with happiness. "True love," the priest declared happily. "There is no force on earth more powerful than love. I pronounce this man and this woman, who are united in their hearts, to also be unified as husband and wife. You may kiss your bride!"

Even if Terra and Cinderella hadn't had Genie whooping and setting off fireworks around them as they shared their first kiss, the effect would have been the same.

Part 2 - Leave (theme 26)

It was a rather awkward wedding reception, with everyone and their mothers hounding the bride and groom about the bizarre switch. Cinderella weathered it with her usual good grace, and Terra suffered through it with a smile, feeling like it was penance for stealing another man's almost-wife. He was still getting off incredibly easy. "Charming...I know I've told you this fifty times already, but you are an awesome guy and I owe you big time."

"Don't worry, Terra," the prince said with a wink, "I'll be calling in that favor eventually."

"Feel free. Seriously. Any time." Terra paused, then blushed a little. "That is...any time after the honeymoon...."

Charming laughed. Then he moved over to where Cinderella was talking to Belle. She turned to meet him with a smile, and he took her hands, murmuring, "I hope you don't mind, Cinderella, but the cost of wedding itself will have to count as my wedding gift to you. The royal treasurer has already had heated words with me about it...."

"Of course, of course! I'm afraid th-there's no way I could reimburse you otherwise, and we do still want to at least pay for some of it--"

"Don't fret about it, dear."
"No, please, I insist!"

Cinderella was extremely grateful for the people who were openly supportive, particularly her friends, the other princesses who clustered around her and defended her with polite, dangerous smiles. Whenever anyone didn't take the hint and continued to be relentless with their nosy questions or criticism, Genie would come swooping in to rescue her with his outrageous theatrics.

"Really, Cinderella," Aqua pouted playfully at one point, "all that work to get you and the prince back together again, and you end up jilting him for my best friend...."

"Do you really mind, Aqua?" Cinderella said anxiously.

Aqua smiled and hugged her. "When you're practically my sister now? Of course not."

The one who made Cinderella's heart hurt most was probably the king. "My dear," Charming's father said with heavy resignation, cradling her hand in both of his, "I was very much looking forward to having you as a daughter."

"I'm so sorry, Your Majesty," she said, her heart aching as she kissed the top of his head. "I know that I've behaved most abominably, but...I couldn't...I just wish I'd known sooner--"

"There's no arguing with true love," he said softly.

"Do you...do you think we could at least be friends, Your Majesty? Or do you never want to see me again after tonight? I wouldn't blame you in the least."

"My dear, you are welcome in this castle any time."

He thought wistfully that her bright smile was, in itself, reward enough for such a declaration.

Cinderella's real father-in-law, or at least the closest thing she had to one, was a bit more intimidating than the one she thought she would have. Master Eraqus surveyed her with a thoughtful frown. "Hmm...never wielded a weapon in your life before, I suppose."

"Not unless you count a broomstick, sir," she said good naturedly.

"And can I assume you would be unwilling to learn?"

"Me?" she said in surprise. "Learn to fight?"

"You're a Princess of Heart. It would be a great advantage if you were able to defend yourself, rather than relying on others to do it for you."

Cinderella still keenly remembered what it had been like to be a prisoner of darkness. She straightened up and smiled. "If you are willing to teach a woman how to fight, sir, then I would like to learn."

"Very well. You'll be more interested in your honeymoon, I suppose, but as soon as you return, we shall begin."

"Yes, sir!" She was still smiling despite her blush.
Ven glomped her as soon as Eraqs had walked off. "Ellaaaa! You're really gonna train with us?"

"It looks that way," she laughed.

"Yes! I'm so happy you're one of us now, Ella! I really like you."

"I'm quite fond of you, too, Ven dear," she said, kissing him and trying not to comb her fingers through his enticingly untidy hair.

"I can call you Ella, right?"

"Of course, love."

Just before it was time for the bride and groom to leave, the other princesses came to embrace Cinderella and bid her farewell.

"Oh, Ella, I'm so happy for you," Jasmine said, squeezing her in a tight hug.

"Thank you so much, Jasmine, Rose, Belle, Snow, all of you," Cinderella said warmly, hugging them each in turn. "I feel so incredibly happy...if it weren't for you girls, I would have...."

"We just wanted to make sure you had the best Happily Ever After you could get," Belle said, kissing her cheek.

"Go on, Ella - your real prince charming is waiting for you."

Just as Cinderella was turning away, Aurora caught her arm and whispered in her ear, "It might take a few tries, but once you get the hang of it, sex is the most wonderful thing."

"You found out what sex is?!" Cinderella whispered back eagerly.

Aurora gave a sly grin and shoved her toward where the groom was waiting.

Terra helped Cinderella onto the Keyblade Glider first, laughing when her skirts got tangled and she impatiently kicked her shoes off. Then he mounted, and they took off amidst cheers and a shower of flower petals. Cinderella tossed her bouquet, which landed directly in Ariel's outstretched hands like a bird coming to rest. As Ariel squealed in excitement and the other princes laughingly clapped Eric on the back, two people stooped down at the same time to retrieve the delicate footwear Cinderella had left behind.

"She lost her slipper again," Charming murmured with an affectionate smile. "Both of them, this time."

"I don't understand," Snow White murmured, gazing at the shoe in her hand. "You weren't her true love after all...?"

"I think she'll be more happy with him than she would have been with me," Charming said thoughtfully. "It's too bad - I wouldn't have minded being married to her."

"Maybe I have a different true love, too," Snow White said cautiously, as if testing out the idea. "Maybe I can wait a little longer."
"You've got your whole life left to live, princess, and handsome princes are only a part of it.

"Really?!"

He laughed. "Come with me the next time I go traveling. There's so much to see and do just in one world, much less all the ones there are to explore now. It amazes me every time, all the people there are to meet, all the food to try, all the art to see, all the stories to hear - it makes me restless whenever I'm home, as if I'm missing things. I love to travel, and it's fun to have a companion to share with."

Snow White smiled. "I think I would like that."

Author's Notes: Thank you SO MUCH, Kiryn - I am never gonna be able to ship Prince/Snow again. XD Creepy necrophiliac pedo stalker....

When Cinderella told Terra he looked "fine," it was in the older sense of the word, "choice, excellent, or admirable." Nowadays, the meaning has shifted a bit in everyday conversation. ^^;

Prince Charming may not have much personality in the original Cinderella movie, but he's actually a pretty great guy in the sequels. I'd still prefer that Cindy end up with Terra, but I don't dislike Charming the way I now really dislike Snow White's prince. ^^;

Most weddings are DANG EXPENSIVE. I started thinking about that every time I see some chick flick where either the bride or the groom runs out in the middle of the ceremony. It's such a huge waste of money, all in the name of unrealistic Hollywood dramatics. *sweatdrop* Charming really is being insanely generous with his wedding gift in this fic even if Terra & Cindy manage to pay for some of it, especially since the budget had been for a royal wedding. ^^;;

In the third Cinderella movie, Charming's father reveals himself to be a sap for true love. XD

Although I do understand and support the idea that some characters' gifts and talents lie in their strength of heart or something similar, and that characters, especially females, shouldn't be required to be skilled in combat in order to be valued by readers/viewers - I also do think that people with the capability of physically defending themselves should learn how to, at least at a basic level. :) I didn't mean to imply that Cinderella will be a better person if she becomes some sort of bad-a warrior, and she's not going to be a real warrior even in this story/universe. But I figured that Eraquus would place some value on combat skills and would prefer his sort-of-daughter-in-law to learn, and that Cinderella wouldn't be adverse to the idea, particularly since she is a potential target and it would be helpful if she gained even some rudimentary skill at fighting. Her focus will always still be on what she does best, but I don't think it could hurt if she knew some self-defense on the side.

I got the impression from the original movie that Prince Charming isn't home very often, and I assume that means he's more interested in traveling than in settling down with a family? Anyway, I don't even know if I'm shipping Charming/Snow or not, I just thought their interaction was interesting. ^^;

It's been a little over a year since I updated this series.... __. Wow. Sorry, guys.

For a while, my Terrella writing inspiration had died (they're still my favorite romance couple in KH and I still like drawing them, it's just that I adore platonic love so much more than romance),
and I thought I'd have to give up on the challenge. HawkRider did say I could use other pairings, such as Vanitas/Xion in my *Stepsiblings* series (since Xion will never see him as anything other than her cousin ^^;) or Demyx/Larxene or Axel/Larxene, and that helps. Luckily, while I was on vacation this summer, I started hand-writing some drabbles for this challenge in my notebook, and found that my Terrella inspiration seems to be back. ^^ Since the two Terrella drabbles I finished during summer 2013 were so closely connected, I decided to combine them into a two-part one-shot and post it for Terrella Day. I still don't know if I can do all 100 themes for Terrella, but I do want to finish the challenge in some way, even if it takes me a really long time.

Complete: 11/100
BbF&ML: Day 22 - In battle, side-by-side {Lea, Isa, Roxas, & Xion}

A Kingdom Hearts fanwork: 30 Day OTP Challenge by Ericandy, written by Raberba girl

Day 22 - In battle, side-by-side (rough draft)

Summary: Sora is not the only one whose strength comes from his friends.

A/N: Takes place during a theoretical KH3.

.o.o.o

'Sometimes,' Lea thought, 'I think I might be too cocky for my own good.'

Then he could practically hear a silent snort, as if the Isa from his memories was scoffing at him. "What, it took you twenty-five years to figure that out? You really are an idiot."

The pain was still too sharp - merely the imagined sound of Isa's voice was enough to bring tears to Lea's eyes again, as he remembered that horrible moment when Saïx had so unexpectedly appeared in front of him, taking the blast aimed at Lea, his body already starting to break apart even as he collapsed. Lea had caught only one glimpse of those almost-forgotten green eyes and his old friend's heart-breaking smile before Isa had vanished forever....

"Shut up," Lea whispered, viciously driving his Keyblade into one of the Heartless swarming around him. "I already miss you enough, you don't have to keep haunting me and making it worse."

"Lea...."

"SHUT UP!"

Beating up Heartless with a blunt weapon was cathartic, but he still hadn't gotten entirely comfortable with this new fighting style. Lea leaped into the air to buy himself a second or two, and used that time to whip out his old chakrams and fling them at the Heartless below. 'Now, those
are weapons,' he thought in satisfaction.

"They're glorified Frisbee toys. Stick with the cudgel, it's more useful."

"WELL TOO BAD, YOU DON'T GET A SAY, BECAUSE YOU'RE FRICKIN' DEAD!!!" Multiple Firaga spells lent emphasis. Lea's grin was almost fierce enough to qualify as a snarl as he landed, with enough force to send the two special Keychains that hung around his neck thumping painfully against his chest. Oblivion and Oathkeeper, given to him by Sora just before this mission because they 'might come in handy.' As if Lea didn't already have those models in his inventory.... Yet he'd accepted them anyway, to use as jewelry rather than weapons, because they reminded him of what else he'd lost. 'Isa, Roxas, Xion...why, why, why is it that I always lose the people I care about the most?'

"Maybe because you're always charging around too impulsively to realize--"

"I SAID SHUT UP, ISA! If I can never hear your real voice again, I don't want to hear your figment-of-my-imagination voice, either!"

"...."

"That's better," Lea huffed, and Strike Raided a distant Fortuneteller so that he could finish off the Crimson Jazz hounding him at close range.

It wasn't better, though.... Now that the voice had gone silent, he sort of missed it a little. He'd been so confident, claiming he'd be able to clear the Garden path on his own and free up the others to handle the other paths. But it was...lonely, fighting alone. He'd been used to it before, but that had been when he was still a Nobody, before meeting Roxas and Xion, when emotions seemed to be so vague and muted and distant. Now...he very much did have a heart...and it was weary from his life of battle and torn with both old and new grief, and Sora had been right about the whole 'Our friends are our power' stuff because it wasn't just Sora, it was Lea, too; all of them, probably; struggling so much alone yet feeling so much stronger with someone, anyone, even one friend to fight alongside....

"Lea," Isa's voice said, quietly this time. "I'm with you."

"Yeah, I know, you'll always live on in my heart and all that crap," Lea murmured ruefully, smiling with tears in his eyes and wondering if he should use the last of his MP on an attack spell or a
healing spell.

"Lea. You really are an idiot. I'm with you. I'm here. I am trying to lend you my strength, doing what I think is the mental equivalent of shoving it in your face, but I can't give it to you if you don't take it."

Too distracted. Better safe than sorry. Lea cast Cura. "I...Isa?"

"Yes!"

"I-- Isa?!"

"YES!!! Sacred moon! How thick do you have to be?!"

"Flaming pants! Isa?!"

"Use your Keyblade! I'm better with that sort of weapon than your chakrams, it's easier to sync our battle instincts."

"FLAMING PANTS! ISA!!!"

"Stop shouting, I can hear you perfectly."

"YOU REALLY ARE IN MY HEART?!?!?"

"Stop shouting... And yes. Apparently, dying in the arms of a loved one acts as a form of 'heart preservation' - it can't be an anomaly that this is the third time it's been known to happen. I--"

"Aaaahhhh!"

"Shut up and focus! Blizzara at eight o'clock!"
Lea automatically dodged the ice spell and hacked apart the Heartless that had shot it at him, laughing wildly all the while. "Isa! Isa! You're alive!"

"I'm not quite dead, in any case. But someone will have to find and destroy my Heartless yet again if--"

"Isaaaaa!!"

"...You really are useless when you're happy, aren't you." The tone was affectionate. "In which case, you're going to need more help, so I suggest you use those Keychains."

"Huh?"

"Your other friends, Lea," Isa said in exasperation. "I'm not the only one you're carrying around with you."

"Wha--?!" Wide-eyed, Lea yanked the chain from his neck and stared at the tiny dangling forms of Oblivion and Oathkeeper. "Rox--" He flung them into the air and pointed his Keyblade.

There was a blinding flash of light, lots of sparkling and some sound effects. He heard their voices before he could see them.

"Finally!" Xion shrieked.

"What TOOK you so long?!" Roxas bellowed.

"You guys," Lea sobbed, blinded by tears now that the light was gone.

"Ah!" There was a harsh chinking sound of Heartless flesh on metal.

"You okay, Xion?" Roxas asked in concern. Lea swiped at his eyes until he could see them, his
other two best friends, clad in armor like Sora and the others.

"I'm fine," Xion said in a wondering tone, staring at her arm. "It just bounced right off, as if...."

"Tell them to get their heads out of the clouds and help us!" Isa raged.

"I love you guys so much," Lea choked out happily, surrounded by his three dearest friends whom he'd been afraid he'd never see again.

Roxas and Xion grinned at him, Isa urged him into a battle stance, and the four of them flung themselves whole-heartedly into the fray, their strength not just shared, but multiplied.

Author's Notes: Wrote this just now because I'm mad at my NaNoWriMo story and wanted to scribble out a more successful fic to make myself feel better. *sweatdrop* (See my deviantART journal for details.) Sulking with my OT4 plus knocking out another challenge entry, yaaay.

I never got to explain the whole thing with Roxas & Xion properly, but thinking about it now, I've decided that I won't clarify even here in the author's note. The idea is very, very similar to the idea that forms the backbone of my "Birth by Sleep 2" fanfic that I'll probably never have time to finish. *sweatdrop*

One of my AkuSai-fangirling/daydreaming things is that maybe, if Saïx sacrifices himself to save Lea, maybe Isa's heart will get drawn into Lea's for safekeeping, the way Kairi's was with Sora's and Eraqus's was with Terra's. :/

Complete: 10/30
"...but I'm telling you, this one's different," Lea said happily, chattering so much at breakfast that no one else had much chance to respond. "I mean, *yeah* she's pretty and she's fun, but we have a lot in common, too--"

"Oh, so she, too, is an ex-assassin who wielded fire as a Nobody and helped save the multiverse with a Keyblade after regaining her humanity?" Isa deadpanned.

"That's not--"

"Or are you referring to more mundane similarities, such as being impulsive, hot-headed high school dropout single parents who unwind from the stress of working two service jobs by watching pony cartoons?"

Lea glared. "*For your information*-- ...Yeah, pretty much. But whatever! We *click!* We're going out again Friday night."

"Mm."

"And she works at the castle, too, which I think is good because I keep getting in trouble when they're my co-workers; and her daughter is six and her son is five, but she says she doesn't want me to meet 'em yet but they sound freaking adorable, but sometimes women don't like when I act like I like their kids better than them, so it's good we have a chance to-- *Hey.* What are you doing?"
their plates or bowls. Isa had three grains of rice, Roxas had three blue Fruit Loops and a purple one, and Xion was still in the process of piling up Cheerios.

Lea understood immediately. "HEY! Are those weeks, months, or years?!"

Roxas and Xion flinched sheepishly, but Isa said with no shame or hesitation, "Rice grains, half-Cheerios, or light colored Froot Loops are weeks; fruit, whole Cheerios, or dark Froot Loops are months; and bits of bread or pastry are years."

Xion hurriedly pulled back all her Cheerios and replaced them with a piece torn off her cinnamon roll. She smiled at Lea, still sheepish.

"Whaaaat?! Xion's the only one who thinks Sonia and me can even last a year!!"

"You're too similar," Isa said bluntly. "You'll be driving each other mad soon."

"The one you lasted a really long time with was the one you didn't talk much about," Roxas reasoned, shrugging.

"Don't worry, Axel," Xion said encouragingly. "You can do it."

"Yeah, I will! And you know what--" Lea defiantly picked up his entire muffin and plunked it down beside his plate. Roxas and Xion stared at it in awe. Isa rolled his eyes. "I'm totally winning," Lea declared. Then, after a pause, "What are we betting?"

"500 munny from me, and from Xion," Roxas said. "Isa has to come roller skating with us if he loses."

Lea burst into laughter.

"Axel," Xion said eagerly, "If you lose, can we go to the beach again?"

"First of all, I'm not gonna lose; and second of all, we'll go to the beach anyway, all right?"
"Yay!"

"I hope Isa loses," Roxas said happily. "Then we'll get to go roller skating and to the beach."

"That remains to be seen," Isa grumbled.

Two increasingly troubled months later, Lea came home very late, trudging straight to bed and falling into it without bothering to change clothes. The next morning, Isa got up early and left for his Saturday class. When he returned home, it was to find Roxas and Xion eating a late lunch, and Lea still in the house.

"Lea! What are you doing in bed?!"

"Sleeping," Lea mumbled.

"He doesn't have work today," Xion called.

"Yes, you do," Isa said severely. "You're over an hour late."

"I don't care."

"...Did you break up with her?"

"Leave me alone."

Roxas and Xion came into the bedroom. "They broke up?" Xion said anxiously.

Isa sighed. "At the risk of sounding cold-hearted and insensitive, it doesn't matter, Lea. You're not working for that woman's sake, you're working to put food on the table - not just for me and yourself, but for Roxas and Xion as well. You can't afford to succumb to personal setbacks."
"I hate you," Lea said dully, even as he dragged himself out of bed and over to the closet to get his uniform. He paused when Xion came over to hold his arm, looking distressed, and Roxas hovered helplessly nearby. "Hey," Lea said softly. "We're still going to the beach, all right? I'm just...not really feeling up to it at the moment. Maybe next week, okay?"

"You can stay here and sleep," Roxas said. "Me and Xion will go work for you today."

"Huh?!!"

"Yeah!" Xion agreed enthusiastically. "Don't worry, Axel, we'll work instead of you, and that way you can stay home and be sad but we won't lose munny."

"What? No!"

"Xion," Isa started, but was not allowed to finish.

"Don't worry, Saa-chan, we both finished our homework, or I guess I still have to fix those math problems, but you can help me tomorrow since you don't have class, right? We have to help Axel!"

"Look," Lea started to say, but then smiled and shook his head. "Whatever. You guys can come along, I guess. I have to go to work myself, but...I'll feel better to have you for company."

They smiled at him. "We love you, Axel," Xion said.

"I know, sweetheart. It's what keeps me going."

---

**Author's Notes:** I love tormenting Lea and I much prefer to keep him single, but even I am starting to feel bad for him. *sweatdrop* I decided today to change some of the pairings in this universe: it went from Terra/Aqua, Charming/Cinderella, and Forever Alone Lea to Terra/Cinderella,
Aqua/Lea, and Charming/*spoiler*. So Lea will find his Happily Ever After eventually. ^^ (After the kids have grown up and flown the nest. XD) And I need to have at least one story where Aqua & Lea can work as a couple, argh! *sweatdrop*

Anyway, this story is an old one (I wrote it before I wrote "untitled 2"). I decided to type and post it now because I have two announcements.

First, I FINALLY got around to posting the entirely platonic version of Day 24 - Making up afterwards. Since I only changed about 25 words total, I figured it wasn't worth posting as an entirely new chapter, so on most of my sites, I simply replaced the already-existing file with the new one. The original totally failed Sora/Xion version is still on deviantART, for those who are curious. (Seriously, you can barely tell the difference. XD)

Second, I've shifted a couple of titles. I decided that each challenge series I take on should have a title of its own (there were only a couple that didn't), and there was a certain canon-based universe I'd originally intended to only use for a set of AkuSaiRokuShi fics, but it started sucking in some of my VenVan and SaiJaz stories, too. ^^; SO, the "Bound by Fire & Moon Light (BbF&ML)" title will be reserved for my 30 Day OT[4] Challenge entries and any other AkuSaiRokuShi stories/series I might deem it useful for. As for the universe this story takes place in, where Lea, Isa, Roxas, & Xion live in Radiant Garden for four years after the war so that Isa can go to college, and Ven & Vanitas have reunited as a single person and is struggling to live a normal life on Destiny Islands, and the Eyes Like A Tiger's plot where Jasmine befriended Saïx when he saved her from being kidnapped, etc..... That universe now has the collective title of "Beyond the War." The title's still messed up in previously posted fics, but I've fixed it on my deviantART fanfiction indexes.
Beyond the War: Color Theme {Relena & Lumaria}

Beyond the War, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Color Theme (rough draft)

For Marluxia/Larxene Day, 12 November 2013

Summary: An unforeseen development might ruin Lumaria & Relena's wedding plans...or not.

A/N: This was a lot longer in my head, and I think Relena's conversations with Lea, possibly Isa, and Myde would have been a lot longer than this little scene here with Lumaria, but I only had time to scrawl out a drabble. I've been busy this week. ^^;

I forgot where I first mentioned this, but just in case you missed it: "BbF&ML" is now the title of my AkuSaiRokuShi 30 Day OT[4] Challenge entries, and perhaps some other random AkuSaiRokuShi stuff. The universe where they live in Radiant Garden for four years after defeating Xehanort so that Isa can go to college, and where VenVan is a single person living on Destiny Islands as Sora's brother, is now titled Beyond the War. This fic is a BtW fic.

I can't decide which Somebody name for Marly I like better, Rumalia or Lumaria. XD I guess I'll go with Lu for the BtWverse, until we're told his name in canon.

0.0.0

Relena found him arranging flowers (big surprise there), adjusting a collection of pink blossoms with those graceful movements of his she admired so much. Strung out in a row beside him were several other round tables, a vase of flowers in the center of each one, containing arrangements with different color themes. Purple, blue, orange and yellow, red....

Lumaria did not seem to acknowledge her as she came up to stand beside him, but then he said conversationally, as if she'd been there all along, "I'm not partial to any one over the others, so let me know which one you like best, and we can work from there."

"You're doing the flowers yourself, huh," she murmured.
He paused, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye as if to say, "Duh."

"It'll save us a little munny, at any rate."

She expected him to continue with his work, but the pause stretched out, then he laid down the flower he'd been holding and turned to fully face her. "What's wrong?"

She realized that her hands had gone instinctively to her belly, and she made herself drop them back to her sides. "...Nothing."

He waited.

She took a deep breath. Then she said, willing her face to be as hard and immoveable as stone, "You remember how I said I never wanted kids?"

He raised an eyebrow in surprise. "You changed your mind?"

"No. And yes."

"Hm." A noncommittal response to a cryptic answer.

"...You wanted kids, though. Right?"

"As I said before, I wouldn't mind having children, but if you don't want them, I'll respect your wishes."

"My wishes have nothing to do with it," she said harshly.

He stepped closer and set a hand on the table so that he could lean down closer to her eye level. "Tell me."
She finally took his other hand and pressed it against her stomach. There was a long silence. Then, when she felt his fingers twitch in realization, she said quietly, "I meant it when I said I was through with Myde. He didn't care, either. We both walked away. ...We didn't plan on this."

After another long silence, Lumaria finally withdrew his hand from hers and turned back to the vase. He picked up the flower again and set it among the others.

It was her turn to wait. Relena wasn't good at waiting. She picked up the vase and flung it to the floor.

As they both stared at the shattered ceramic, at the water ('Demyx's ele--') spreading out as if to devour the fallen, bruised flowers ('Mar--'), Relena wished very much that she had kept her composure.

Lumaria finally spoke. "I hadn't thought you were the type of person to let something like this change your plans."

"What, you want me to get an abortion, like my mom almost did?" she snapped. "Or hand it off to that sap Lea as soon as it's born? He even said he would, I--"

Lumaria's brow was furrowed in confusion.

She'd reacted too quickly, out of her own anxiety and the thoughts that had been consuming her as soon as she'd learned she was pregnant. His remark had meant something else entirely. 'Breathe, Relena,' she thought to herself. 'Calm down. Read him.'

His eyes had still been turned away when he'd said it, his face closed off from her. Self-protection, like a flower drawing its petals inward. He hadn't been disapproving, he'd been hurt. 'At the thought of Myde and I together?' No.... The flower he'd put back in the vase before she'd knocked it over - he had no longer been paying attention to visual placement. His fingers had simply been running along soft petals and sturdy stalks, seeking comfort. 'My plans. My plans had been...to marry Mari. This child would have changed the plans because--' Because he had wanted to have his bride all to himself for a while after the wedding, before children started invading their life? Or because he was...afraid that this child's existence meant there wouldn't be a wedding after all?

Relena seized his shirt in both hands and dragged him close to kiss him. He didn't resist her, but
was unresponsive until she hissed, "I want you. I'll *always* want you." He gripped her hips and kissed back until she couldn't breathe.

At last they drew apart, eyes fixed on each other. She finally whispered, "There's still time to shift the date, and it's not like it'll *totally* ruin things - Myde can baby-sit his own stupid kid when we get married. And as often as I tell him to afterward. ...Right?"

Lumaria straightened back up and turned away. Relena's hands were clenched into desperate fists until he finally said, his tone conversational again, "It seems you disapprove of the pink, but surely at least one of the others is more to your liking? Though it's not like I'm out of ideas - I can come up with something else if you insist on being picky."

She smiled, her heart filling with relief and with more love for him than ever. "I'm not having a pink wedding, it clashes with my eyes. We need a color that looks good on *both* of us."

He took her hand affectionately. "I can manage that."

"You'd better."

They kissed again, and were in too good a mood afterwards to argue about the final decision for long.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Venturing into don't-know-what-I'm-talking-about territory again, but I like both Marluxia/Larxene and Demyx/Larxene, and I finally figured out a way to resolve my favorite Larxene pairing feels in the same universe. I'm gonna have fun with this family.... *(Not that I *at all* approve of Dem & Larx having an extramarital liaison. But sometimes sexual sin can lead to super-interesting familial relationships. ^^;;;;;;; [Ftr, Dem & Larx had a very brief fling, but broke up before she officially got together with Marly.])*

By the way: **I'm completely fed up with FanfictionDotNet**, and now that I have a whole collection of better sites to post my work on, I don't have to put up with FFN anymore. If I wasn't addicted to reviews and paranoid about plagiarism, I would leave FFN, because I've hated this site for over a decade, and they STILL haven't improved. FFN's run by a bunch of control freaks who, after all this time, still keep throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Since I *am* addicted to reviews (most of my readers are on FFN... ^^;) and since I *am* paranoid, I'll still keep posting
everything on FFN as always, but FFN has gone from being my "main arena" to being my "crappy obligation site." I'm no longer going to put any effort into fixing formatting issues; if FFN censors things out, then my FFN readers are just going to have to put up with it, sorry. :/ AO3 and deviantART are my two main sites now (AO3 is the best, but I'm most active on dA, and dA is also where my comprehensive fanfiction indexes are). I'm "Raberba_girl" on AO3 and "raberbagirl" on dA.
Bastion of Light: Mystery (theme 39) {Axel & Saix}

Introduction: I kinda got the "Bastion of Light" title from my friend Kiryn. ^^; If you don't mind strong language or intense issues, check out her fic Racing Yellow Lights, it's amazing!

This challenge is one of the ones I've had my eye on for a while (though, as usual, I will be breaking rules, since I am incapable of consistently sticking to word count limits :/). Although this is the first fic I've posted for this challenge, I've actually been working on A-Sign-of-Insanity's contest prize for several months now, which is a one-shot built around about half the themes for this challenge. I also have some ideas for themes that are unrelated to Sign's story, most of them in the Beyond the War universe.

This first story here is just a random AkuSai fic.

Mystery (theme 39)

Summary: Young Axel finally discovers the fate of his younger siblings.

A/N: Narrated by Axel, very shortly after becoming a Nobody. Although it starts out and ends in the Castle That Never Was, a significant portion of it takes place in Hollow Bastion.

0.0.0

The last few days have been so....

I mean, I know it's been days, at least two or three of them. I slept a lot. I sat and stared a lot. I don't really know what I was staring at, because this is the first time I've noticed what this place is
like, this place where I've been a zombie for however long it's been. White walls, utter silence, almost nothing in the room other than me and this bed - I'm seeing it all for the first time, yet I know I've been here all along.

"Isa?" That's my first thought. My first real, coherent one, anyway. A face, a name, the knowledge that he's important for some reason and I should know what happened to him. "Isa?"

Hearing the sound of my own voice seems to finish waking me up. What am I doing lying around in bed for? I should get up and figure out what's going on.

...I don't particularly want to. And I don't particularly not want to. But I should.

I walk through doors and corridors and up and down stairs and something I think might have been an elevator until I finally come across another person. That guard with the eye patch, wearing the same kind of black coat I am. Braig. He grins at me.

"Well, good morning, sleeping beauty."

The corner of my mouth twitches a little, and I have a feeling I should laugh, but I'm not sure why and I don't really care and I don't feel like laughing, so I don't. "Where's Isa?"

"Seriously, is that the only thing you know how to say?"

Why, have I asked him about Isa already?

"Your boyfriend's in the dining room. You might wanna check on him and make sure he's getting his breakfast into his mouth. Xaldin hates seeing food go to waste."

What is he talking about? "Where's the dining room?"

He gestures, and some weird-looking white creature sort of stretches out of the ground. It stands between us, swaying from side to side like it's drunk.
"What's that?"

"A Dusk. It'll show you the way."

I follow the Dusk thing until I get to a room with a big table in it. A couple of big guys are sitting at one end, both wearing black coats. I vaguely recognize them - I think they were palace guards, too. The one with auburn hair is just sitting there eating and ignoring everyone, but the one with black hair is frowning over at the third person in the room. Isa, in a black coat just like everyone else, sitting with a bowl of food in front of him and a spoon in one hand, but he's not moving at all. After a while, I finally notice that he's not blinking, either.

I go over and wave my hand in front of his face. He blinks. "Isa," I say. "I found you."

He stares at me for a long time before he finally says, "Lea."

"Yeah. That's my name."

We keep looking at each other for a long time, until I realize that that's not what we're supposed to be doing.

"You're in here to eat, right?"

Isa looks down at the bowl.

"That eye patch guy said to eat."

Isa puts the spoon in the bowl and scoops up some broth and puts it in his mouth. He swallows. Then he stares at the bowl some more.

Come to think of it, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing, now that I've found Isa. I finally decide to sit down in the chair next to him. He doesn't move. I stare at him for a long time, waiting for something to happen.
The guy at the other end of the table finally says, "Eat. I didn't spend good munny on that food just to see it start uselessly congealing."

Isa puts another bite in his mouth.

"I hate new recruits," the guy mutters under his breath.

After a minute, it occurs to me that we're the new recruits, Isa and I. "Hey," I say. Both of the men look at me. "Where are we?"

"This is the Castle That Never Was," says the auburn-haired guy.

I frown until I remember their names. Xaldin and Lexaeus. That's what the others had called them when they--

I stand up again. There's something wrong. "You guys attacked us."

Neither of them answer. They're just sitting there eating, looking bored.

"Hey. You hurt us, and dragged us here - isn't that kidnapping? That's wrong. You guys are bad people. Why are we here with you?"

No one says anything, then Xaldin finally mutters, "I hate them so much" again and takes another bite.

Why is no one reacting the way they're supposed to? Why am I not reacting the way I'm supposed to? Something horrible happened to me and my best friend, right? Shouldn't I care about that? "Hey. Isa."

"What," he says dully.

"Isa. Wake up." I snap my fingers in front of his face, but all he does is blink and stare at them. "Isa, let's leave here."
He puts the spoon down and stands up obediently, like he was just waiting for someone to give him different orders.

"Isa... We should escape, right?"

"It's better to be with you than by myself," he says. His voice is completely flat, and his face has no expression.

"Hey. Isa? You're not a robot, are you?"

"I'm not a robot."

"...." I grasp his arm. He doesn't respond in any way. "Hey. Isa. Call me stupid."

"You're stupid," he says, in the exact same monotone as before. The name-calling was supposed to reassure me, but instead, it just seems even more wrong than before.

"Isa? Smile."

Nothing happens for a while. Then he finally says, "I can't. I forgot how."

I let go of his arm so I can put my two pointer fingers on each corner of his mouth and pull them upwards. I hold them there for a minute. Then I let go. "That's how."

Nothing happens again, except that his mouth twitches a little.

"I can't," he finally says.

"...Well, whatever. Let's get out of here."
"All right."

Even though I'm kind of expecting the other two guys to say something, they don't try to stop us at all.

We wander around the castle for a while. I hit Isa a few times and call him names, because he's not acting at all like he used to before we were kidnapped, but it's like he's a doll or a robot. I hug him and tell him he's my best friend forever, but he still just stares blankly at me like a dollbot.

"Isa. Something happened to us. We both changed. That's a bad thing, right?"

"I suppose so."

"...Shouldn't we try to fix it?"

"Should we try to fix it first, or get out of this castle first?"

I guess he's got a point. One step at a time. "Let's get out of the castle."

"All right."

We finally find some more people, in a gray room with couches and a huge window. It's nighttime outside, and the moon in the sky is shaped like a heart. "Look at the moon, Isa."

He tilts his head and studies it. He finally says, "The moon is either an orb or a crescent."

"But look, it's a heart. That's bad, right?"

"...Yes," he finally says. It's good to hear him confirm it, since I'm not sure about anything anymore. I wish I could feel something, something to tell me if I'm doing the right thing or am totally off, but I can't feel anything. My chest feels empty.
"Stop dawdling," some guy snaps at us. Black coat again. The kid typing on a laptop across the room is in a little black coat, too. "Come here and get your missions. Ien-- That is, Zexion will be teaching you some basics today."

I stare at him. "What?" We're supposed to be escaping, aren't we?

I don't know if it counts as escaping. Isa and I follow the kid through some black tunnel thing, and when we come out, we're in Radiant Garden, and it's daytime. That means we escaped the Castle That's Invisible or whatever, right? Except the kid's still here.

"All right," he says, in a monotone like Isa. "First of all, I want to make sure you can remember your new identification. Who are you?" He points at Isa.

"...I'm Isa," Isa says softly.

"No. That's wrong. Your name is Saïx, you are Number VII in the Organization, and your title is the Luna Diviner." He turns to me. "What about you?"

I can't remember what they told me back in that gray room, but I don't care. "My name is Lea Deucalion Hayes," I say loudly.

"Wrong again. You are Axel, Number--"

I turn and walk away. After a minute, I realize that I'm alone, so I go back and take Isa's arm and pull him along. He stumbles, then finds his gait and paces behind me like a pet dog.

"Isa, wake up," I tell him.

"I'm already awake."

"No. Wake up. Stop just doing everything I tell you to."
"Because...." I have to think awhile before I come up with the answer. "Because Isa doesn't do anything I tell him - he's the one always bossing me around. You're Isa, so you have to act like Isa, okay?"

"I don't remember what Isa was like."

I stop and look at him. "Really?" It's hard to remember things from before we were kidnapped, but they're still there, memories drifting around like islands in the ocean of my mind.

Isa's face is still so blank as he looks at me. "There's just darkness. A white room. Someone told me to eat. You told me to escape. You're more important than them, so I should be with you."

"...."

"...."

"...That's all?"

"That's all."

He lost more than me. My hand tightens on his arm when I finally realize it. I lost a lot, but for some reason, he lost everything.

"...Just stick with me, Isa, okay?"

"Yes."

"Say, 'Obviously, idiot.'"

"Obviously, idiot," he says in a monotone.
"...Never mind."

We don't get very far. A wiggly shadow with hands and feet and glowing yellow eyes comes out of the ground. Then more of them do. I don't know what to make of them until they start clawing at me, and the shock of pain leaves me breathless for a minute. It's the closest thing to feeling I've had since I got out of bed, and I actually try to kneel down so they can reach me better.

Isa stops me, pulling on my arm and dragging me back a few steps. "Get away."

"No, I want--"

"They're hurting you."

"I...feel...."

He presses his palm against one of the cuts, as if trying to push the blood back into my skin.

A huge book comes crashing down on the shadows' heads, over and over until they pop into wisps of smoke and disappear.

Zexion stands there, frowning a little. "Those were Heartless. You need to learn how to fight them."

We stare at him for a while. Isa's grip on me tightens. "...Okay," I finally say.

I get the idea that I should enjoy being able to throw around these spiked wheel things and hurling fire wherever I want, but I don't really care about it. It's just one more thing Zexion's nagging me to do. I don't even know what I do want, though. I'm back in the Garden with my best friend, but...the place looks pretty trashed...we've been in the castle the whole time, because not much outside of it has survived. I'm not even sure my house still exists anymore.

"I wanna go look for my family," I say.
Zexion looks back at me. "They're not here."

"You don't even know, because we haven't looked. I'm gonna go look."

"Either they've turned into Heartless, or they're in Traverse Town. There's nothing left for you here, Axel."

"...I used to have a little brother. And a sister. I still have a sister, but I used to have two. You know what happened to them, Zexion?"

"No. And I don't care. Neither should you."

"You're wrong. I don't care, but I should. I'm going to go look for them. Because Zeph and Bel disappeared long before--" I remember now. I remember. "We'd almost found them. We found the others who'd disappeared, I know Zeph and Bel had to be there, too. Isa even found computer files with their names, but we couldn't read them because you guys came barging in and...."

I turn and head for the nearest stairs, with Isa trailing after me. I have to go down. Down and down, until I reach that room with the computers, the computer that had files on my little brother and sister. "I have to find...."

"Lord Xemnas will not be pleased about how off-task you've been during this entire mission," Zexion says, but I ignore him. I wish Isa would talk more, but he doesn't say anything except when I ask him questions.

"Say something, Isa."

"Something."

"No. Come up with something out of your own head."

"...."
"What's your favorite book, Isa?"

"I don't remember."

He's definitely messed up, there's no way the real Isa couldn't have answered a question like that.

"I'm gonna find some stuff for you to read in a minute, okay, Isa?"

"All right."

"...Do you remember how to smile yet?"

He's silent for so long that I think he didn't understand the question. Then he says "No," and I realize he'd been trying to smile but failed.

"Well...it's okay, buddy. We'll work on that."

"All right."

We find the room. We find the computer. It's busted, so I hit it a few times, but it doesn't help. Isa's staring at the computer as if he's actually looking at it, instead of just staring into space, so I tell him to work some magic. He fiddles with the wires for a minute, then the screen lights up.

"Good job, Isa!" I tell him.

He stares at his hands like he's not sure how he did what he just did.

I start typing in Zeph's and Bel's names. The computer keeps throwing error messages at me, and I notice that Isa's staring at it again, so I step aside to let him work. He doesn't do anything. I take his hands and put them on the keyboard, and he still doesn't do anything for a minute, but then he slowly starts typing, and eventually he finds the files again. He's still a nerd even when he's a
"Good job, Isa!"

"...Don't say that."

I look at him. So he finally has an opinion on something? "Why?"

"...The way you say it. It's like when people talk to small children. Or dogs."

My lips twitch again, and I realize that the old Lea would have smiled, so I smile. "Sorry. I meant, thanks for helping me out."

He thinks a minute, then I guess he finally remembers what to say in reply. "...You're welcome."

I start reading.

Subject FDF8-13, male, 7 years old. Unusual resistance to darkness in initial examinations, showed signs of affinity for wind, succumbed in fourth trial after failing to....

Subject FDF8-14, female, 5 years old. Predictable resistance to darkness considering relevant factors. Possible fire affinity, though this was not confirmed before subject succumbed in second trial due to....

After a while, I remember that this is my little brother and sister I'm reading about. Zeph. Bel. Tortured and killed, from the looks of it; turned into monsters like the kind we had to fight on our way down here.

"They're dead." My voice feels as empty as my heart. Isa looks at me. "Zeph and Bel are dead." I turn and look at Zexion. "You guys killed them." He gazes back at me impassively.

I feel my hands curling into fists. Why can't I feel anything? This is important, isn't it? I shouldn't just be standing here doing nothing, right? This is bad, bad. So act like it's bad. "You killed my little brother and sister." I make my voice go higher and higher as I say it until it sounds better, all...
wobbly like it's about to crack. As if I'm as upset as I should be. "You killed them. They're dead."

I fall on my knees, and I scream. The thing I notice most is that it puts a strain on my vocal cords, which is something I can feel. That's good, so I keep screaming. "You killed them! You killed them!"

"What in the world are you doing?" Zexion says. "There's no need to shout."

"AAAAHHHH!!!!" I pound my fists against the metal in front of me. I can feel that even more, so I hit harder. Isa stoops down and takes my fist in his hand and looks at it, at the red marks on my skin.

"I'LL MAKE YOU ALL PAY!"

"Stop it. We need to RTC."

"RAGH!" I get to my feet, belatedly realizing that I should have jumped up faster, but whatever; I'm standing now. "I'LL KILL YOU!" I summon my weapons again.

Zexion sighs as he gets his book ready. "I do not recommend that you challenge me. I might be younger and smaller than you, but I have the advantage when it comes to skill and experience." More white creatures materialize around him, some of them Dusks but others with different shapes. I don't care.

"I'LL MAKE YOU SUFFER TEN TIMES MORE THAN THEY DID!"

He totally kicks my butt. I could have sworn I hit him at least once, maybe twice, but he doesn't look fazed at all as he freezes me and then electrocutes me and then just sits back and lets his goons beat on me. I manage to take out some of them, but there are too many.

"Isa, help me!"

That big club appears in his hand again. "...You want me to destroy the Nobodies?"
"SMASH THEM TO PIECES!"

He does. At first. Then Zexion gets his book out again and starts beating him up, too. Just when I think Isa's about to join me on the floor, his eyes start glowing and his hair starts floating a little and he lets out a roar that I wouldn't have imagined could ever come from his throat. It sends a shiver down my spine, and I watch as he decimates almost all of Zexion's little army. I even think for a minute that he can beat Zexion; he's got the kid on the run, Zex is defending and hiding and dodging, and I think that surely he can't last much longer.

Turns out he was just waiting. I guess Isa got burned out or something, because he suddenly collapses, and Zexion strolls over and slams that book on him without mercy until Isa's out cold.

I feel like I'm about to pass out, too, but I manage to get my arms braced so I can prop myself up a little. "I hate you," I tell Zexion.

He looks at me. "No, you don't."

The sad thing is, I don't. All this grief and rage has been an act. I feel nothing, and after all these weeks and months of missing my brother and sister and trying desperately to find them, or at least find out what happened to them.... At last the mystery is solved, but I have even less than I did before. I have nothing. I really am nothing, nobody, an empty shell.

"Are you finished wasting my time, or is there more?" Zexion asks.

"...Nah, I'm good." I lay my head down on my arms and let myself lose consciousness.

When I wake up, I'm lying in bed in the white room again. There's not a scratch on me, I don't even have the pain left to help me figure out whether I'm still human or even alive. I wonder if it was all a dream.

I lost track of time. I've been lying here for who knows how long, just thinking about nothing. I could keep on doing that, but I know the real Lea wouldn't, so I get out of bed and go look for Isa.

He's sitting on a couch in that gray room, staring at nothing. When I come over to him, he looks up
at me, and he frowns. It's the very first expression I've seen on his face since I found him in the dining room.

"Isa? We went to Radiant Garden yesterday, right? It wasn't a dream?"

"...We went to Radiant Garden yesterday."

"Good. Here, pinch me, just for good measure."

He stares at the arm I'm holding out to him, my sleeve pushed up so he can pinch properly.

"Isa. Take some skin between your fingers and squeeze it."

"Why?"

"Because it'll hurt. I can't hurt if I'm dreaming, or dead."

He lays his hand on my arm, but he doesn't pinch me. "You're not dreaming," he says softly, "or dead. I can tell you that."

"...We really got ourselves in a mess, huh, Isa."

"...Lea?"

"Yeah?"

"Why were you shouting back then?"

"You mean in the computer room?"
"Yes."

"Because I was upset, Isa. I found out some bad news. People scream and yell and flip out when they get bad news like that." They're *supposed* to, anyway.

"...You felt something?"

I can't lie to him, not when he's like this and can't tell. "No, Isa. Forget it. I was just pretending."

He frowns again. This time, I remember to grin without my lips having to twitch. "Good job, Isa."

"What?"

I touch his forehead, where the frown lines are. "It's an improvement, at any rate. Next, let's work on your smile, okay?"

He nods as if I'm not joking, and come to think of it, I guess it never was a joke. These things that used to come so naturally to us are going to take effort and practice. "All right."

"We can do it," I say, and I smile again to show him.

"Yes." His expression changes so that it's not a frown anymore. It's not really a smile, either, but it's literally better than nothing.

O.o.o

**Author's Notes:** It's been two and a half weeks since I posted anything, so I finally hunted through my challenge theme lists for a quick plunny to draft. I said a few days ago that I'd try to post something before RepliNami Day - December 2nd is the day after tomorrow, but I did manage it in the end~

I'm thinking I might want to someday do an alternate version of this idea that takes place slightly earlier than this, because I've wanted for a long time now to write how Isa & Lea might have
become Saïx & Axel.

Btw, they're still emotionless zombies in this story, but they'll regain more memories and figure out how to fake their old personalities eventually.

In my headcanon, Lea's father is dead, and his mother remarried (his stepdad is either a certain canon character or a throwaway OC, depending on which universe I'm writing); Lea's also got a younger sister, and two younger half-siblings who disappeared (turned into Heartless). I haven't figured out their age differences yet, so I might have to fix that in either this fic or others. *sweatdrop*

I've been distracted by a lot of non-writing projects, so I got a much later start on Christmas stuff than I'd intended. I have about 2,400 words written of the story about little Riku and his family, but at the rate I'm going, that might be the only thing I finish in time for Christmas. :/ Pairing Days have also been jumping on my muse again, so I don't know if I'll be able to resist temptation.... I've already got a picture almost ready for VanNami Day, and story ideas for RokuKai, VanNami, and VanKai, which are all coming up in the first week of December. *sweatdrop* I've also got three other pictures in the coloring stage, including that one of Riku and his family that I kept talking about.
The Next Life: Battle Stance - No Name (theme 98) {Repliku & Naminé}

Battle Stance

Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Armory Challenge by RoseOfADifferentColor, written by Raberba girl

Summary: A collection of one-shots inspired by weaponry in Kingdom Hearts.

Introduction: Yet another challenge I've wanted to take on for a while~ For some reason, all the stories I've written for it so far are The Next Life ones. XD

Sorry for flooding my accounts with all these unfinished challenges. ^^; They're fun and help me de-stress and are easier to write than other stories, because I stopped taking them seriously and they're more accessible even under non-ideal writing conditions. I'm keeping track of my completed entries on dA, and my incomplete ones on LJ.

The Next Life: No Name (theme 98 ) [rough draft]

Repliku/Naminé Day, 2 December 2013

Summary: Riku's replica and Naminé awaken as young children trapped in Castle Oblivion.

A/N: Repliku & Naminé have the physical and emotional maturity of five-year-olds.

0.0.0

He woke up from a nightmare he couldn't remember. He cried for a while, then he stopped. He looked around, but there was no one there.... Just white walls, white white white, he hated it so he stood up and went over to the wall and hit it, but nothing happened. It scared him, and the panic bubbled up in his chest until he screamed. He looked around desperately, but there was nothing, so he shut his eyes and screamed some more until he finally felt something in his hand.

He looked at it. 'Keyblade,' he thought. He wasn't sure what a Keyblade was, except that he was holding one now, but it didn't matter. It was something. Something heavy he could hit the wall
with. So he did, hitting and hitting, and then he screamed again and something burst out of the tip
of the Keyblade and burned the wall. He stared at the black mark in relief. Finally, no more
WHITE, now there was something different and he could breathe again.

He looked at the Keyblade. "Thank you," he said. Then he went to go look at one of the big white
doors. He didn't like it in here, he wanted to get out.

So many white rooms. SO MANY. He burned every single one he passed through, but the panic
was coming again and it was hard to breathe. "I want OUT."

'Card,' he suddenly thought. He needed...a card? "Give me a card!" he shouted, but no cards came
to him like the Keyblade had.

He didn't give up. He kept looking and looking, even when he started getting so scared that it hurt,
and by the time he finally found her, he was crying again and exhausted. He ran to her and
dropped to the floor, shoved the sketchpad away, put his head in her lap, and fell asleep, still
clutching the Keyblade tightly.

Tears of relief had started running down her face as soon as she'd seen him. She hugged him as he
slept and smoothed his soft silvery hair, then put her sketchpad on his head and started drawing
again, but she was happier now, and so were the pictures.

When he woke up, she was asleep, cuddled close to him. He shook her until she whimpered and
woke up. "We have to get out," he said.

"I don't know how," she whispered, about to cry again. "I'm so glad you're here. I was so afraid I
was all alone."

He looked at the top picture in her sketchpad. "What's that?"

She looked at it, too. "His name is Sora. I think he'll save us."

"No one will save us," he said. "We have to get out."
Her face fell. She picked up her sketchbook and stood up. "What's your name?" she asked. "You look like the boy named Riku, but I don't think you're him."

As soon as he heard her say 'Riku,' he knew that that was his name; but he didn't want it, it scared him, he wasn't Riku, "That's not my name!" he yelled.

She winced. "What is your name?"

"I don't know." His face puckered. "I don't have a name. Who am I?"

"You're my friend," she said softly. "My name is Naminé."

He reached out with the hand not clutching the Keyblade and held her hand tightly. "We're friends?"

"Yes. We're together, and we'll help each other."

"We're friends. We're friends. I love you," he added suddenly. "I remember. I love you. I'll always protect you, Naminé."

Her eyes filled with tears. "That was a lie. I lied to you because they told me to, but I'm sorry, it isn't true. It's Kairi you said you'd protect. I only pretended to be Kairi so you'd love me, too, but it isn't true and I'm bad."

He hugged her, and both of them cried. Then they just stood there miserably holding hands, until he finally said, "Can we...be friends now, though? Even if it was a lie before, can we be friends for real this time?"

"You'll let me?" she whispered, her eyes full of fragile hope. "You'll let me be your real friend?"

He hugged her again, then pulled her toward the door. "We're gonna get out together."

They walked and walked. There were so many rooms, with nothing in them and no way out.
Naminé finally stopped and drew a picture.

"What's that?"

"It's where Sora lives. I pretended to live here, too, and you thought you lived here, but you didn't." She tore the picture out of her sketchpad and gave it to him. "Use your Keyblade."

He did, and then they were somewhere else - sort of. He could still feel the white walls around them and he hated it, but at least it finally looked different. He had to look around a lot before he started remembering what it was all called. Sand, ocean, waves, sky, sun. Paopu. "Food," he suddenly realized. He ran and climbed up the tree, and it was hard and he scraped his hands but he did it, and then he climbed back down and ran to bring the fruit back to Naminé.

Her face lit up, but then she looked worried. "Wait," she said.

"It's good. We need it."

"But...but this star...if we eat it, we'll always be connected."

"So?"

"Do you...want to always be connected to me?"

"Yes."

She smiled. They shared the fruit, and their stomachs felt better. "I'm gonna find more," he said.

They couldn't stay in her picture forever, in the 'Destiny Islands card.' He looked around at the horrible white walls and got sad and scared and mad, but in the next room, she drew another picture and then he couldn't see the walls again. "Keep drawing."

"I will."
They slept in Agrabah. It was warm, and there were plenty of places to hide in.

When he woke up, she was already awake and they were in a garden with huge flowers that sang.

"What's that?" he asked, looking at her sketchbook.

She touched the picture she'd drawn of a Keyblade. "Way to the Dawn," she said softly.

He looked at the picture for a long time. "That's my name," he finally decided.

"Way to the Dawn?"

"That's too long.... Dawn. My name is Dawn."

She smiled. "I like you, Dawn."

"I like you, too, Naminé."

o.o.o.o.o

Kairi shivered a little as she and her two best friends made their way through the silent white halls. "It's kind of creepy in here...."

"The fact that it's a dream world cut off from its source doesn't help," Riku remarked. "Aqua said it'll completely collapse once we move whatever node is holding it together."

"Good riddance," Sora grumbled. "I don't even remember half the stuff that happened here, and it still gives me a bad feeling...."
"Shouldn't we have run into some Heartless by now?" Kairi wondered. "Or Dream Eaters, or something?"

"All the cards were lost, we're basically just looking at raw data...."

Riku was the first one to sense that they were being watched. He deliberately fell behind, a frown on his face as he looked around.

There...glaring aquamarine eyes, quickly disappearing behind a white pillar. "Hm," he murmured.

"Heeeey, look at this," Sora said at one point, crouching down to inspect something on the ground. "Paopu seeds, and some stem.... Was someone eating here?"

"Or something," Kairi muttered darkly.

Riku glanced over his shoulder. "Was it you?"

Sora and Kairi looked at him in confusion. Riku inclined his head meaningfully, so they redirected their attention, and then they saw what he was looking at. "Who's that?!" Kairi gasped.

The child fled. He was no match for three teenagers, who quickly caught up to him.

"Let me GO!"

"That's a Keyblade!" Kairi gasped, as Riku struggled to keep the boy from either escaping or smacking anyone.

"Whooaaa," Sora exclaimed, "he looks just like you, Riku!" He giggled. "Except tiny."

"He's so cuuuute," Kairi gushed.
"A little help here?" Riku said in annoyance.

"Run, Naminé!" Dawn shouted. "Run away!"

"Naminé?!" Sora and Kairi exclaimed at the same time.

"Where is she?" Riku asked sternly, twisting his young replica's arm a little.

"You can't have her!" Dawn screamed. "I'll kill you! Don't hurt her! She's my friend!"

"Naminééééé," Sora and Kairi were calling, "come on out, we're not gonna hurt yooouuu!"

Dawn was crying by the time they found Naminé, and she cried because he was. "But it's Sora," she sobbed, trembling in Kairi's arms, "It's Sora, he'll help us, he promised...he promised...."

"Yeah," Sora said earnestly, "we're here to help you guys! We've been looking for you."

Kairi handed her tiny Nobody over to Sora and crouched down to where Riku was still struggling with Dawn. "Sshhh, Riku, sshhh. It's okay, we're not going to hurt you or Naminé."

"I'M NOT RIKU!"

Kairi glanced at Riku, who shook his head. "He's my replica, he doesn't really have a name...."

"DAWN! I'M WAY TO THE DAWN! I'M NOT RIKU I'M NOT RIKU I HATE HIM HATE HIM...!"

Kairi stared. "Dawn?"

"No way," Riku growled.
"Isn't Dawn a girl's name?" Sora said in confusion.

"It's my name!" the replica shouted, "MINE!"

"All right, uh, Dawn, all right," Kairi said soothingly, and Riku groaned. "C'mon, Dawn, we're all gonna go home to Destiny Islands together. Don't you want to get out of this big lonely castle?"

Dawn went still and stared at her.

"It's much better than here," Sora coaxed. "This place isn't even real."

"I'm not real," Dawn said shakily. "They told me I wasn't - and it's his fault!" he shouted, shoving back against Riku so that his older lookalike grunted. "All your fault! If I kill you I'll be the real Riku, except my name is Dawn now but I hate you and I'm better than you!"

"Forget this, let's just get out of here," Riku said, standing up and walking off with the boy gripped tightly in his arms.

"Let me gooooo...!"

"He's scared," Naminé told the other two, looking desperate.

Kairi smiled. "We know, Nami-chan."

"I'm scared, too...."

Sora kissed her temple and squeezed her in a hug. "It's okay, Naminé. You don't have to be scared, because we're here. Everything's gonna be okay."

She smiled tremulously at him. "Thank you, Sora."
The children refused to be separated that first night. They huddled together under the same blanket, gazing out a window that showed the real sand and waves and moonlight of Destiny Islands, rather than illusions. "We got out of the white walls," Dawn said.

"I told you Sora would save us," Naminé said softly.

"You like him better than me," Dawn grumbled.

"I like you both."

"...Naminé?"

"Yes?"

"I'm still your friend, right? Even though we got out and everyone here loves you?"

"Yes. You'll always be my friend, Dawn."

"Good." For the first time, Dawn felt like he was safe.

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Author's Notes: I don't...really like this one much, but I needed to show how Naminé & Repliku joined the others. Next is Ven & Vani for their Day near the end of December, and I'm still working on an installment for Riku & Repliku. ^^; I have a few more ideas for after that, and I know this series is just going to keep growing. XD

I'm also so glad I finally found a name I like for Repliku~ X3 I'm gonna have fun with it. I have another RikuRepli fic in a different universe I wrote a while ago, but I still need to type it.
The bad news is that I got sick today, which stinks. -.- Also, I didn't realize that my family's going to be busy this whole week, so that *might* mean I can't post anything for those early December Pairing Days except the VanNami picture. :/ Oh well....
The Next Life: Battle Stance - Oathkeeper (theme 51) {Ven & Vanitas}

Battle Stance, Kingdom Hearts fanwork: Armory Challenge by RoseOfADifferentColor, written by Raberba girl

The Next Life: Oathkeeper (theme 51) [rough draft]

Ventus/Vanitas Day, 21 December 2013

Summary: It's kind of hard to beat up a bad guy when he's four years old and desperate for your affection.

o.o.o

Granted, Ven barely had any memory of what his life had been like before finding himself here. Still, he thought it was reasonable to assume that he'd never experienced anything as weird or frustrating as being held prisoner by a four-year-old in some bizarre alternate dimension with no floor.

They glared at each other as they floated in the darkness, Ven and the small boy with brown eyes and wildly spiked black hair. "...I bet you don't even know," Ven finally said. "I bet you're just bluffing."

"You're WRONG!" the child shrieked. "I have the key and I hid it and you'll never, ever, ever find it!"

"I bet I will." How good could a four-year-old be at hiding something anyway?

Pretty good, as it turned out. There wasn't...really anywhere Ven could look, since there was nothing here besides himself and the boy. Yet Ven tried anyway, drifting off in different directions to see if this place had...like, walls or something.

As far as he could tell, it didn't, and it was annoying to have that kid following and taunting him wherever he went. "...and you're the biggest stupidest loselry loser and no one wants to be your friend because you're a bad boy who did bad things and they're glad you're gone and they don't even miss you because they never loved you because you're horrible and someone should've just
stepped on you and squished you like a bug because you are a bug, and if you were a real bug I'd smash you because I hate you--"

"Would you just shut up?! Seriously, shut up! You are the--the uncutest little kid I've ever seen! Brat!"

"Jerk!"

"Leave me alone!"

"You're trapped in here FOREVER, ha ha ha!"

They both eventually had to sleep, though by that time, Ven felt like the stupid kid had driven him crazy.

When he woke up, his gut was twisting with hunger, and he watched with a cranky glare as the kid, drifting too far away to reach but not nearly far enough for Ven's liking, played with some sort of weird animal. The creature had glowing red eyes, and as Ven watched, the kid squashed it until it suddenly burst into smoke. Ven gasped. The kid gave him a defiant look and ate one of the squishy green balls that had been left behind.

Ven's stomach rumbled. "What are you doing?"

"Eating," the boy said smugly. "Are you hungry, Ventus?"

"...Yes."

"Hah! Well, too bad, because I won't feed you 'til you're nice to me!"

Ven's teeth gritted. The little boy somehow made another creature appear--Ven lunged for it. 'If I kill it, it'll make food...?'

"NO!" the boy shrieked, and to Ven's astonishment and frustration, the child somehow sucked the
creature into his own chest.

"Where is it?! Give it back!"

"No!"

Ven seized the boy by the throat. He didn't squeeze, but the boy gasped in fear, and Ven wondered at himself. He had the sense that he was usually a lot nicer than this, but something about this kid really ticked him off.

"Don't. Don't hurt me."

"Bring it back."

"No!"

"Bring it back!"

"NO!"

This time, Ven did squeeze, just a little, but though the boy looked terrified, he held his ground. Wincing, Ven let go and held him by the arms instead. "I'm starving. I need to eat something."

"No! Only if you be my slave and do everything I say and are nice to me and call me Master!"

"Never."

"Do it!"

"No." Ven let him go and drifted off again, trying to ignore the boy's furious shouting as best he could.
The next time Ven slept, he had nightmares, and when he awakened, he had remembered enough to finally recognize his companion. "Vanitas!"

"That's not my name!" the boy screamed.

"I don't know why you look like that, but I don't care, I'll kill you!"

"You can't hurt me! You can't hurt me!"

Ven chased him around until it finally occurred to him that he wouldn't really know what to do with the boy if he actually caught him. He wanted to kill him, but...destroying a little kid, no matter how bratty, was a lot different than fighting an armed personification of evil who was trying to destroy him back. "Gah!"

Ven tried to ignore him. Vanitas apparently got bored and came over to taunt him some more. Ven finally lost his temper and chased him again. Then he put his fingers in his ears, shut his eyes, and sang loudly for a long time, trying to block out Vanitas's existence.

o.o.o.o.o

He was so hungry. He had to get an Unversed somehow.

Ven eventually got desperate enough to actually hit Vanitas, but even though the boy hit back (and bit), he stubbornly refused to summon any Unversed while Ven was awake. "You're killing me," Ven growled. "You're killing me. I can't last like this forever."

"I don't care. I won't ever let you leave. You'll stay with me 'til you rot."

Ven got too tired to chase him, and the hunger pangs eventually went away. Lethargic, he lay in midair, gazing at his tiny dark half, who curled up and glared back. "...Why do you hate me so much, anyway?" Ven murmured.
"Because I hate you."

"Why? What is it about me that makes you angry?"

"...Everyone loves you," Vanitas finally mumbled. "And everyone hates me. It's not fair."

Ven frowned. "They wouldn't hate you so much if you didn't do such horrible things."

"They wouldn't love you if they knew you were me!"

Sudden tears stung Ven's eyes. "Shut up! I'm nothing like you!"

"You're me! You're me! You're ME!"

Ven tried to chase him again, but he was tired and soon gave up. He just floated there and cried, and wondered in the back of his mind why Vanitas was crying, too.

\[\text{o.o.o.o.o}\]

Ven couldn't tell when he was awake and when he was asleep anymore. The deep fatigue of starvation seemed to shadow him constantly, whether he was drifting in the dark or struggling through a nightmare. "Aqua...Terra..." He thought sometimes that they were stroking his face or holding him, but he had to have been dreaming that, because they weren't here...he was alone. All alone except for the dark half of his heart, and it was true, he really was Vanitas, and they wouldn't want anything to do with him if they knew....

Something sweet burst in his mouth. Ven gasped and opened his eyes.

Vanitas scrambled away warily, and Ven stared at him for a long time before finally realizing, "You gave me an HP orb?"

"I dropped it," Vanitas said haughtily. "It fell in your mouth by accident, stupidhead."
"...Give me another one."

"No way!"

"Vanitas!"

"I hate you! Stay away from me!"

"I hate you, too!"

"I don't care!"

"Then leave me alone!"

"Yeah! Because you're stupid!"

"I hate you!"

"Me too!"

"That means you hate yourself, idiot."

"I HATE YOU!"

"STOP YELLING!"

"YOU STOP YELLING!"
"Gah, I'm too tired for this...."

After about the third or fourth time Vanitas pulled him away from the edge of death, Ven finally gave up. It all seemed so pointless by now, anyway. "Master," he whispered. After a moment, he realized that Vanitas was asleep against his chest. "...." With great effort, Ven managed to roll over, dislodging the boy enough for him to awaken. Vanitas tensed and stared up at him.

"...Master. Please give me some food."

"What?"

"I'm so hungry...please...."

"No way! I don't--" Vanitas broke off, looking confused.

"I'm begging you. I'll do whatever you want, just please...."

Vanitas's eyes finally lit up. "You'll do whatever I say?! You'll be nice to me?!

"Yes," Ven said dully.

"Hah!" Vanitas grinned at him in a way that looked more relieved than triumphant. Then the smile faded, and he narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Are you trying to trick me?"

"No. Please."

Vanitas fidgeted. "Say I'm the best person ever."

"...You're the best person ever."
"Say I'm better than you."

Ven sighed. "You're better than me."

"Hah. Hah!"

Vanitas finally produced and handed over enough HP balls for Ven to feel like a person again instead of half a corpse. The two boys regarded each other warily. Ven finally said, "Didn't you say something before about having a key?"

Vanitas looked at him for a long time through narrowed eyes, then said, "Promise you'll be good and won't trick me."

"I promise."

"Okay." Vanitas started to touch his own chest, then suddenly jerked his hands back down and glared. "Turn around and go away. Don't look."

'You've been keeping the key in your heart all this time?!' Actually, that made way more sense than it should....

Ven rolled his eyes and drifted away. He heard sounds and saw a burst of light that reinforced his theory of Vanitas's hiding place. Then he turned back around and saw Vanitas grinning smugly at him, holding the incomplete χ-blade. "That will get us out of here?" Ven said warily.

"Yup. We can't get out unless we work together. You need me. You can't do anything without me, because you're stupid and I'm important."

"...What do we have to do?"

"You're not allowed to leave me, okay? You're not allowed."
"Fine, I won't."

"Promise!"

"Gah, I promise!"

With the two of them in close proximity, completing the χ-blade was easy - apparently, all they had to do was touch it at the same time. Within the resulting burst of light, something that looked like a gateway appeared. Ven gasped and immediately lunged at it.

"Wait for me!"

'I can't let Vanitas into the outside world. He's evil. He'll try to hurt people again, just like he did last time.' Ven turned back. Vanitas was reaching out to him with both hands. Ven stretched out his own arm - seized the χ-blade, tore it out of the boy's grasp, and backed away.

"No! No!"

The gate closed, leaving Ven and Vanitas on opposite sides of it.

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When Ven opened his eyes, he found himself being cradled by a weeping Aqua, with other people clustered around where he lay in the middle of the Keyblade Graveyard. "Aqua..."

"Ven-- Ven...!"

So many people. Delighted cries, cheers, laughter; Terra catching him up in a crushing hug, a familiar-looking young man glomping him, a blonde girl with a sketchpad smiling at him in relief, another familiar-looking guy with blazing red hair grinning at him...homecoming was so sweet.

Yet there seemed to be an emptiness behind the joy. A faint sense of loss, betrayal, rage, grief, and desolation, simmering in the depth of Ven's heart even after the return to Destiny Islands,
throughout the many introductions, as they were eating a meal together.... It was a constant ache that wouldn't go away.

Ven finally sighed. He simply could not dismiss the memory of Vanitas's face, that last glimpse of the child's despairing expression.

*You'll stay with me 'til you rot.*

*Everyone hates me.*

*You're me!*

*You need me.*

*You're not allowed to leave me, okay?*

*Wait for me!*

It occurred to Ven that Vanitas...might not know *how* to ask nicely.

Or maybe he did. But maybe he couldn't bring himself to 'grovel,' as he would probably consider it, if his pride was all he had left. *'Idiot.'* Ven sighed. "Sora."

"Yeah?"

"...Cast a Sleep spell on me."

"Huh?!"

"I shouldn't wait until I fall asleep tonight...he's been alone too long already."
"Huh?"

"I have a promise I need to keep."

Vanitas was curled up in a ball, making soft, tight noises of desperation. Even when he saw Ven, his face crumpled and his brown eyes filled with tears, but he otherwise did not move until Ven had drawn near and was reaching out for him.

"I h-hate y-you," Vanitas choked out through tightly clenched teeth. Then, in a full-blown scream as Ven's arms closed around him, "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!!!"

'I hate you, too,' Ven thought in resentful resignation.

Then he froze. 'Wait...' He was supposed to be a being of pure light, wasn't he? So...how was he even able to feel anything negative, much less...? 'If I can feel hatred - can Vanitas feel love?'

"I hate you," Vanitas was sobbing brokenly into Ven's shirt, his fists still beating at him, though so aimlessly that Ven could barely feel it now. "I...hate...you...."

"I'm...sorry for leaving you," Ven said, and Vanitas let out a wail. "I'm sorry...I'm really sorry."

"You left me!"

"I--"

"You're a LIAR! Liar! Liar!"

There was only so much point-blank yelling Ven could take; the remorse was starting to shift back to irritation. "You want me to leave, then?"
"NOOOOO!" Vanitas screamed, latching onto him.

"Owww! Okay! Geez, shut up."

"I hate you!!!"

Ven shook his head and carried Vanitas through the gate.

o.o.o.o.o

Back at Sora's house, Ven awakened with a groan of pain. Vanitas had gone silent as he glared around at all the curious faces surrounding them, digging his fingers into Ven's flesh. "Ugh, let go...."

"He looks just like you, Sora!" Kairi exclaimed in surprise.

"D'aww, now the kids have another friend," Lea laughed, as Roxas, Xion, Dawn, and Naminé watched the newcomer with great interest.

"You brought back Vanitas?" Aqua said angrily.

Terra, however, was staring at the boy's face. "His eyes...."

Ven sat up on the couch. The child clung to him nervously, and Ven put his arms around him. "Everyone, this little guy is...Kazé."

The boy once known as 'Emptiness' whipped his head around to stare at Ven in surprise.

Ven's arms tightened around him. "He used to have another name, but he doesn't want to be called that anymore. He's named after the wind, just like me, because...because he is me."
The way Kazé was staring at him, full of incredulous hope, helped stiffen Ven's resolve. His eyes met Aqua's as he continued, "He is me. So if you love me at all, then you have to love him, too. And if you can't love him, then, well...."

He trailed off awkwardly, then closed his eyes in relief when Terra reached out and rested a hand on his head in an understanding way.

"Ven's mine," Kazé growled at them all. "He's stupid and a liar and he left me, but you still can't have him."

"We can work on that later," Ven mumbled at them, a little apologetically. "I'm kind of tired right now...."

"We have one, too," Xion offered, and Kazé looked at her with interest. "His name's L-e-a-gotitmemorized, but we don't like that so we call him Axel."

"You can't play with Naminé," Dawn announced, which was enough to lure Kazé off the couch and go trotting after Naminé with a glint in his eye.

"No!" Dawn yelled, "No!"

Roxas planted himself in front of Naminé before Kazé could get to her and said, "We decide with rock-paper-scissors. Axel taught us."

"That's for toys, not Naminé!" Dawn yelled.

Xion gasped. "Then we have to play nice! If we don't share Naminé, then they'll take her away like they take away the toys we don't share!"

"I can share," Naminé said anxiously.

It somehow ended with Dawn and Kazé trying to hit each other with miniature Keyblades, as the
other three drew a comic about ponies fighting zombies, which Roxas narrated authoritatively as they drew.

"Man," Lea remarked as all the adults watched, "why do we even bother pretending like we're in charge...?"

"They're sooo cute," Kairi laughed.

Beside her, Sora scratched his head. "Man, Kairi, most of them are clones of you or me, it's kind of funny."

Aqua's expression was a bit grouchy as she watched, and Terra put his arm around her. "I think it'll be different this time," he said.

"His eyes might have changed, but he still looks like a troublemaker," she huffed.

"He is," Ven mumbled.

Both his best friends looked at him. "What did you mean when you said that he's you?"

"It's a long story, and you'll probably hate me by the end of it...."

"We could never hate you, Ven!" Aqua cried.

Ven eyed her. "You hated Vanitas."

Terra and Aqua glanced at each other. "Well," Terra remarked, "it's easier to hate some punk teenager who's trying to kill my best friends than a little kid who's crying because he got in a fight with another little kid over who gets to play with what." He smiled a little as he watched Lea putting a Band-aid on Kazé's forehead, as Kairi tired to soothe both his and Dawn's tears, and Riku gave both boys a lecture about what happens to brats who can't behave.

Ven sighed. "I can already tell that having to take care of Miniature Evil Me is going to be a pain
Aqua sighed, too. "We'll just have to work together."

Ven glanced at her. "Together?"

She smiled a little. "I suppose we'll first have to figure out which of the four of us are more willing to move, and if we'll end up living in the Land of Departure or here on Destiny Islands."

"Move?" Terra exclaimed.

Ven stared. "You mean 'living' as in...like, a family?"

Aqua looked at him affectionately. "Are you opposed to the idea?"

"I mean, I just never thought about it before...." Ven smiled. "Seems kind of harsh on Mom to saddle her with another little brat after her first one finally grew up and got out of her hair. I guess it would be better if we took on Kazé ourselves."

Terra chuckled. "Why do I get the feeling that parenthood might be more adventurous than our actual adventures were...?"

Author's Notes: I can't believe it's been almost three weeks since I've posted anything. *sweatdrop* I am so freaking busy, and so easily distracted.... ;; But it's Christmas vacation now, so hopefully I'll get to be productive during these two weeks! 8'D

I still haven't finished that Next Life fic about Riku & Dawn, too busy. :/ But that'll probably be the next one I post in this series.

My Christmas project is in a shambles - four days 'til Christmas, yet I still haven't finished a single holiday piece. orzzzzzzz I'm so mad at myself, since I really wanted to go all-out this year, but I'll
be lucky if I even get *anything* posted.... DX

Due to my spiritual beliefs, I have a problem with calling him "Vanitas" in fics where he's trying to make a new life for himself and be a better person. Therefore, in stories like that, I will shorten or change his name. I'm fine with "Van" or "Vani," and will use "Kazé" when necessary. Basically, I believe that words have power, and that a person who's constantly called and identified with a negative term, regardless of people's actual thoughts/feelings/demeanor when saying it, will suffer from a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the very least, even if it's not actively working against him, it's still a completely unnecessary spiritual hindrance. So due to my beliefs and out of respect for the character, I only use the name "Vanitas" when he hasn't yet made a decision to ally with the heroes of light and work for good instead of darkness. (And I picked a wind-related name ["kaze" means "wind" in Japanese] because I fervently ship platonic VenVan. XD XD <3)

Complete: 2/100
Beyond the War: Bound by Moonlight, Isa and Xion - Down the Aisle

Beyond the War: Bound by Moonlight, Isa and Xion - Down the Aisle (rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Summary: Xion asks her 'dad' to give her away at her wedding.

A/N: This is much later in the timeline than usual. Isa's now a college professor living with Lea in Twilight Town. I'm not sure yet where Roxas & Xion are living or whether they've graduated college yet.

0.0.0

"Saa-chan?" Xion kicked off her shoes and set her purse down on an armchair.

"In here," he called from the study.

She smiled and went over to find him leaning back in his chair, frowning at a document in his hand as if it was a small child that had just insulted him. "Are you grading essays?"

"Yes. If you can call this piece of tripe an 'essay.'" Isa sighed and tossed the papers on his desk. Then he looked up at Xion and gave her a small smile. "Hello, Xion."

"Hi, Saa-chan~" She sat down in his lap and put her arms around his neck.

"What are you doing?!"

"I want a hug~"

"Xion, get off! You're a grown woman, this is ridiculous," he protested, fruitlessly pushing at her.
"Saa-chan...Isa...I need to ask you something."

He paused, then searched her face and seemed to discern that she was serious. "...At least get up first."

"...I'll make some tea. Let's go in the living room."

When they finally settled down on the couch, she cuddled right up against him, holding her tea carefully, and he glanced down at her. "Is something wrong?"

"No...I'm just...kind of nervous about asking you."

He sighed. From the way he wouldn't meet her eyes, she knew it was a guilty sigh rather than an annoyed one.

"I mean-- It's okay if you say no, I just...really, really want you to say yes."

"Stop beating around the bush."

She sipped her tea. Then took a deep breath. "Isa, can you...give me away?"

They were both silent for a long time.

"At your wedding?" Isa finally asked.

"Yeah...." She closed her eyes. "Yeah."

"...You didn't ask Lea?"

"I... No." She drank more tea.
"Why not?"

"I mean, I talked to him about it, and he totally understood. He said it was fine."

She felt Isa shift uncomfortably. "You don't want him to give you away?"

"I mean, I'll ask him to if you won't, but I...I really want you to do it, Isa."

"Why?"

Xion struggled back upright so she could set her mug down on the coffee table, then turned back to Isa and put her arms around his shoulders, resting her chin on his shoulder. "Because it's supposed to be my father who gives me away, but I don't have a father, and if I have to pick someone to be my daddy, it's you."

There was a pause.

"You...you're the only person I can think of as a dad, Isa. Please give me away."

Isa was staring at the floor. He reached out and set his tea down on the coffee table as well, then gently dislodged her arms from around his shoulders. She continued to kneel beside him on the couch, watching him intently, waiting.

"Xion...I'm not even-- It's Lea who adopted you, not me."

"He only adopted us so we could go to school and stuff," she said impatiently. "He's my friend, Isa. Like my big brother or something. But you...I dunno." She shrugged. "You're the one who always helped me with my homework, you're the one who'd ground us most of the time--""

"Only because Lea turns to jelly when you two manipulate him."
"--you're the one my boyfriends were actually scared of, you're the one my teachers usually went to first--"

"Because Lea was always at work, whereas you people had much less respect for my studying time."

"--you're the one who gave us the Sex Talk, for heaven's sake...."

"Sacred moon," Isa groaned in miserable remembrance.

Xion smiled a little. "I mean, you're my friend and my brother, too. But...whenever I need a dad, it's always been you."

There was another long silence. Isa, still not meeting her eyes, finally picked up her hand and held it, staring down at it as if it was the most amazing thing he'd ever seen. "Xion...."

"Please," she whispered.

His fingers entwined with hers. "You used to be so small," he murmured at last. A tiny smile quirked his mouth. "You're still small...."

"Ven says it's okay that my boobs are little," she pouted.

Isa jerked his hand free of hers, finally meeting her eyes in shock. "Wha--?!"

She smiled in relief at having gotten his attention. "He even said it when he was in Van Mode, so I know it's true."

"That's not what I meant!"

"Eh?"
"I only meant that you looked about ten years old in the Organization, and you kept bemoaning how everyone towered over you in high school. You've grown a bit since then, but I-- I was reminiscing!"

"I know, Saa-chan," she said soothingly.

He glared.

"You were reminiscing about how I'm your precious little girl and you can't wait to participate in one of the most important milestones of my life, right?" she said hopefully.

"I was reminiscing about how I spent the entire first year of your existence being as un-fatherlike as a person can be...."

Sensing that she was losing him again, she unfolded her legs and draped them across Isa's lap. He glanced at her again, still looking upset.

"Yeah. You were a jerk and I hated you. Years ago. I thought we'd moved passed that."

Instead of pushing her legs away, he rested his folded arms on top of them and leaned forward a little so that his hair hid half his face. "We have," he said unhappily. "You stopped being a brat, which I appreciate."

"And you stopped being a jealous tyrant, which I appreciate."

"Jealous--?"

"So you'll reward me by being my daddy at the wedding, right?"

"...."

"Pleeeaaase?"
"...I'm not very good at dancing," Isa finally mumbled.

She frowned and gave him a hard nudge with her heel. "You're using that as an *excuse* to not do it?"

"It's not an *excuse*," he snapped. He glared at her. She couldn't help being relieved at the eye contact again, despite his expression. "It was...a warning."

"A warning?"

"Lea is the one who's skilled at this sort of thing, knowing the right things to say and performing well and being self-assured in front of a crowd. You *should* ask him to do this for you. But if you insist on it being me instead, just be prepared for it to be less than ideal."

"You're talking about the father-daughter dance at the reception?" she realized.

"Unless you choose to forgo that particular tradition. Which I would have no objection to, by the way."

She curled her legs back in and leaned to kiss Isa's cheek. "No. I want you to walk me down the aisle and give me away, and I want you to dance with me, Saa-chan. And to make a toast and everything else that daddies are supposed to do for their daughters when they get married. You can trip and make both of us faceplant the floor and ruin the whole wedding, I don't care; as long it's you."

"You don't care?" he repeated dubiously.

"Well...just don't trip, okay?"

He sighed. "Fine."

She hugged him. "Thank you, Saa-chan."
He merely grunted in response.

She sighed. "Isa...do you really not want to do it?"

"Of course I don't! It's one of the last things in the worlds I want to do!"

She stared at him.

He stared back. Then he took her hand. "But I'll do it anyway. Because I love you."

Her mouth dropped open. "You...?!

"Yes, I said it, but I'm not going to repeat it," he grumbled.

"Isa...you don't have to do it if you really don't want to, I just--"

"I'm doing it."

She smiled, her eyes misting a little. "I love you, too. I love you so much."

"Fine. Now please leave. I still have essays to grade, and you've got the rest of your wedding to plan."

"Saa-channn!" She hugged him again and smacked another kiss against his cheek.

"Leave, please!"

She giggled and finally let him go. "We should practice dancing together before the wedding."
"Let me know when you're available."

"Isa...thank you. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome." He picked up the mugs to take to the kitchen, hesitated, then touched his lips to Xion's hair in a brief kiss. "I'll see you later."

"See you~" Xion practically danced into her shoes and out the door.

Isa returned to his desk, but couldn't concentrate on grading for a while. "Her father...." He finally shook his head and picked up his phone to call his best friend. "Lea, do you have a moment to talk...?"

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Author's Notes: Lol, I bet everyone forgot about this series. XD  
Bound by Fire was for Taliax, and  
Bound by Moonlight is just me OCDing over my OT4. ^^; This one is Isa & Xion's turn.

(Btw, hopefully you remember that "Ventus" in this universe is VenVan. [He and Xion started dating when she was about 19.] I can't romantically ship Ven with Xion unless Vani's in the picture, too. ^^; )

Randomly decided to draft this now because working on my original story is boring, and working on the Sora/Xion Day fic is tiring. *sweatdrop* Needed to write some KH OTP stuff to feel refreshed.... <3
"HAH!" A black-clad, silver-haired figure dropped out of a tree and straight into Riku's path.

Riku wordlessly side-stepped him and continued marching up to the house.

"OI! Riku!"

"Hello," Riku said brusquely as he shoved open the front door.

"Where are you going?!!" Kadaj yelled, forced to run after his younger brother.

"Kadaj, we don't have to fight every time we see each other."

"You have to fight if I say you have to, and I'm saying you have to! I'm bored!"

"I'm not here to entertain you."

Kadaj impatiently swung at him, and Riku reached up without even looking, Keyblade
materializing in his hand to block the strike. "Kadaj, I'm serious. I am not in the mood to play with you."

"What's your problem?" Kadaj shouted.

Loz came bounding in from the backyard. "Is Riku here?" he asked eagerly.

"Yeah, but he's being STUPID," Kadaj pouted.

Ignoring them, Riku climbed up the stairs, passing Yazoo, who had curiously poked his head out of his bedroom. "You're back, Riku."

"Not for long."

All three of the triplets froze. Then Kadaj and Loz rushed to catch up with their brother, and Yazoo came out of his room to follow.

Riku was moving around his own room, shoving things into his backpack and into the suitcase he'd dragged out from under his bed. 'Forget clothes and toiletries, I can just buy new ones or borrow from Sora. Don't need anymore school crap since I'm taking the HSE exam instead, though I need to at least return the textbooks from sophomore year....' Most of it was the few sentimental items he still cared about and which his brothers hadn't destroyed, a few old CDs, games, and figures that were now difficult to find at reasonable prices, the few photographs he owned, and a few necessities that did fit.

"What do you mean, 'not for long'?" Kadaj was demanding.

"Are you leaving??" Loz cried in alarm.

"Yeah. I'm moving out."

"Whaaaaat?!" Kadaj and Loz shrieked.
"Why?" Yazoo asked. Though his tone was casual, his eyes were fixed on Riku, intently following his every move.

"Because I'm 17 years old and ready to leave home. What other reason do I need?" Riku snapped. He flung the backpack over one shoulder, picked up the suitcase, and pushed past his brothers.

In the bathroom, he started shoving things like toilet paper and first aid items into the backpack. If Dawn somehow got into trouble before Riku could go shopping, these were the things he'd probably need most.

"You're not supposed to leave!" Kadaj yelled. "Now that you're grown up, you're supposed to HELP!"

"I'm not interested."

"Something happened," Yazoo said shrewdly. "You weren't like this when you came home from the war. What is it that you're willing to defy Mother for?"

"It's none of your business." Riku tried to shove past them again, but Kadaj seized him in a chokehold and Loz gripped his arms and Yazoo pointed a gun at his chest.

"You're not leaving," Kadaj hissed. "You're not allowed to leave."

'Which is why I can't stand it here,' Riku thought. He abruptly shoved back against Kadaj, bracing himself so he could kick the weapon out of Yazoo's hand. Kadaj yelled and dropped him, but Riku was expecting that. He twisted his arms out of Loz's grip, simultaneously falling even farther, too low for Kadaj's swinging sword to make contact and low enough to swipe his leg to the side and knock Kadaj's feet out from under him. He surged up again to jab an elbow into Yazoo's throat, summoning his Keyblade at the same time so that he was able to smash the tip of it into Loz's face before Loz could complete his punch. Then he dealt a few more strikes with the Keyblade, to incapacitate his brothers while they were still reeling and couldn't defend themselves.

When all three were either unconscious or groaning, showing no sign of getting up soon, Riku dismissed his weapon. He picked up his luggage again and walked out.

"Were you boys fighting again?" his mother called irritably from the study as Riku stalked into the
"Yes." Riku packed a few snacks for Dawn, again as an emergency stash in case something happened before he could shop.

"You come home and don't even have the respect to greet your mother?" Jenova snapped.

Riku stalked into the study. "Hello, Mother." He knelt, but not at her feet as she seemed to have expected. It was so he could reach the lowest file cabinet drawer, which was locked.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"I need my records."

Riku summoned his Keyblade again and pointed it at the lock. There was a clacking sound of release.

His mother seized a fistful of his hair. "I don't like this attitude of yours, Riku."

"With all due respect, I don't like yours, either." Even with his head captured at an uncomfortable angle, Riku managed to get the drawer open, pull out the folder with his name on the tab, and slip it into the outside pocket of his suitcase.

"I am getting angry," she hissed.

"I've been angry for a really long time." Riku slipped a knife from a hidden sheath and swept it by his head.

She let go with a gasp, as locks of severed silvery hair dropped to the ground. "Are you trying to cut my fingers off?!"

"I'm trying to cut off my hair." Even the suggestion was enough to elicit a pained hiss from her. "I don't appreciate you using it to jerk me around," Riku continued as he kept slicing away, rapidly
shortening his hair until there were no longer any strands long enough to grasp hold of. "But if I happen to catch some of your fingers in the process, I could care less."

Jenova rose to her feet, eyes flashing, her hair beginning to drift ominously around her like tentacles.

Riku sheathed his knife, grabbed his bags again, and walked out as if he hadn't even noticed.

Sephiroth stood in the living room, regarding Riku silently, blocking his way to the door.

The triplets were dragging themselves down the stairs. "Father! Mother!"

"Riku's--!"

"WHAT DID YOU DO TO YOUR HAIR?!"

Riku did a double-take - it was so rare for Yazoo to lose his composure at all, but he now looked almost hysterical with horror as he stared at Riku's shorn head.

"What is the meaning of this," Sephiroth asked, with absolutely no expression. It was anyone's guess as to whether he was angry, approving, or indifferent.

Even Riku couldn't treat the imposing figure rudely. He swallowed and said in a quiet voice, "I cut my hair to show that I'm cutting ties to this family. I am not one of you." There was a pause. Then Riku tried to move closer to the door.

Masamune was thrust across his path, bringing Riku to a halt. He kept his eyes on the blade barring his way to freedom, as Jenova's long silken hair came curling around his limbs and neck, tightening, holding him fast. Kadaj bounded over to seize his arm possessively, and Loz came and held Riku's other hand, fixing anxious eyes on him. Yazoo leaned against Riku's back and wept softly, fingers moving delicately across the pitifully short strands, grieving over Riku's lost hair as if it was a dead pet kitten.

Held prisoner by every single member of his family, Riku glared at Sephiroth, trying to convey the
depth of his resentment and frustration. 'I WILL be free, but it's up to you to decide how much damage I'll cause on my way out.'

"What is it that's become so precious to you?" Sephiroth asked.

"You expect me to tell you, so that you can go crush it? 'I'll kill you before I let you touch Dawn.'

"I expect you to tell me while you still have the capability of doing so."

The hair around Riku's throat tightened further, making it hard to breathe.

"Mother," Loz said in alarm.

"Better talk, Ri," Kadaj advised, his tone gleeful but his expression agitated.

"I will make sure," Riku gasped out, "that he'll never have to grow up the way I did."

"Who?" Loz demanded.

Riku struggled to get the words through his constricted throat. "My...little...brother."

The hair slackened, and there was another pause. "No!" Kadaj suddenly shouted. "No! No! You're the youngest, weakest one, you're the little brother, you're not supposed to have--! You're not allowed--!"

Riku cast Firaga. A ring of flames burst out to encircle him, and Jenova screamed as the house filled with the odor of burnt hair. Kadaj, distracted by the fire, didn't see Riku's punch coming in time. Yazoo listlessly stumbled backward when Riku shoved him, showing no interest in fighting. Loz watched in distress as Riku dodged the wave of hair their mother shot at him and charged straight at her with his Keyblade. Jenova was ill-suited for fighting in close quarters, and was hampered by focusing so much on protecting her hair, which Riku deliberately targeted in order to prevent her from attacking with it. He managed to get in a couple of hits by multi-tasking at every opportunity, but then he was alerted by Kadaj's yelling, and avoided his brother's attack just in time.
Now it was mostly a matter of fighting Kadaj while dodging Jenova's hair; he didn't have attention to spare for any other opponents, and was therefore glad that Loz and Yazoo weren't participating. Sephiroth, though....

Riku, in flipping out of range of Kadaj's sword, found himself landing in a crouch at his father's feet. For an instant, their eyes met - Riku with his blood roaring in the heat of battle, Sephiroth impassive, choosing his moment. 'I'm dead,' Riku thought. Then he had to Dodge Roll away from another attack and focus again.

Half a minute later, Kadaj was screeching in pain, and Jenova was on the verge of defeat. Her desperate, wrathful cry seemed to drive Riku on as he leaped to deliver a crippling blow.

Before he could descend, Masamune pierced straight through his abdomen, jabbing into the ceiling. Riku screamed, instinctively dropping his weapon and seizing the blade that impaled him, cutting his hands as he tried to stop himself from falling any further down the length of it and injuring himself even more. There was a pause. "Father," Riku sobbed in agony, arms trembling from the strain.

Sephiroth jerked the sword free and flicked his wrist, sending Riku flying across the room. Riku crashed into the wall and passed out for a second. The next thing he knew, Loz was cradling him, begging, "Riku, stop, just stop, stay with us, you know you can't escape, just be good and don't get hurt anymore...."

Riku, fingers slick with blood, struggled to get out an Elixir. Loz gently took it away. Riku bit him so viciously that the bottle dropped to the floor. He seized it again and dragged it to his mouth to gulp desperately at the dregs still left inside, groaning in pain as he forced himself to roll over. His worst wound landed directly on the pool of Elixir that had spilled, and he gasped in relief as healing and renewed strength started to rush through him. He was struggling to get his hands and knees under him in order to get back to his feet, when Masamune came slashing through his abdomen again. Riku screamed in almost as much frustration and outrage as pain.

"How many Elixirs do you have left, Riku?" Sephiroth asked conversationally.

"As many as it takes," Riku hissed through gritted teeth.

Kadaj flung himself to his knees beside him and, unable to grab his hair anymore, pressed a hand against the back of his neck to hold him down. "Give up. Give up. You can't beat us. You
belong here, why don't you get that?"

'Dawn. Sora. Kairi.' Had to remind himself why he was doing this, why he couldn't just take the easy way. 'Help me.' It was such a struggle to speak. "I...will never...belong here...and neither...will he." Riku allowed himself to collapse in the pool of his own blood, which began gushing out in earnest when Masamune was removed. Kadaj let go of him to help Loz dig through his pockets, removing all the healing Items. An egg-shaped Item they weren't familiar with got tossed aside, rolling almost right into Riku's palm. He grasped it, squeezed until it popped open, and licked up as much of the ice cream as he could reach.

His brothers yelled in surprise and jerked away when six crystal swords burst from Riku's back like wings. Riku seized two of the blades and jabbed them into the ground, using them to brace himself as he climbed to his feet. He stood, unsteady but upright, glaring straight at his father, blood splashed on the wall behind him and pooling at his feet and still streaming from his wounds.

Sephiroth surveyed his youngest son for a moment. Then he turned away. "Continuing this battle is meaningless. We have no use for one so weak."

Everyone stared at him.

"You can't be serious!"

"Father?"

"No!"

Riku felt his MP suddenly finish reloading, its speed boosted by the small portion of Elixir he'd managed to absorb. "Curaga," he said raggedly, and gasped in relief as his injuries healed themselves completely, the pain vanishing.

Sephiroth's back was to him. "Get out of my sight."

Riku took a step.
“I will not allow this!” Jenova cried. Another wave of hair lashed out and encircled Riku, pinning his arms tightly to his sides and dragging him to his knees. ‘I hate hair,’ he thought. ‘I hate this hair, I hate that we were all born with it and I can never get rid of it, I hate it.’

"Jenova," Sephiroth murmured, his tone dangerous.

"I didn't say he could go! He is MINE, to do with as I please! He was created for the sole purpose of carrying out my will!"

"We neither need nor want him."

"I want him," Kadaj said hotly.

"Me, too," Loz echoed plaintively.

"Why did you cut your hair," Yazoo lamented softly, "it looks terrible...it used to be so beautiful...you cut it when you came back, and now you've murdered it...I hate you...."

Riku simply stayed silent and waited for his family to decide whether he would be able to walk out peacefully or have to fight further.

Masamune came swinging down. Riku, having so recently been hurt by it, couldn't help flinching, but this time the weapon sliced through his mother's hair rather than his own flesh. Jenova gave a shriek of shock and fury as Riku struggled free of the mass of silken, silvery strands wrapped around him.

"How dare you! How dare you!"

"I don't take kindly to defiance," Sephiroth said coldly.

"You brazen creature! It's you who should be bowing to me...!"

Riku was used to tuning out the familiar old argument. He brushed the last strands off his arms
and stepped toward his blood-splashed backpack.

"Don't think you can sneak off when Mother and Father are distracted," Kadaj snarled, brandishing his weapon.

"If I'd intended to sneak out, I would be long gone already."

"Riku," Loz begged, "please don't leave. I promise I'll be nicer. I promise."

"I've been wanting to escape this house since I was four years old, Loz. Nothing you do or say can make me change my mind."

"Riku!"

He had to fight his brothers again, but only briefly. Then Sephiroth struck Kadaj across the room and held his sword to Loz's throat, freezing him in his tracks. His eyes met Riku's. "Leave."

In that shared gaze, Riku saw dismissal, regret, and pride, perhaps even a small bit of compassion. He could practically even hear his father's thoughts, connected as the two of them were by shared otherworldly cells. 

"It seems your destiny lies on a different path than the one we chose for you. Get stronger. Do not fail and shame who we are."

The support from his father was unexpected, and Riku had to force back tears as he bowed formally. "Thank you, Father. Sayônara."

"Nooo!" Kadaj howled.

Riku retrieved his things and turned to the door. Loz ducked under Masamune and ran to wrap his arms around his younger brother's shoulders. "You can't just abandon us!"

Riku laid a hand on Loz's arm and lifted his head, craning back until their eyes met. "I'll come play with you sometimes, Loz," he promised softly. "Just a little, so you won't be so lonely. But I have to leave now. Let me go." He allowed Loz to cry for a minute, then pulled free of the desperate embrace and continued on.
"I hate you!" Kadaj screamed after him. "I hate you!"

"Good-bye, Kadaj," Riku called without looking back.

"Go out there and die like the miserable worm you are," Jenova hissed. "He's right - you're no loss. The humans have ruined you."

"Love you, too, Mother."

"Don't you dare come into my sight until your hair's grown out again!" Yazoo shouted.

"Will do."

"Come back," Loz sobbed.

"I hate you! Come BACK!"

"I changed my mind! I don't care how ugly your hair is! I don't care!"

Riku walked on. Out of the house, down the porch steps, down the road, until he could no longer hear his brothers' cries or sense his mother's fury or his father's gaze. The peace of the islands crept around him, the shushing of the wind and the murmuring of the ocean. After seventeen years, he was finally free.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: For those who haven't played BBS, you can use ice cream in battle. XD It gives you temporary special powers, which vary depending on the flavor.

Riku actually gets along with Sephiroth about half the time. Seph was a jerk here because he had divided loyalties during the fight, and because he's pretty ruthless about forcing his kids to get
I actually love Riku's long hair, but it's so fascinating to experiment with it in my writing (i.e., cutting it all off *sweatdrop*).

Sayônara means "farewell" in Japanese, and often has the connotation of being for a long time or forever (as opposed to something like "Jaa, mata!" which is like "See you later!").

I could already tell that this fic was going to be long, but I wasn't sure yet whether to hope it would stay less than 10,000 words, or whether I would have to or ought to break it up into a multi-chapter. Then, on January 13th (yesterday), I happened to glance at my calendar and realized that the next day was Riku/Xion Day 2014, so I very randomly decided to jot down a drabble for them.

...Well, for reasons I will explain later, I ended up having to type and post what I have so far of Rejection of Fate very last-minute, so tonight you're getting the first two parts of an incomplete Riku/Dawn multi-chapter, and a failed Riku/Xion Day drabble. ^^; I have no idea when I'll be able to finish Rejection of Fate. Probably not for a long time. :/ I still have thirteen bullet points left on my outline, I have several higher-priority projects that need finishing, and I'm pretty sure that my busy life is about to get even busier....
The children were playing among the trees near the road that led to Sora's house, so they were the first to see him coming.

"It's Riku!"

"Riku's back!"

There was a patter of feet along the path, and then they were surrounding him. "What happened to your hair?" Naminé asked.

"I cut it."

"Oh."

"It all sticks up now," Roxas observed.

"It looks stupid," Kazé said.

"It looks pretty," Dawn snarled in defense of his Original.

"'Pretty' is for girls, 'handsome' is for boys," Riku corrected wearily.
"Why are you all dirty?" Xion asked, looking curiously at the huge dark stains on Riku's clothes and not realizing what they were.

"Because I had a fight." Dawn was hovering way too close. "I can't carry you right now, Dawn. My hands are full, and I'm tired."

"I didn't wanna be carried!" Dawn yelled, face flushing as he jerked away.

"Ha ha, Dawn's a baby who has to be carried," Kazé taunted, which of course led to a scuffle.

"As if you don't keep begging Ven or Aqua to carry you all the time," Riku muttered.

"You're gonna get in trouble for fighting," Roxas laughed, taking Riku's hand as they walked along.

"Maybe."

"Are you okay, Riku?" Naminé asked, looking worried.

"I'm fine. Just tired. I want to go to Sora's house and lie on the couch with a bag of chips and watch TV until I feel better."

"We can watch The Little Mermaid," Xion said in satisfaction.

Riku rolled his eyes, though he was smiling.

Sora and Kairi were chatting on the porch swing when they arrived, and immediately hopped up to greet them as soon as they were in sight. Kairi, though she had been approaching with a smile, suddenly stopped dead and screamed, startling the children. "Riku!"

"I'm fine."
"You're covered in blood!"

"Curaga!" Sora yelled frantically.

Riku rolled his eyes again as he was briefly enveloped in a cloud of green sparkles. "I'm fine. I already healed myself."

"What happened?!" Kairi cried, still looking horrified. "Did...did they cut your hair?" she asked, gently touching Riku's shorn head.

"I cut my hair."

"Did they beat you up?" Sora exclaimed in dismay.

"Look, mission accomplished, okay? It doesn't matter, I got what I came for, I'm fine, it's over." He refused to answer anymore questions. Except when Sora's mother screamed even louder than Kairi had, and actually reached to jerk up his shirt in order to check for wounds.

"M-Mrs. King," he stammered, his face heating as his flesh was so unexpectedly revealed. He diffidently reached to push his shirt back down.

"You look like you got stabbed!" she cried.

"I-- I'm fine, I just-- Really, I'm fine...."

"There's not a scratch on you! Why are you covered in blood?! Did you kill someone?!"

"No!"

"Is blood bad?" Xion whispered to Roxas, who shrugged and said he didn't know.
"I just-- We have magic potions and things, I...can I please use your bathroom? Please? I need to shower. And I...might need to...probably will need to...spend the night...if you don't mind...."

"Of course, Riku, but what happened?! I thought you were just going to pick up some things!"

"I-- I really want to watch The Little Mermaid," he said in desperation.

It was a relief when Riku was finally able to lock himself in the bathroom, where it was quiet. His ruined clothes went into a plastic bag, in preparation to be chucked into the trash. He stood under the hot water for a long time, lost in thought, then sighed and began to scrub away the last stubborn traces of blood. When it came time to wash his hair, Riku had already squirited out a handful of shampoo before he realized what he was doing. He stared at the mound of scented goop in his hand for a second, then burst into bitter laughter. It took only a fraction of the stuff to actually wash his cropped hair, and he watched the rest of it sliding uselessly into the drain with the same dark grin still cracking his face.

The children were, in fact, watching The Little Mermaid when he came out, all five singing along or talking to the characters. Whenever anyone tried to ask Riku more about what had happened at his house, he determinedly sang or talked to Ariel, too, until they gave up. Lea eventually came to pick up Roxas and Xion, Aqua came to get Kazé, and Naminé went home with Kairi, but Dawn stayed with Riku at Sora's house and insisted on snuggling right up to him when they went to bed. "Ugh, Dawn, we've got the entire floor. Give me some room."

"You're hogging the blankets!"

"Fine, here."

"...I'm still cold."

"Seriously, Dawn? And you'd better not be kicking me all night, either."

"I don't kick! You do!"

"Stop yelling in my ear!"
"You guys are loud," Sora mumbled sleepily from the bed.

Riku lowered his voice to a whisper. "Go sleep with Sora."

"No," Dawn said stubbornly.

"What? He won't mind, and the bed's more comfortable than the floor, anyway."

"No! I hate beds!"

Sora rolled to face the wall and pulled a pillow over his head to try to block out the noise.

The next day, Kairi came to pick up Dawn in the morning, so that she could drop off him and Naminé at the kindergarten on her own way to school. Riku and Sora, who had dropped out of school, took a day off from HSE studying to go look at apartments. Sora, who was easily distracted and overly optimistic, wasn't much actual help, but Riku was still grateful for his company.

"Oooh, this one has a fireplace!"

"Yeah, a little kid plus a fireplace. That'll end well...."

Or, "Hey, look, Riku, you can see our island from here!"

Riku's attention was instead caught by something in the alley below. "There's a dumpster down there...why am I getting visions of Dawn falling out the window straight into that thing and getting carted off to an incinerator somewhere...?"

"Heh, you sound kind of like a fussy mom."

"I'm not his mom, I'm his brother!"
Riku eventually decided on an apartment that was fairly close to Sora's house, the kindergarten and elementary school, and a shopping center. It had two bedrooms and wasn't too expensive, so even though Riku still hadn't financially recovered from helping his friends defeat a certain munny-eating boss near the end of the war, he could still afford the rent if he either found a full-time job or killed enough Heartless every day to make ends meet. HSE studying might have to drop a bit lower down the priority list, but he'd worry about that later. "Yeah, I can afford the deposit. Where do I sign?"

By the time that was done, the kids' school had let out, so Riku and Sora went to go pick them up. As soon as Naminé saw Sora enter the playground, she ran to cling to him, and his laugh had a questioning edge to it as he scooped her up in his arms. "You okay, Nami?"

"Dawn's in trouble," she whispered.

They both stared at her. "What do you mean?" Riku asked sharply.

Naminé's eyes filled with tears. "The other kids were being mean to him, and he hurt them. Then everyone yelled, and they made us go inside and then I didn't see him anymore, so I think he's gone."

Riku immediately made a beeline for the nearest teacher. Sora, still holding the girl, hurried after him. "Where's Dawn?" Riku demanded.

"D-Dawn? Um...you're here to pick him up? We called his contact number, but...."

Riku realized that they must have tried to reach his parents' house. This is why I wanted to use my cell phone number,' he thought furiously.

Kazé came trotting over. "Dawn used his Keyblade at school," he said gleefully. "On other kids. He was really bad, but I was good today," he said proudly. "I'm gonna tell Ven and Aqua I was good and he was bad."

"Where is he?" Riku demanded.

"They took him away to the elementary school."
Riku whirled and marched off.

Sora shook his head and held out his free hand to the little boy. "Come on, Kazé. I'll take you to my house and you can wait for Ven or Aqua or Terra to pick you up, okay?"

"I was better than Dawn."

"Uh...well, I'm glad you were good, Kazé."

As soon as Riku strode into the elementary school's front office, he attracted attention. People stared at him, wide-eyed, and one secretary raised a walkie-talkie to say into it nervously, "Mrs. Reyes?"

"Yes?" a woman's voice crackled from the device.

"One of the Crescent's is here...."

"Where's my brother?" Riku asked tightly.

"Come with me." She led him out of the office.

Riku soon heard, in the distance, a child's shrieks and a sound of pounding or beating. He passed up the secretary and followed the noise until he reached the classroom it was coming from. 'Welcome to BMC!' a sign on the door proclaimed cheerfully. Riku pushed the door open, and the noise seemed to double.

The inside of the classroom was a mess. Tables and a shelf seemed out of place, a couple of chairs were knocked over, and the floor was littered with books and papers. There were no students in the room, but three women and a man stood clustered near what looked like a closet door with a small window in it, most of them with walkie-talkies.

The screams and pounding were coming from within the closet. Riku shoved past everyone and
yanked open the door, which had no lock.

"I TOLD you--!" Dawn shouted, starting to fling himself out while swinging his Keyblade. Upon seeing Riku, he froze, his gleeful look shifting to horror.

"Dawn," Riku started to say. Dawn tried to slam the door shut again, catching Riku painfully on the hip. "Ow! Dawn!"

The sudden anger in Riku's voice sent Dawn into a panic; he practically ripped open a dark corridor and started to leap into it. Riku managed to catch him and drag him back out. "No! No!" Dawn screamed.

Riku was gaping at the inside of the closet, which was blackened and still smoking a little, with holes in the walls and the inside handle beaten into a misshapen lump. Dawn himself didn't appear to have any noticeable injuries. Riku was incredulously starting to realize that rather than being abused, Dawn, who obviously could have escaped at any time yet hadn't, might be in here not as a punishment, but rather for the protection of whoever had been around when the classroom was being wrecked. "Did you do all this?"

"I HATE SCHOOL! I HATE YOU! I WANT KAIRI! I WANT SORA! I WANT KAIRI, NOT YOU!"

"Dawn--"

"LET ME GO!"

After a fierce scrabble for the edge of the door, Riku managed to pry Dawn's fingers off it and slam it shut, closing them inside. Dawn pounded at the carpeted walls with his fists. "I want Kairi," he sobbed. "I want Kairi...."

Riku finally noticed the wad of gum stuck in his young replica's long silver hair. The sight gave him a sick feeling as childhood memories suddenly surfaced. "Dawn...who did that to your hair?"

Dawn suddenly went still.
Riku looked at him for a while. "Dawn, talk to me," he finally said.

The little boy didn't say a word, but he did lean into Riku, put his arms around his neck, and begin to cry into his shirt. Riku held him until he calmed down. Then he got to his feet and, grasping Dawn's hand firmly in his own, he opened the closet door again and emerged. "What happened," he asked flatly.

"No one really--"

"It was on the playground--"

"Severe damages--"

Their chorused voices drowned each other out and made Riku's temples pulse with the beginnings of a headache. "Never mind," Riku snapped. "Let's go, Dawn."

Riku had calmed down and Dawn had cheered up by the time they got to Sora's house. Naminé anxiously ran to ask Dawn if he was all right, and Sora and Kairi were not far behind.

"We're fine. Come on, Dawn; we need to get that gum out of your hair."

Riku was astonished to see Dawn panic as soon as the boy saw scissors in his hand. "NO! DON'T CUT MY HAIR! DON'T CUT MY HAIR!!"

"Dawn-- Dawn! Shut up, I'm only cutting that little bit with the gum."

"Noooo!"

The noise attracted attention. "What's going on in here?" Sora's mother exclaimed as she came into the room with the others.

"He's freaking out over nothing. Here, Sora, hold him."
"NOOO!" Dawn screamed.

Sora looked uneasy, but he dutifully gripped Dawn's arms as Riku tried to hold Dawn's head steady enough to snip out the wad of gum.

"Riku," Kairi said, seeing the tears now pouring down the little boy's face, "hold on."

"It's just hair, Kairi!" Riku said in frustration. "It grows back. Dawn hasn't even MET my family, he doesn't have any reason to be as freaking obsessed with his stupid hair as they are!"

Sora, who didn't have the heart to hold the child captive for long, let out a grunt as Dawn finally wrenched free. The boy ran straight into Sapphique's arms and sobbed as she held him protectively.

Riku rolled his eyes and slammed the scissors down. "Fine, whatever. Just go around with gum in your hair for all I care."

"Perhaps if you try--" Sapphique started to say, but Riku cut her off.

"We're leaving. Sorry for all the trouble. I just need to get my stuff." He retrieved his backpack and suitcase, shoved Dawn's few possessions into a bag, and dragged his little brother out of the house.

"I hate you!" Dawn yelled. "I hate you! I want ice cream!"

"Shut up."

Riku--" Sora and Kairi started calling after him.

"I'm fine! I'll see you guys later, I've got too much to deal with right now."
"Bye, loser," Kazé called after Dawn, and grinned when he blocked Dawn's retaliatory Strike Raid.

"PUT THE KEYBLADE AWAY," Riku thundered. "Let's go."

They dropped their stuff off, a pitiful looking heap in the middle of the empty apartment. Then Riku spent about half an hour exchanging heated words on the phone with one of Dawn's kindergarten teachers and the elementary school's BMC teacher. Apparently, no one had seen how the incident started, and one other little boy was also in trouble, though not as much as Dawn was. "But that's what you're saying, isn't it?" Riku growled. "You're kicking him out."

"In ordinary cases, we willingly accommodate any student with special needs, but the fact that he has constant access to a weapon we can't confiscate poses a very serious danger to the other children--"

"Don't tell me Kazé doesn't have that problem, too! Are you kicking out him?"

"When there is a specific incident of this nature, the procedure is...."

Riku finally hung up when he couldn't take it anymore. Dawn had apparently stopped rolling around the floor yelling because he'd found Riku's Nintendo DS, and was now playing a game on it.

"Dawn, put that down, we have to go shopping."

"This game's boring."

"So put it away, like I asked you to."

They had to make more than one trip. At the general store, Riku just went through every aisle, tossing things into his cart. Dishes and cookware, towels, a book of bedtime stories for Dawn, cleaning supplies, a radio with an alarm clock feature, a couple of sleeping bags and some pillows....

Riku spent longer than usual in the aisle of hair products. He stared at all the bottles, but of course
a place like this wouldn't have anything from the brands his family used or at least approved of, including the hair oil that Riku, as a child, had used to get gunk out of his own hair whenever jealous classmates had bullied him or his brothers had tormented him. The only products here were the inexpensive kind that people like Sora used.

"...." Riku slowly reached out and grasped a bottle of shampoo. Its labeling proclaimed that it could practically work miracles, but when he snapped open the cap and inhaled, he could smell the cheapness of it. '

'...Buy it, Riku. You barely have any hair left, anyway. And even if you did, it doesn't matter. It's just hair. There's no reason it has to look its best. This is normal shampoo, the kind normal people buy. You can't get your old hair products anymore, anyway, even if you wanted or needed them, which you don't. So just buy this one, Riku. Buy it. Buy it.' He dropped the bottle into his cart.

Dawn trailed after him whining half the time, and disappeared the rest of the time. Riku eventually found him in the toy aisle. "Dawn, put that ba--"

Dawn looked up at him, still clutching the box of soldier figurines.

Riku remembered that Dawn barely had any toys - just a stuffed animal that Kairi had given him, and a Lego set that Sapphique had bought for him. "...Never mind. Come on."

At the apparel store, Riku was too tired and Dawn too cranky for them to spend much time there or even try anything on. Riku simply grabbed a few outfits and shoes in their sizes, then went straight to the register.

Last was groceries. Again, Riku went through every aisle, throwing things into the cart. 'I'm almost out of munny. Probably should have come here first.' "Put it back, Dawn. We're not getting Rainbow Puffs."

"I want it!"

"Doesn't matter. I can't afford it."

"Rainbow Puuuuuffs!"

"No."
"Waaaahhh!"

Of course people were staring, and Riku was even a little embarrassed about his replica throwing a tantrum on the floor, but he was too tired to care much. He tried scooping up Dawn and dumping him in the cart with the food, but Dawn put up a fight, even summoning his Keyblade.

Riku wasn't about to hit a five-year-old with his own Keyblade. "...Fine. Stay there, then; I'm going home." He started pushing the cart away.

"Riku!"

"...."

"...RIKU!"

"...."

"Rikuuuuuu, don't leave meeeeee!"

Riku grunted as Dawn crashed into his legs and clung, nearly knocking him over. He bent down to pry Dawn off his legs and put him in the cart. Dawn twisted his fingers into Riku's shirt and cried into it as Riku continued on his way. "I hate kids," Riku muttered. He never had before, but now that he thought of it, he'd almost never actually dealt with kids before. "Seriously, Dawn...."

They were both miserable by the time they returned to their new home. Riku didn't have the energy to do more than warm up some soup for dinner. "Time for bed. Go brush your teeth and put on your pajamas, Dawn."

"No! I'm not sleepy!"

Riku had very little patience left. When Dawn continued to put up a fuss, Riku knocked him out with a Sleep spell, brushed the unconscious boy's teeth, cut the gum out of his hair, changed his
clothes, and wrapped him in one of the sleeping bags. Dawn was so tired that he never woke up throughout the entire process, transitioning straight into natural sleep as the spell wore off. Riku took a long, hot bath, then crawled into his own sleeping bag and fell asleep almost instantly.

He was awakened before 6:00 a.m. by the sound of Dawn's screams.

"Noooooooo! Noooooooo!"

Riku stumbled to the bathroom, Keyblade in hand, before even fully awakening. "What?! What happened?!"

"My haaaaiiiir!"

"...Seriously?"

"YOU CUT MY HAIR!!!!" Dawn screamed.

"It was one lock, you can't even tell. And shut up, the neighbors'll complain."

"My haaaaiiiir!"

Riku didn't bother with breakfast or with trying to get Dawn dressed. He simply shoved his legs into the closest pair of jeans, tossed Dawn over his shoulder, and lugged the still shrieking boy over to Sora's house.

Sapphique answered the door in her bathrobe. She stared.

"If I can't leave him here," Riku growled, "I'm going to throw him in the ocean."

Sapphique held out her arms. Riku shoved Dawn into them, then turned and marched away.
"Riku cut my haaaiir!" Dawn wailed pathetically. "He cut it! He cut it!"

"Oh, ohhh, baby, but it still looks so beautiful, I hadn't even noticed."

'SERIOUSLY?' Riku thought, but Dawn's cries almost instantly died down to sniffles in response to Sapphique's reassurance. 'Whatever.'

There was a sound of a window opening upstairs, and Sora's voice called down sleepily, "Riku?"

Riku paused and looked up. "Sorry for waking you, Sora."

"Was that Dawn...?"

"Ugh, yes. Sorry for dumping him on you, but I kind of hate him right now."

"Oh...."

"I'm going to Radiant Garden. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Can I come with you?"

Riku considered, then shrugged. "Sure."

It wasn't until they were actually walking through the Garden's streets that it occurred to Sora to ask, "Hey, Riku, why are we here?"

"My brilliant replica got himself kicked out of school," Riku grumbled, "and now no one on the Islands will take him. I have to see if I can get him into a school in a different world...."

"Hey, let's visit Roxas!"
"Huh?"

"And Xion and Axel. They all live here in Radiant Garden, right?"

"Yeah...." It wasn't even seven o'clock in the morning yet, they'd all likely still be home. Riku shrugged. "Sure. Why not."

The Hayes household was bustling. Mrs. Hayes was stacking mounds of eggs and pancakes onto plates, as her husband showered in one bathroom, the girls fought loudly over use of the other bathroom, and Zeph slept right through his insistently beeping alarm clock. Lea was trying not to curse out loud as he fought to drag a comb through Roxas's untamable spiky locks. Roxas was vehemently protesting the operation, and Xion was happily dressing herself in clothes that were all inside out.

"...Wow," Riku remarked. "I thought I had it rough with Dawn, but maybe all that was just normal...." Not that he'd know. His family was only partially human.

"Hi, guys!" Sora said.

The sea-salt trio all paused to look at him. "Sora!" Xion cried in excitement. She ran to glomp him, and he laughed as he knelt down to hug her back.

"Good to see you, too, Xion! You need some help with those clothes?"

"I can get dressed all by myself," she said proudly.

"Ehehehehe...."

"Make him stop," Roxas ordered Riku, pointing dramatically at Lea.

"Aw, come on, Roxas," Lea said in exasperation, "you can't just not comb your hair every morning. If I'd known that's what you'd been doing in the Organization rather than actually styling
it that way, I'd have made time for a few extra Life Lessons...."

"I hate combs!"

Riku marched across the hall to the bathroom, ignored Lea's squabbling, semi-dressed sisters, rummaged through the cabinets, and marched back to Lea's room. Then he dragged Roxas out of Lea's hands, sat down on the bed, held the struggling boy still with his knees, sprayed Roxas's head with detangler that smelled like strawberries and tangerines, and mercilessly raked the comb through the boy's hair.

"AXEL! HELP ME! HELP ME!"

"Why does my kid flip out if you mess with his hair," Riku grumbled, "and your kid flip out if you fix his hair...?"

"Riku, let go, you're hurting him!" Lea cried.

"He's fine." Riku made one more swipe, set the comb aside, artfully ran his fingers through the boy's hair a few times, then released him. Roxas fled into Lea's arms and glared at Riku over his shoulder.

"Wowww, Roxas looks like a movie star!" Xion cried in delight. "Do my hair, too, Riku!"

"Leave Roxas alone," Lea growled.

"Yeah," Roxas said.

Riku shrugged, went to fetch more hair products, and set to work on the much more appreciative Xion.

After a rushed but entertainingly lively breakfast, Riku and Sora went with Lea to drop the kids off at their kindergarten, then simply accompanied Lea to his own high school as if they were enrolled there, too.
"Isa!" Lea called, galloping over to where his friend was reading a book on the steps outside the library. "What's up, man?"

"You're late. As usual." Isa shut the book and surveyed Lea's companions. "What are they doing here?"

"Dunno."

"We're looking for a school for Dawn," Sora explained brightly.

"For Dawn?" Lea echoed in confusion.

Isa frowned. "Doesn't he live on the Islands with you?"

Riku sighed. "I can't even keep up with one kid, and you've got two of them, Lea...I don't know how you can stand it. Though you do have your entire family to help you, unlike me...."

"You're talking as if they're a pain," Lea said warily.

"Well, Dawn sure is. I've never really thought about having kids, but if I had, Dawn would definitely have cured me of that by now."

"Awww, but he's so cute!" Lea laughed.

"Maybe he can go to school with Roxas and Xion," Sora said.

Lea winced. "Good luck with that.... Man alive, the paperwork's been a nightmare, and I'm not even close to sorting out that mess. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get Nobodies enrolled in school? They only let the kids in at all because I made Ansem write a letter about it, but Rox and Xi still don't actually exist yet as far as the records are concerned...."
Riku found this to be true in Dawn's case as well. He spent the entire day flying around the multiverse, trying to set up some records for Dawn so that the Radiant Garden kindergarten that Roxas and Xion attended, which charged a myriad of fees and was much more formally run than the Island schools, would accept him.

"But it's in process. I told you I can't actually show it to you yet, but I just talked with Destiny Islands' town hall a couple of hours ago, and they said his birth certificate will be ready in a couple of weeks. I HAVE to get him in school before then, or he'll drive me crazy."

Riku was very tired when he finally returned to Sora's house that evening. The last thing he wanted was for Sapphique to greet him by taking both his hands in hers and saying apprehensively, "Riku, sweetheart, take a few deep, long breaths."

"What'd he do?" Riku demanded immediately.

"Breathe first."

The children were playing in the backyard. As soon as the adults came out, Dawn's laughter died and he protectively crushed all his hair into a bun, staring up at Riku with a mix of defiance and apprehension.

"I would have tried to get it out, but he wouldn't let me touch it," Sapphique said unhappily.

"Show me," Riku said in a flat voice.

"No," Dawn growled.

"Maybe you should do what he says," Naminé suggested timidly.

"It's MY hair! I can do whatever I want to it!"

"Dawn chewed gum and stuck it in his hair on purpose," Kazé eagerly informed Riku.
"SHOW ME," Riku commanded.

"You're not allowed to touch it! It's my hair and I can do whatever I want!" Dawn insisted, and slowly lifted his hands until his hair sagged free again. Nearly a quarter of it was tangled in the vicinity of his left ear, the gooey pink center of the knot almost completely hidden within the silver strands.

Riku gazed at it ominously.

"I put it back because you cut my hair and I hate you," Dawn declared nervously.

"...Let's go," Riku finally said.

"Where?" Dawn demanded.

"To find some scissors."

"NO."

Riku seized the front of his shirt. "Oh, so I guess you prefer for me to rip it out with my bare hands."

"NO! DON'T TOUCH IT! IT'S MY HAIR!"

Riku reached out; Dawn frantically jerked free and summoned his Keyblade.

"Don't tempt me," Riku growled.

"Leave me alone!" Dawn swung the Keyblade at him.

Riku summoned his own weapon in a flash of light and blocked the strike, then raised his
Keyblade high. He managed to check himself enough to allow Dawn to block the attack, but it was hard to hold himself back. He swung again, and again, but then the growing dissatisfaction of having to pull his punches got overwhelming. Riku whirled away. "Sora!" he shouted.

Luckily, Sora figured things out just in time to counter the incoming attack. "Riku--"

"Fight me or I'll kill him," Riku snarled.

"Okay, but--" Sora didn't have time to finish, he needed all his concentration to handle the flurry of blows raining down on him. Their growing audience hurriedly backed away, giving the two combatants room to maneuver.

"RAAAAGHHH!" Riku bellowed, bashing away at his best friend without restraint.

Sora was starting to break a sweat. "Whoa, wow, okay, angry Riku, help, forgot my shortcuts, where's my, ack, whoa, okay okay hold on Riku, ah...!"

Sora, hampered by a lack of motivation, was having a difficult time holding his own against the enraged Riku, who was focusing so much on aggressive physical attacks that Sora never had a chance to shift onto the offensive. Ven finally came to his rescue, flying in to help split Riku's attention just when it looked like Sora was about to go under. Rallying at the appearance of an ally, Sora downed a Hi-Potion and leaped back into action refreshed.

The battle was now more evenly matched. Ven's lightning-fast attacks provided Sora with more openings, and the brothers' spells tended to instinctively complement each other even though they had no opportunity for verbal coordination. Riku's merciless assaults on one would give the other time to recover, so they were able to keep switching off as long as they timed it right.

The pace of combat increased until only Aqua could still tell what was going on. Kairi and Kazé only saw a rush of cool-looking but incomprehensible action, Sapphique was trying not to have a heart attack at the sight of her babies involved in such intense violence, and Naminé got bored and started drawing pictures of the 100 Acre Wood. Dawn had already sneaked away and was now searching the pantry for junk food.

"HAH! Rainbow Puffs!"
Later, when they were back at the apartment, Riku and Dawn faced each other down as they waited for their supper to cook. "...Dawn," Riku said, trying hard to stay calm. "What are you planning to do? How are you going to get the gum out?"

Dawn shrugged sullenly.

Riku sighed. "Remember how I told you that kids used to do that to me, too? We had all kinds of fancy hair products at our house, and I'd use one of the hair oils to get it out. But I don't have all that fancy hair stuff anymore, Dawn. When I moved out so I could take care of you, I left all that stuff behind. I don't have any way to help you now unless you let me cut it."

Dawn crouched down and burst into heartbroken tears, covering his head with both arms.

Riku watched him cry, but minute after minute passed and Dawn showed no sign of stopping.

Riku finally gave up. "Whatever.... Let's just eat. Come on, get your plate."

To be continued....

Author's Notes: To clarify about the "closet" - it's a specially-designed area in some types of special education classrooms, where a child who's violently upset can vent without causing damage. It's not meant to keep them 'prisoner' or whatever, and I've never seen it used like that; most kids actually prefer to take refuge in there. (Sometimes I have a hard time digging them out when they try to waste time in there without actually needing it. XD) Dawn made a bigger mess of things than usual because of his Keyblade and stuff. Though...I actually have, a few times, seen kids get so upset that they do shove around furniture and knock things over. *sweatdrop* (In this case, they'd evacuated the other students to different classrooms, since it was getting so dangerous with Dawn swinging his Keyblade around and firing off attack spells.)

Basically, it's not an uncommon thing to see in special education (minus the Keyblade and magic XD), and there was nothing inappropriate going on in this story from the administrative end. Riku's perspective is parentally biased, and he wasn't actually present to see what happened, all he saw was the aftermath; plus, he wasn't familiar with special
And note that the behavior unit is only ONE branch of special education. There are lots of different branches, since there are tons of widely varying special needs; not all kids are going to need a quiet room. (Man, I don't know how much to explain...I'm familiar with this stuff because I've worked in special ed for so long, but I don't know how it looks from an outsider's perspective. *sweatdrop*  Basically, I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea; I am very supportive of special education, but it might not look that way because I'm not writing this fic from the teachers' perspective, the way I did in Welcome To Our World. :/)

I decided on "Crescent" as Riku's surname, since that's the closest thing any of his family has to a surname in FF7. *sweatdrop*  (Sephiroth's biological mother is Lucrecia Crescent.)

I have a fairly large family, and we tend to leave the bathroom door open or at least unlocked if we're doing something that doesn't require privacy (so that someone else can come in if they need to fetch something or use a mirror or whatever). The idea of Lea's sisters getting ready in the bathroom at the same time and not minding Riku popping in and out seems normal to me, but it might be different for different sorts of families, I dunno.

The idea of it being very difficult to enroll Nobodies in school is a reference to my fic Beyond the War: Existence. :p  And the stuff about Sora & Ven being brothers is in my fic Before Sora, as well as Sapphire Eyes and some other stories.

I actually looked it up and found several methods for removing gum from hair without having to cut it. I already knew about ice, but I didn't know you can also use peanut butter, baby oil, mousse, toothpaste, and more. Riku wouldn't know about those because he's used to doing things the expensive way. XD
Riku was surprised to get a call from Lea as he was heading to Radiant Garden for Dawn's first day at his new school.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, Riku! You were planning to stop by here this morning, right?"

Riku frowned in confusion. "Stop by...what, your house?"

"Yeah," Lea said, as if it had been obvious.

"Why would I stop by your house? I have to go to work after I drop off Dawn."

"Xion's been asking for you, man!"
"Xion?" Riku said in surprise.

"Yeah. She wants you to do her hair again."

"Her hair?!"

"Yeah. She loved it last time, she keeps asking when you're gonna come back."

" Seriously? I--" Riku suddenly noticed what his replica / little brother / adopted son was doing to the control panel. "DAWN! Sit down and put your seat belt back on!"

"It's blinking!" Dawn insisted, pointing at the interior gravitational simulation indicator.

"It's supposed to blink. Put your seat belt on."

"It itches."

"Put it on, or I'll tell Father you've been bad."

"Don't tell him!" Dawn squeaked, jerking the seat belt down across himself. His encounter with Sephiroth had left him in great awe, and just enough fear for Riku to be able to use the ultimate SOLDIER as a threat.

"Dawn's being Dawn?" Lea observed with a chuckle.

"Yes," Riku grumbled. "I can stop by your house, but only if you take Dawn to school for me."

"Sure."
'Like it's no trouble at all,' Riku thought. The thing was, with Lea, it usually wasn't any trouble to saddle him with extra children, even unruly ones. "We'll be there in about five minutes."

When they arrived at the house, Xion came running out in excitement to meet them. "Riku! Riku! Riku! You came back!"

"Yeah, Lea asked me to."

"Hi, Dawn!"

"Hi. Let's play Legos."

"Okay!"

Riku raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to play with Dawn, or do you want me to fix your hair? We don't have time for both."

"Fix my hair, Riku! Pleeeeeeaaase please fix my hair and make it pretty like last time!"

"That's why I came."

They went into the house. Lea's mother and Roxas were in the kitchen, making pancakes. "I can't do it!" Roxas yelled in frustration, throwing the spatula across the stove.

"Roxas, don't throw things. Here, try again, I'll help you."

"No! I can't do it! I can't do anything!" Roxas cried, and burst into tears.

"Hah! Crybaby," Dawn taunted, doing to Roxas exactly what he hated Kazé always doing to him.

"I hate you!" Roxas screamed, launching himself at Dawn with Keyblade in hand.
Riku caught him expertly. "Hey. Remember the rule? Keyblades are for Heartless, not bullies."

"I'm not a bully!" Dawn cried. "Kazé is!"

"You're a bully when you make fun of people. Go help Mrs. Hayes make pancakes."

"Why?"

"Or play Legos. Pick one."

"He can't play with my Legos!" Roxas cried furiously, tears still in his eyes.

"You can play with my Legos," Xion offered.

"I wanna make pancakes." Dawn clambered up onto the stepstool beside Mrs. Hayes.

Riku rolled his eyes and carried the still sniffing Roxas into the back hallway, where Lea was gelling his hair in the bathroom. Roxas scrambled down and ran through the open door. "Axeeelll!"

"Whaaaat?!!" Lea cried, hastily setting down the gel bottle so he could put an arm around his friend/foster-brother.

"Make Dawn go awaaay!" Roxas sobbed, though his tone had shifted from genuine distress to make-a-fuss-over-me whining.

"Make Dawn go away?"

"I hate hiiiiim!"
"You hate him?!" Lea exclaimed in mock-astonishment.

"He's frustrated because he couldn't flip the pancakes very well," Riku explained.

Lea's face softened in understanding. "Ah."

"I DON'T CARE ABOUT PANCAKES."

While Lea soothed Roxas, Riku dug a pile of things out of the cabinets, then sat down on the closed toilet lid and tugged Xion to stand in front of him. "Hmmm...." He'd never actually styled another person's hair in a premeditated context before. "Do you want...I dunno...curls or something?"

"Make me pretty," Xion ordered.

"You already are pretty, Xion," Lea assured her, back to work on his own hair. Roxas was using his finger to draw hearts and X shapes in some splotches of gel that had fallen on the edge of the sink.

"...Curls it is," Riku mumbled uncertainly. He picked up a comb, but had only made one stroke before he noticed something that gave him pause. "Lea...." He set the comb down again and ran his fingers gently through Xion's hair, observing the slightly greasy roots. "Did they bathe last night?"

"I forgot," Lea admitted sheepishly, "til I took my own shower this morning, but I don't have time to give them a bath before school.... I'm new to this whole taking-care-of-little-kids thing! And mom was out last night, so she didn't remember, either."

"It's fine," Riku assured him, whole-heartedly sympathetic. He was painfully new to parenting as well, and unlike Lea, he was doing it all on his own.

"Are we taking a bath now?" Xion wondered.

"No. Hold still." Riku sprinkled out some baby powder and then combed it through until Xion's
hair looked clean.

"Whooooaa! How'd you do that?" Lea marveled.

"You just watched me do it...."

"How did you know to do that?!"

Riku wasn't sure how to respond, since it was something he felt like he'd been born knowing.

"Cool!" Lea snatched up the bottle of powder. "C'mere, Roxas."

"No!" Roxas yelled, throwing his arms protectively over his head and backing up against the wall.

"Oh, come on, buddy, it won't hurt!"

Riku rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to his task. He picked up a set of curling sticks and began wrapping lock after lock of Xion's hair around them, trying to work quickly. "I'm gonna turn the blow dryer on, okay?" They were in a hurry, so there wasn't enough time for her hair to set as much as he thought it probably should, and he decided to try a bit of hairspray to help hold the curls. By that time, Lea had finished doing his own hair and left with Roxas to eat breakfast.

"Stop bouncing, Xion...I'm trying to finish, but it slows me down when you move."

"Sorry!"

When she restlessly started bouncing again, he asked her to tell him a story, and was glad when the talking seemed to be enough of a distraction for her to stand more calmly.

"So then Mulan pushed him and ran up and she was gonna shoot the bad guy with the cannon, but it hit the mountain instead and it snooooowed a lot...."
"Mm." Riku carefully drew the curling sticks back out, then reached for a bottle of gel.

Xion got excited by the feel of the curls softly brushing her face. "Am I pretty?! Is it pretty?!"

"Almost, Xion; stand still. Did Mulan find anyone in the snow?"

At last he ran his hands through her hair for the final time, satisfied that the curls were now pretty and would hold for at least a few hours and were soft enough to look natural. 'Phew. That was harder...and took longer...than I thought.' He didn't mind, though. Xion really did look lovely, and the utter delight on her face was reward enough. He wasn't expecting her to stop squealing at her reflection and whirl back away from the mirror to throw her arms around his neck, squeeze him in a tight hug, and plant a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you Riku sooooo much!"

'...Why couldn't Xion have been my replica instead of Sora's?' Riku thought wistfully. Instead of a sweet, easily pleased girl, he'd been saddled with a total brat he could never imagine being able to truly love. Riku almost sighed as he returned the hug, remembering just in time that she'd probably think he was unhappy if he sighed aloud. "You're welcome, Xion. I'm glad you like it."

Xion whirled back out and dashed down the hall. "Axel! Axel! Mommy! Look what Riku did to my hair!"

In the kitchen, Roxas was loudly slurping orange juice through a straw as Lea played some sort of game with Dawn nearby. Dawn had made a circle with his hands, and tried to catch Lea as Lea swiftly poked his finger through it. "Aah! Got me again!" Lea exclaimed.

"I have ten points, you only have two!" Dawn declared, looking elated.

'Wow, so the little brat really can smile. Why does Lea make it look so easy to play with him?' Riku pouted silently.

"AXEL LOOK AT MY HAIR," Xion demanded.

Lea turned to her with a wide smile and a compliment already on his tongue. "Wow, Xi, you really--!" He broke off when he actually saw her, his eyes widening in amazement. "Whoa! Xion, you look fantastic!"
"That's Xion?" Roxas said warily, eyes narrowed. "You look like a girl."

"I am a girl!" she cried indignantly.

"Ohhh, my, Xion, it's beautiful!" Mrs. Hayes cried in admiration. Her youngest son reached out to playfully ruffle Xion's hair.

"Noooo! Don't touch!" Xion shrieked, batting his arm away.

"Wooow, Riku, you're really good at that!" Lea's sister Kayla chimed in, giving him a thoughtful look.

"Can you do my hair sometime, too?" Belén asked shyly.

"Oooh! Yeah, do my hair, too, Riku!" Kayla said enthusiastically.

"Do my hair too~ Riku~" Zeph chirped sweetly. "NOT."

Riku raised his hands in self-defense. "I'm not a hairdresser or anything, okay? I just fixed Xion's hair because she asked; I don't even know how to do people's hair. Except my own."

"Yeah. I can see that," Lea teased, indicating Xion's lovely curls. Roxas unhappily kept trying to poke her unfamiliar hair, until Xion finally got fed up with it and pinned his hands to the table. Then she dipped her head down and took a bite of his pancakes.

"HEY!" He cried in outrage. "That's mine! Don't touch!"

"You don't touch."

"You!"
"My hair looks better," Dawn complained.

Riku shook his head. "Whatever. I'm taking off now, okay? I'll pick you up later, Dawn."

Dawn's eyes widened, and he flew across the room to latch onto Riku's leg. "I'm coming with you."

"No, you're staying here. Lea's taking you to school, and I'm coming to get you afterwards, okay?"

"TAKE ME WITH YOU!"

"For crying out loud, Dawn, we talked about this last night!"  *This never even would have happened if you hadn't trashed the Islands school - it's your own fault, you little brat!*

"Daaaawwnnn," Lea wheedled, "come to school with us and I'll buy you some ice cream later, okay?"

Dawn's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"He can't eat ice cream with us," Roxas declared.

"Yes I CAN!" Dawn cried furiously.

"No! He can't, Axel! He's mean!"

Lea's family was watching with great interest, his mother as if affectionately observing the two teenage boys' parenting skills, his siblings as if they were spectators enjoying a sports match.

"Rox, remember when we talked about being good friends?"
Roxas slipped completely out of his chair so he could sulk on the floor.

"We're gonna be your friends at school, Dawn!" Xion said.

Dawn looked down at the floor, his grip loosening a little.

"Hey," Lea said, "Riku has to go to work and earn lots of munny so he can buy you ice cream, okay? Let's tell him to have a good day so he'll be happy when he comes back this afternoon."

Riku resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

Dawn's grasp tightened again, but then he mumbled, "Bye, Riku. I'll miss you. Come back and don't leave me alone."

Riku was shocked. 'How does Lea do it?!' "Uh," he said out loud, "of course. I told you, I'll come back." He gave a mental sigh. "I'll always come back, okay, Dawn? I promised I'd always be there for you, and I will."

There was a pause. Then Dawn abruptly let go of him, dashed over to the table, and dragged the last two pancakes onto his plate, biting into them savagely.

"You're supposed to put SYRUP on them!" Roxas shouted, grabbing the syrup bottle and plopping out an obscene amount of liquid sugar on Dawn's pancakes before Lea managed to get the bottle away from him.

"Here," Xion offered, dropping a handful of blueberries on top.

Riku rolled his eyes, raised his hand in farewell to the Hayes household, then left. 'I don't understand kids at all....'

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Apparently, Riku and his family are totally obsessed or associated with hair in my
headcanon. XD And ftr, it doesn't have to be baby powder; flour works fine, too. ^^;

I had to do more research than usual for this fic (which is weird, since it was so short o.O), but I was in a rush, so I didn't get to look up things as thoroughly as I would have liked. Apologies for any mistakes, please point them out if you see anything amiss!

Even though I'm really busy this week, I looked at my calendar and noticed that the next day was Riku/Xion Day, and randomly decided to try a drabble for it.

I've discovered that often, when it comes to pairings I ship or don't ship, the key is how successfully and comfortably I can write the pairing. XD If a pairing works when I write it, and I enjoy writing it, then I probably ship it. On the other hand, when I try to write pairings that I dislike or don't particularly ship or have interest in, then the story tends to wander in different directions, or else I do manage to stay on-topic but don't enjoy the writing. There can be exceptions, but that seems to be a general trend that I've noticed in my work.

Although I'd initially liked Riku/Xion, they haven't really worked out well in my stories - in my headcanon, Riku prefers being single and has migrated to Naminé when he needs a love interest, and Xion's gravitated toward Vanitas. ^^; Still, I wanted to see if I could at least write a platonic Riku/Xion fic. Unfortunately, I was only able to come up with two Riku/Xion ideas. One takes place in the The Light In Their Eyes universe, but so far in the future that I can't write it until I get some other stories in that series written first. *sweatdrop* The other idea was this one I've just posted, but I had so much fun writing about the Next Life kids that Riku & Xion didn't get as much screentime together as they should have in a fic that was meant for their Day. *sweatdrop* Sorry.

And by the way, it was because of this fic being a fail and being so closely related to Rejection of Fate that, last-minute, I decided to feverishly type what I had so far of RoF, so that I could post it before this one and you guys wouldn't get confused. ^^;

Btw, I now have another job, am still doing my old job a little, and am continuing work on the novel I hope to publish someday. So I basically have three part-time jobs now, and I'm anticipating that my busyness level will rise accordingly. X'D Again, my sincere apologies if it takes me months or even years to answer your messages. :/
"Wretched hive of scum and villainy," Saïx muttered as they made their way through Tortuga.

"Aww, so you were paying attention when I made you watch Star Wars."

"I paid more attention than you did. You're the one who fell asleep."

"Hey, I was tired, and I've already seen it a hundred times."

The two Nobodies came up short as a man and a woman crossed their path. The man was stumbling and singing wildly off-key, while the smiling woman supported him as she went through his pockets.

"That's her!" Axel whispered. "She's got the key!"

Saïx cleared his throat. "Ahem, Miss Scarlet, we were--"

She hit him in the face and kept right on going without saying a word.

"Whooaa.... She knew you?! Do you have some 'past history' with her?!"
"Certainly not. She is simply a crude and overly suspicious person."

"Maybe she could hear you saying her name with only one T."

"That's ridiculous, and--" Saïx frowned. "What are you talking about? Her name is Scarlet."

"Scarlett. Two Ts."

"How--? You don't even now that."

"Yes, I do!"

"Why, because you took the time to research Tortuga prostitutes' pseudonyms before we came here?" Saïx said sarcastically.

"No, smarty. It's because I've seen the movie, and I was too lazy to find the remote and turn off the TV when it ended, so I just kept sitting there and watched the credits, and I saw her name."

"That still doesn't explain how you could hear the difference between one T and two...."


Author's Notes: Apparently the Organization can watch the origin movies of the worlds they visit...?? Idk, this theme was difficult, so I went with what first came into my head. (And no, Saïx has not had any past interaction with Scarlett, she just punched him because he was creeping her out. XD)

I didn't forget about this challenge series. XD I've just been extremely busy, distracted by shiny newer projects, and having my butt kicked by OCD. (Sometimes it's like I can sense invisible demons tormenting and laughing at me, it's creepy. DX) Tonight I felt like just doing some random typing, and a couple of the F&M drabbles were short enough to get typed, quick-edited, and posted in one sitting. ^^;
Both this drabble and the next were written a long time ago, ftr.

Complete:  63/101
"Just give me a moment to recover," Saïx - Isa - said irritably. "I can't wake up from being possessed and nearly dead, and just jump into battle as if I was a teenager in perfect health."

"But we're sitting ducks here--"

"Lea!" Isa cried in sudden warning.

A Keyblade swung out and crushed the Heartless that had been leaping at Lea's head.

"Thanks, Rox," Lea said gratefully.

"Is he okay?" the dark-haired girl on their other side asked. "He's just lying there."

"He'll be fine, Xi."

Roxas knocked away another Heartless. "But you guys are just sitting here. You can't even fight if you're helping Saïx."
"I'm not Saïx anymore," Isa thought, a little resentfully. "Go, Lea," he said aloud. "I can take care of myself." He tried and failed to get up.

"I can see that," Lea deadpanned.

The girl laid a hand on his shoulder. "Me and Roxas will split up and keep the Heartless from getting to you. You take care of...of your friend, okay?"

Lea smiled gratefully and nodded. The Keybearers exchanged a look and then rushed apart to battle in earnest.

"...I'm sorry," Isa muttered.

"I'm just glad you're back," Lea said happily, looking at his green eyes.

"Lea?"

"Yeah?"

"Who is that girl?"

"Huh?"

"The girl fighting over there. She looks like Kairi, but Kairi was wearing something different, and was supposed to have gone with the other Princesses."

Lea stared. "Isa, that's Xion!"

"What?"

"Xion, dummy! Don't pretend you still don't remember her."
"What are you talking about? Xion was destroyed by Roxas months ago."

"Yeah, but she came back, duh."

"What are you talking about? That isn't Xion!"

"Yes, she is!"

"Xion didn't have a face!"

"Are you crazy?!"

"No! I looked! I still get nightmares!"

"What are you talking about?!"

"What are you talking about...?!!"

Author's Notes: Hanyou-no-miko on devART has a hilarious comic called "Puppets Are Creepy." XD  For you readers not on FFN, the link is http://hanyou-no-miko.deviantart.com/art/Puppets-Are-Creepy-253666466

I've thought for a long time now, even back when planning the CatC sequel (LOL, speaking of old plunnies that got abandoned for newer ones... X""D), that Isa probably wouldn't recognize Xion if he were ever to see her as a human after KH2. And, again, this drabble and the previous one were both written a long time ago, but it just took me a while to dig them out and get them typed.

Sorry if I get even worse at answering messages than usual.... I'm about to start training for my new job, I haven't quit my old one, and I feel like I'm drowning in things to do in my personal life.
(There is sooooo much to type, and so many stories on hold simply because I'm so disorganized and therefore feel too anxious to continue them until things are better sorted out.) X( Not to mention that OCD's been really kicking my butt lately.... It took me five days of missing work and struggling with OCD, just to get myself out of the house so I could run an important errand (the errand itself only took about an hour). -.- I've been going to bed way too late on a regular basis, and wasting so - much - time, the days pass too quickly and I keep being bewildered as I finally get into bed at 1:00 in the morning, wondering where the heck all that time went, since I can't seem to account for it all. This alarms me, and I don't want it to affect my new job, so I need to do my best to prioritize real life over socialization and hobbies. :/

Gah, Frozen.... I still haven't seen it yet, but the more I spoil myself for it, the more I want to watch it for real.... Watching the "Let It Go" scene/song online gives me feels, and I'm pretty sure it's my favorite Disney song since Treasure Planet came out in 2002. (As in, Treasure Planet's songs were the most recent Disney songs that I thought were "good" rather than just "all right." ) Elsa is so amazing and painful and beautiful in that scene, and Idina Menzel does such an incredible job, of both singing and acting while she's singing, it made me tear up the first few times I watched it. I wanna see that scene in context. X'D

I finally have a little collection of complete drafts.... The Sora/Xion Day fic for a friend of mine is finally done, yaaaayy, so you guys remind me to post it on Jan. 30th in case I forget. Also have a couple of Valentine's Day drabbles finished (Lea/Isa and Xion/Vanitas, both platonic), with several more partial drafts that I might or might not finish in time. I have other WIPs that are also important, but they might get put on hold some more if I end up being as busy as I anticipate in the coming weeks. orz

Complete: 64/101
Summary: Sora has a mission in the depths of his heart. Sora/Xion

A/N: Takes place during a theoretical KH3.

Sora once again found himself pelting down a stained glass path with a fellow Keyblade wielder at his side, pursued by a swarm of Heartless.

"Almost there," Roxas gasped out, sounding relieved when the door on the platform below came in sight.

"Roxas--" Sora started to say.

"Shut up and run!"

Running like that on a downward slope, they couldn't stop themselves in time, and both of them crashed right into the door. Hissing in pain, Roxas scrambled to regain his footing and faced the approaching horde with a fierce look.

"Roxas," Sora tried again, "I can't leave you to do this! At least Ven had Vanitas with him, but you--"
"GET THROUGH THE DOOR BEFORE I CRACK YOUR HEAD OPEN." Without looking, Roxas thrust his Keyblade toward the door behind him. A laser-thin beam of blue light struck the keyhole, unlocking it.

"But--"

"I'll be fine! It's you they're after, they'll leave me alone once you're gone!"

"But how do you know that?!" Sora cried desperately. He could barely see now, the light from the opening door was so bright. "For all I know, Ven and Van got eaten back there! I don't wanna lose you, Roxas!"

Roxas seized a fistful of Sora's shirt and shoved him through the door. "Tell her hi for me."

"Huh?"

The light began to obscure everything on the other side - the stained glass of the pillar and the darkness beyond, Roxas ready to fight, the glowing eyes of the monsters who were nearly upon them.... It was exactly like last time, except that the two halves of Ventus had been together, facing the darkness side by side. Roxas was completely alone.

"Roxas!"

The light seemed to consume it all. Sora couldn't see anything anymore. "ROXAS!"

The door latch clicked into place with a final-sounding thunk, and then everything went black.

When Sora opened his eyes, he found himself standing on a very familiar beach. "This is...Destiny Islands?" He looked around at the vast ocean, the sunny sky, the paopu trees rustling in the wind. "Huh." The previous pillar had been Twilight Town; the one before that, the Land of Departure. It
felt nostalgic to be in a place that seemed like home. "At least I'm on my own turf this time." He summoned his Keyblade. "Now, I wonder where--?"

As if on cue, the ground seemed to ripple, and Shadows began to emerge. Sora smiled ruefully, his grip on his weapon tightening. "Well, come on, then."

It was easy at first, whacking away at puny targets that burst into smoke and prizes with only one hit each. However, as Sora had expected, the small fry started giving way to bigger and tougher Heartless. They seemed to generally follow a beach theme, and Sora soon found himself beset on all sides by evil, glowing-eyed octopi, starfish, and seagulls.

"Haaaahhhh!" It wasn't like he'd never done anything like this before. Sora was a decimating whirlwind in battle, destroying Heartless after Heartless so quickly that only a fraction of their strikes were able to hit him. Yet there were so many of them, it was only a matter of time, and he eventually felt the relentless exertion starting to take its toll. "Just leave me alone, would you?! Or at least lead me to your boss so I can get this over with!"

An octopus Heartless's tentacle curled around his ankle and yanked. Sora cried out in surprise and pain as he lost his balance and thudded into the sand; then he shrieked and threw an arm protectively over his head as a seagull Heartless swooped in for a vicious jab.

"Fira!" Fire burst from the tip of his Keyblade and struck the retreating Heartless, drawing an outraged squawk from it. Unfortunately, the other Heartless were swarming in now that Sora was on the ground. "Fire! FIRE!"

Most of them were able to weather the rings of flame Sora tried to keep summoning. He cried out again as a heavy blow landed across his back.

"Salvation!" A rush of light swept through the battlefield, prompting shrieks from the Heartless - the ones that survived being evaporated. Sora weakly raised his head and saw a hooded, Keyblade-wielding figure, swathed in one of those black coats, come flying in to his rescue.

"You're a little late, huh?" Sora murmured with a little smile. Groping in his pocket for a Hi-Potion, he gulped it down and then surged to his feet, whipping his Keyblade back into a steady grip and swinging it at the nearest Heartless. "You guys might as well surrender, 'cause I've got backup now!" he proclaimed triumphantly.
Then he yelped as another tentacle seized his ankle again. "Hey--!" Instead of yanking down this time, it jerked up, meaning that Sora's Keyblade swung through empty air; then, before he could even finish processing his failed attack, he was flung. "Aaaaahhhhh...!" He landed with a splash in the ocean, and floundered painfully for a moment before starting to struggle back to shore. "Uh oh." Some of the octopi were sliding into the water in pursuit of him. "Fine! Come get it, then!"

It didn't take long after that. The hooded newcomer was mopping up the last Heartless as Sora slogged back onto the beach. He took a deep breath, leaped into the air, and dealt the finishing blow to the last Heartless just as his ally was starting to swing back. Sora grinned. "Thanks for helping me out."

The hooded figure lowered his Keyblade and nodded.

"So...um, do I know you? Did we meet before and I forgot, or you used to be a part of the Organization, or...?" Sora trailed off uncertainly. His companion remained completely silent. "Um...I'm Sora."

The other Keyblade wielder nodded again, then turned away.

"It's nice to meet you!" Sora called, a little desperately.

When he was ignored again, he shook his head and then looked down at his dripping clothes. "Man, I'm soaked...." He looked back up. "Hey! I'm gonna start a fire in that cave over there, all right? Join me if you want!" Again, there was no acknowledgement. Sora scratched the back of his head and then went into the Secret Place.

The fire cast its warmth over his exposed flesh in front, but the cave's chill still raised gooseflesh on Sora's back, making him shiver. He looked up in surprise and pleasure when the hooded boy ducked into the cave and approached. "Hey!"

The boy crouched down and set a large leaf on the ground next to Sora.

"You brought some food?"

The boy retreated and leaned back against the cave wall, lifting a piece of fruit to his own unseen mouth.
Sora picked up a second piece of fruit from the leaf, smiling at it a little. "Hey...you know the story of the paopu, right?"

The boy paused.

"If two people share one, their...." They looked at each other for a minute. Then Sora shrugged. "Eh, it's probably just an old wives' tale." He bit into the paopu.

The silence stretched out. The boy seemed to be staring at him a lot, though it wasn't easy to tell because of the hood. Sora finally shook his head. "So...do you hate me or something?"

The voice was soft, and sounded almost as startled as Sora felt upon finally hearing it. "What?"

Sora blinked. "I mean - you won't talk to me, you won't even tell me your name...."

His companion was silent and rigid.

"...Well, I guess you don't have to, if it scares you so much."

"I'm Xion."

Sora frowned. "Hey...are you a-- a girl?"

The hooded head ducked down.

"I-I mean, hey, that's cool! I don't mind if you're a girl, I--" Sora suddenly looked down at himself, remembering that he was half-naked. His face felt warm as he instinctively drew his arm over his bare chest. "Uh...maybe I should put my shirt back on, I just...."

"It's fine," Xion mumbled.
"Um...." Sora smiled sheepishly and reached to get dressed again, even though his clothes were still damp. "Sorry for...uh...I just kinda assumed you were a guy."

"I don't mind." Her head jerked up. "I mean! I...." She shoved the rest of her paopu into her mouth.

"So...is that why you were wearing your hood? Because you didn't want me to know you're a girl?"

"I...I just...."

"I mean, I know you're a girl now, so you don't have to keep hiding your face, right?"

"We should get going," she said tersely. She got to her feet, Keyblade appearing in her hand again.

"Hey! I mean, we need to find the boss Heartless, but we're not in that much of a hurry, right?"

"There's no point in hanging around here."

"Well...okay, but--" Sora crammed the last of the fruit into his mouth, kicked dirt over the fire, then hurried to catch up with Xion, who had already left the cave and was making her way toward one of the ladders. "Wait up!"

They climbed until they were up by the empty hut, the highest part of the little island. Xion glanced back at him. "Do you have Glide equipped?"

"Huh? Yeah, but.... Are we flying somewhere?"

"The boss obviously isn't here. Is there a boat I don't know about?"

"Uh...." Sora squinted down at the empty pier. "Nope. So we're going to the mainland?"
"Unless you've got any better ideas." She leapt off the edge of the wooden walkway.

"Xion!" Sora meant to jump right after her, but paused a moment to admire her steady, graceful flight. She'd obviously done this a lot, maybe even more than he had. "Xion! Wait for me!" He jumped off the walkway and Glided after her.

He was soon able to catch up, and they soared side by side for a little while. Then Sora grinned and angled himself a bit until his fingertips brushed hers.

She jerked back in surprise. The sudden movement affected her balance and she dropped down a few feet.

"Xion!"

"I-- What's wrong?!"

"Huh?!"

They stared at each other. "Why did you...run into me?" she finally asked.

"I just-- I dunno; I was playing?"

"Playing?"

"Yeah. You know...like tag. Kind of." He felt really stupid now.

"...."

"Never mind." He looked down and smiled again. "Heh, I wonder what it'd be like to cannonball into the water from all the way up here."
"We need to keep going. We're not in Neverland, we'll lose altitude if we don't hurry."

"Yeah, but...." Was she always this serious? "Hey. I bet you don't know what kind of fuel Gummi Ships run on."

"Huh? What are Gummi Ships?"

Sora grinned. "They're made of Gummi Blocks, and they can take you all over the multiverse. I have some of my own, they're fun. Guess their fuel."

"Uh - pixie dust...?"

"SMILES!" Sora immediately put on his hugest and goofiest, and was rewarded when his companion let out an incredulous chuckle and wobbled in the air.

"Your face...?!"

"Gummi Ships run on smiles," Sora said in satisfaction. "It's good to hear you laugh, Xion."

"Huh?"

"You just seem so serious...."

"You think this is a party or something?" she said, now sounding sullen. "I lost my best friends. We're all trapped in your heart. If we don't defeat this monster, you're gonna die, and the rest of us will die with you. You'll never see your friends again, and they'll...they'll cry. Is this supposed to be fun?"

Now Sora's heart was aching a bit, and he didn't think it was because of his own feelings. "Xion...you've really had it rough, haven't you."
"You don't know anything about me!"

"Maybe I don't know exactly what happened to you and the others, but I...can hear it. In your voice. Sadness and pain, just like when I met Roxas in that nightmare.... You guys are depending on me, aren't you."

"Yes. So let's get going."

"Yeah, but - can't you let me make you smile on the way?"

She was silent for a long time. Then she drifted closer, this time letting her own fingertips brush his. "Yes."

Sora exhaled in relief.

They soon came to land on the beach of the mainland, and Sora turned to wait for Xion to catch up. She was staring at the breaking waves.

"Xion?"

Slowly, she stooped down to pick something out of the sand and then straightened back up, staring at it.

Sora went over to look, too. "That's a pretty seashell."

"I used to...come here sometimes, to gather shells.... At the real islands, I mean. Not this shadow world here in your heart."

"You like seashells?"

"Mm...you can still hear the ocean in them, even when you're far away."
"Does it make you feel homesick?"

"Homesick?"

"Yeah. It's when something reminds you of home. The place you belong."

"But...I never even saw the beach until the first time I had a mission there. It wasn't my home, the...castle was."

"Which castle? You were part of the Organization, weren't you?"

"...."

"But you had to have been somewhere before that, right? Where are you from, Xion?"

"Nowhere," she said shortly. "I'm from nowhere. Come on, Sora. Let's get moving." She seemed startled when he caught her hand.

He smiled at her. "Everyone comes from somewhere, Xion. I bet you came from the seaside, just like me. Otherwise the ocean wouldn't sound like home."

"...."

"Come on," he said playfully. "Let's get going." He started tugging her toward the nearest path, and was pleased when she didn't pull away from his grasp on her hand.

The town was eerily silent and deserted. Twilight Town had been, too, but this was worse - this was supposed to be Sora's home. He knew the names or at least the faces of everyone who should be in the homes and shops they passed, but there was no one, nothing, not even any animals.

"That's the pet shop," Sora said softly. "Mom said, back before all the Heartless stuff started, that maybe I could get a dog soon...there was this white puppy with a black nose that I had my eye on...." He gave a helpless little chuckle. "Guess things never really worked out."
"Mm."

"And that store over there, me and Riku and Kairi used to stop there sometimes on our way home from school and buy peppermint sticks. And that's the ice cream shop...." He grinned. "Wanna go see if we can get any ice cream?"

"Is there anyone even in there?" Xion said dubiously.

"Well, even if there's not a person there, there might still be ice cream, you know?"

There was. Fourteen different flavors, sitting quietly in their frozen tubs. "Uh...hello?" Sora called uncertainly. There was no answer - the shop was completely empty. "I guess I'll...check and see if there's anyone in the back."

The back of the shop was empty, too, and by the time he returned to the counter, Xion had already helped herself.

"Hey," Sora laughed, "you didn't wait for me?"

"This world isn't real - we're inside your heart," she pointed out. "There's no one to buy the ice cream from."

"Yeah...but still...." Sora left some munny on the counter, just because it felt right. Then he picked up the scooper Xion had used and scooped some ice cream into a little bowl. "Oooh, they have nuts and sprinkles and stuff, too."

"You put nuts on ice cream?" Xion said, as if she'd never heard of such a thing before.

"Yeah! Or chocolate sauce or strawberry, or whatever you want. It's good." He was eagerly trying to cram every available topping on the bit of ice cream that fit in his bowl.

"I think I'll just stick to sea-salt, thanks...."
"Everyone likes sea-salt, huh," he commented, dipping a spoon into his dessert.

"It's our favorite."

"Our?"

"...Me and my best friends."

"Who are your--?"

"So do you live somewhere out there?" she asked hurriedly.

"Huh?"

"This is Destiny Islands, right? Didn't you have a...a home to go to every night?"

"Well...yeah." A sudden thought struck him. "You wanna see my house?"

She looked away. "Y...Yes."

He smiled. "Come on."

They walked close together once they left the ice cream shop, and it felt almost natural for Sora to reach out and hold Xion's hand. He wondered for a second if she'd be mad, but her hand squeezed his in what he thought might have been surprise, then she relaxed and they continued to amble along, their hands fitting very comfortably together.

"It's so beautiful here," Xion murmured.
"Yeah. I mean, of course the other worlds are really cool, too, but...there's no place like home, huh?"

"So many flowers...and the sound of the ocean seems...restful, sort of."

"It was a good place to live."

"Do you...plan to come back?"

"Come back?"

"To Destiny Islands. After all this is over."

"Well, yeah, I guess so. Why wouldn't I?"

"No reason...."

"...Xion?"

"Yes?" she said, sounding a little nervous.

"When you said you came from nowhere - um, did you mean you-- Uh..." He gulped. "Do you wanna come live here, after we fix everything with Xehanort and all that?"

"Live...here? With you?"

"I mean-- You have nowhere else to go, right? You can definitely come live here if you want, Xion!"

"I.... Thank you, Sora. It's nice of you to offer."
"I'm not just being polite, you know!"

"I know. I'll...think about it. Okay, Sora?"

He smiled a little and squeezed her hand. "Okay."

When they got to his house, Sora paused in the driveway, a little unsettled at how silent and still everything was. Xion, however, looked fascinated, going up to look at the flowering bushes by the front porch and the ceramic dog sitting next to the door. "It's cute."

"Um, thanks." Sora tried the door, which was unlocked as usual. "So, you...wanna come in?"

"Yes."

They stepped inside cautiously, and found it to be quiet and unoccupied. Sora took out a couple of aluminum cans and brought them to the living room, where Xion was staring around at the furniture and walls. "You want a soda?"

"A...? Um, sure." It became apparent that she hadn't had much experience with soda when she took a cautious sip and then burst into a coughing fit.

"Xion! You okay?"

"Yes, I-- What is this?"

"Soda. You've never had it before?"

"Of course I--! I.... Is it - supposed to taste this way?"

"All fizzy and bubbly, yeah." Sora took another gulp from his own can. "Sorry. If I'd've known you'd never had it before, I would have warned you."
"It's good..." she said, though she sounded uncertain.

"Here, I'll show you my room."

It belatedly occurred to Sora, as Xion was moving around examining everything closely, that maybe it was a little weird to have a girl going through his room. "Hey, um, I'll get those, uh, out of your way...." Red-faced, he picked a pair of boxers off the floor near Xion's feet and hurriedly tossed them into the laundry basket. Then he registered all the other dirty clothes and quickly worked to get them all off the floor, too.

"Riku...."

"Huh?!!" Sora exclaimed.

Xion was now holding a framed photograph. "This is...you with your best friends?"

"Yeah, that's me and Riku and Kairi-- Hey, do you know Riku?"

"...We've met."

"Really?!!"

She set the picture frame back down. "He cares about you a lot," she mumbled.

"We've been best friends since we were little kids. He's done a lot for me," Sora said, smiling at the photograph.

"Sora...we should get back to looking for that giant Heartless."

"Huh? Oh, okay." They left the house again and started heading farther inland. "Man, I hope we don't have to wander around the entire island looking for it...."
"I know what you mean. Some of my missions were like that."

"Your missions...in Organization XIII?"

She seemed tense.

"It's okay, Xion," he assured her. "I know now that Organization XIII wasn't totally evil. Roxas was in it, you know, and we're friends. You don't have to worry about me holding it against you or anything."

She sighed. "Fine. I was in the Organization."

"I knew it! Hey, did you know Roxas?"

She was quiet for a while, then said, "We talked sometimes."

"I bet it was rough," Sora said sympathetically. "All that time, thinking you guys had no hearts...it must have been so confusing when you got hurt and couldn't understand why you were hurting."

"Don't act like you know anything about it," she said sullenly.

"But-- I mean, Roxas kind of downloaded it all into my brain, I felt what you guys felt, even if it was just for a minute. It was awful."

"Sorry."

"No, that's not what I-- I just...I wanna help you guys, Xion."

"I know," she said quietly. "That's why you're helping us hunt down the Heartless here. Thank you."
"But it's not just that."

"What?"

He finally came right out and said it. "Let's be friends, Xion."

She paused, staring at him.

He smiled. "Will you let me be your friend?"

"...All right," she finally whispered.

There was a sudden roar. The Keyblades instantly appeared in their hands as an immense shadowy figure rose up above the trees.

"It's in the forest!" Sora shouted. "Come on, Xion!" They both ran to engage their enemy in battle.

Sora immediately went for the monster's feet, which was the closest part of it he could reach. As he bashed away, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Xion was casting spells. When he got hit with a dark ball of energy, a green glow almost immediately surrounded him. For a second, he wondered why he didn't feel better, but then realized a few minutes later that it was a Cura spell, which drew out its healing effects over time, rather than pumping up his HP in one shot the way a Cure spell would have. "Thanks, Xion!" he called out.

"Aim for its hands the next time it reaches down!" she called back.

They made a good team. Just like with Roxas and Ven, Sora got the strangest sense that he and Xion were somehow connected, that they could sense things in each other without having to say anything. There were too many times when he'd block a shot and Xion would be ready to strike as soon as the Heartless reeled; or when she'd cast a Blizzard spell just as he was swinging his Keyblade, so that the physical attack on the frozen area dealt even more damage than it would have otherwise. "We should do this more often!" he called over the noise of battle.
"What, risk our lives trying to save the worlds?" she yelled back.

"No, I mean - do things together like this! It's cool!"

"Let's try not to chat in the middle of a battle!"

Finally, they had the Heartless on the ropes. Its HP was very low, and it had resorted to desperation attacks. Sora was spinning his Keyblade madly, blocking the series of strikes in quick succession. Xion, wreathed in lightning, flung herself at the Heartless and shaved off a large amount of its remaining HP. Sora was raising his weapon for the death strike when the monster bellowed and swept out a hand, striking Xion and sending her flying.

"Xion!" Sora shouted. The lapse in concentration made him stumble, and he had to defend himself again before he got another chance to strike. He briefly considered rushing to the fallen girl's side, but it made more sense to finish off the monster quickly and then tend to her when things got calm. "Haaahhhhh!" He laid down a combo, grinned wildly when the Heartless finally burst into smoke and prizes, then ran to his fallen companion's side. "Xion! Xion!"

She lay still on the ground, looking small and fragile. "Xion!" Sora dropped to his knees beside her and lifted her in his arms, gazing at her in distress. "Xion, I used up all my healing Items, I--"

He wasn't sure what came over him then. He wasn't really thinking, he simply leaned his head down until he could feel her face against his, sense her breath whispering past his cheek. He didn't even have to look for her lips; his own met them so suddenly that it was as if he'd already known where they were by instinct.

Her hood dropped back as he kissed her. He didn't notice at first, because his eyes were closed and his mouth full of the taste of her, his mind giddy when he realized she was kissing him back. Then he opened his eyes again and drew away, just a little, having a crazy half-expectation that he'd find himself looking into his own face.

His mouth dropped open in shock. She didn't have his own face, but he still recognized her. He'd seen her a hundred times before.

"K-- Kairi?!" But, no, she had black hair, not red.... Other than that, they looked exactly the same!

"X-Xion," she gasped, her eyes full of pain. "I'm Xion."
He stared at her for a minute. Then he smiled. "Of course you're me-- I mean, of course you're Xion." He leaned to kiss her again, then stopped. "Sorry, um.... I should have asked permission first."

"It's okay," she said, and closed the small gap between them so that they were kissing again.

After a while, they both finally sat up, smiling sheepishly at each other. "Sorry.... Are you okay, by the way? I don't have anything to heal you with...."

"I'm fine. I just had the wind knocked out of me, but...um, I'm better now." Her hand moved hesitantly toward his, and he grasped it.

"So, like, are you Kairi's long-lost sister or something?"

She blushed a little. "I...I'm just...." Her face suddenly darkened, and she reached to pull her hood back up again.

"Wait, Xion," he pleaded, "please don't. You don't have to hide from me."

"There's a lot you don't know about me," she said in a low voice.

"Yeah...I know there's a ton of stuff that's been going on that doesn't make sense. But it's okay, Xion! It doesn't matter who you are, I still...." He couldn't bring himself to say 'I love you,' and ended up with a silly smile instead.

She looked torn. "I...I'm...." She took a deep breath. "I'm a - a replica, Sora."

"Really? Like Riku's replica?"

She winced. "Y-Yeah...sort of...."
"Whooaaa, so Kairi has a replica, too?! I wonder if I have a replica."

Now she was grimacing. "Sora, please stop."

"Okay. Sorry, Xion. But you know, it doesn't matter who or what you are - you've got a heart. That makes you just as human as I am!"

"As you are..." she murmured, almost despairingly.

He smiled and got to his feet, holding out both hands to help her up. "Come on, Xion. Let's go find the way out of here."

They talked some more as they went, and Xion seemed to relax more as they moved away from the subject of her identity and origins. Sora had even gotten her to smile, and to laugh a few times, and almost to chatter before they reached the door. He kind of wished he could stay here in the fake Destiny Islands longer, but this mission of his still wasn't over yet.

He took a deep breath. "Well...here we are."

She'd gone quiet again. "Yeah."

"...I know you probably can't come through this door, but...." He took her hands. "I'll see you again, Xion. I promise."

"Some promises are really hard to keep," she said softly.

"I always keep my promises, Xion. You'll escape, okay? I won't let you or Roxas or Ven or Vanitas get trapped in here forever."

She squeezed his hands. "Th-Then we'll be waiting for you, Sora."

He hesitated, then leaned in to kiss her again. She kissed back hungrily, her hands going to grip his shoulders. He wrapped his arms around her waist and squeezed her in a hug.
They finally parted, smiling sadly at each other. "I love you," she whispered. Then, so softly that he wasn't sure he heard it right, "Your heart is my heart."

"I'll come find you," he said gently. They kissed one last time.

Then the door unlatched and started to open slowly. They watched until it had swung as wide as it would go, a stained glass path revealed on the other side, stretching out into darkness. Keeping hold of Xion's hand, Sora tried to step out onto the path.

As they'd both expected, her fingers halted at the threshold, unable to move past it. With a sorrowful look, Sora pressed his lips to her hand. "I want to stay...."

"You won't do anyone any good if you never wake up again."

He smiled heavily at her. "Yeah." At last they parted, their eyes fixed on each other as he backed away through the door. She stood perfectly still as she watched. "Wait for me, Xion."

She smiled.

And the door closed again, cutting her off from his sight.

'Not forever, though,' Sora thought. 'I'll find a way to get her back.' He turned around and set off resolutely down the path.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Come on, it's Disney; they'll eventually live Happily Ever After. XD

Aaaaand I will probably never do Sora/Xion romance again, because this was so hard to write. *sweatdrop* I don't have anything against the pairing, it's just a really difficult one for me to portray, especially as romance - this is, like, the fourth plot bunny I came up with, since the others didn't work out for one reason or another. Trying to change Xion's characterization too much made
me dissatisfied with the quality of the work, and she and Sora both kept getting distracted by platonic love if I let any other characters onscreen. *sweatdrop*

I did want to try SoXi at least once, though. :) Partially because my muse is apparently determined to crank out at least one fic for every KH pairing ever, and partially for Guggi’s sake, since Sora/Xion is her OTP and I’ve been wanting to make something for her for a while. ^^ Her MMD artwork is lovely, and I’ve been following it for a few years now. I hope this story was to your liking, dear! I tried hard to adapt into my own style the sort of ‘atmosphere’ I sense this pairing has in your work. :hug:

Lol, I think this might be the first time ever that I’ve written game-Xion without totally failing (as opposed to manga-Xion, which is the characterization I usually write). XD
**Summary:** Isa finally graduates from college, and his family has a gift for him~! :D

**A/N:** Beyond the War universe.

Even among the large crowd of people milling around in the courtyard outside, Isa's shaggy blue hair was easy to spot. Lea and Xion ran to tackle-glomp their graduate before he even saw them, resulting in some minor scrapes and bruises, frosty insults, yelling, and doomgazing. Roxas, coming up behind them with the present, grinned as he watched.

"GET OFF," Isa demanded.

"Saa-chaaaaan, you finally graduateeeeed!" Xion cheered, shoving Lea away and helping Isa back to his feet. "Are you happy?! Are you really, really happy?!"

"I was until about ten seconds ago...."

"Did you throw your hat, Isa?" Lea asked, grabbing the graduation cap and waving it.

"Of course not."

"Whaaaat?! How dare you break with tradition just because you didn't want to lose a piece of cardboard you'll never use again!"
"Xion invested a significant amount of time and effort in it," Isa huffed, grabbing the cap back and dusting off the flat top of it, which Xion had lovingly decorated a few days before with glitter pens.

"D'aww, Saa-chan, you care," Xion said, standing up on tip-toes to kiss his cheek.

Isa eyed his other family member dubiously. "Are you pregnant or something?"

"Nope," Roxas laughed. He was supporting the present under his bulging jacket with both arms as if it was a belly with a baby in it. "Axel said to hide it."

"Then I commend you on how excellently you've concealed the fact that you're holding an item roughly 20 cm. tall and 35 cm. wide," Isa deadpanned.

"I told him to hide it 'cause you'll know what it is as soon as you see it," Lea clarified. "Ahem! Rox, Xi!" he called in a dramatic voice. "Prepare for: the unveiling!!!" He and Xion began vocalizing ridiculously together as they unzipped Roxas's jacket in a ceremonious way.

"I should pretend I'm not related to you three," Isa muttered under his breath, noticing that one or two amused passersby were taking pictures. Then he paused. "Wait a minute - I'm not related to any of you. Sacred moon."

"Pay attention!"

"Happy graduation, Isa."

"Do you like it, Saa-chan?!"

Isa looked at the gift-wrapped box, but didn't notice anything unusual about it until he'd accepted it and saw a bunch of holes poked in the top. "...Are you giving me something that needs to breathe as a graduation gift?"

"PFFFTT, HA HA HA, why would we do that?"
Roxas and Xion stared at Lea in confusion. Isa rolled his eyes, lifted the top off the box, then stared down at it for a while, speechless.

"...Axel, does he like it?" Xion whispered uncertainly.

"He looks mad," Roxas observed.

"Bark!" Isa's present cried in excitement.

Isa finally grasped the Chihuahua around her rib cage and lifted her out, holding her securely against his chest and idly setting the box down on a nearby ledge.

"Isn't she cuuuute?" Lea said. "We got her from the animal shelter. We saved her! You saved her! You're her daddy now~"

Isa scratched the top of the dog's head, and she eagerly licked his fingers.

"I still can't tell if he likes it," Roxas complained.

"Thank you," Isa said in a monotone.

"He thinks she's the most adorable thing he's ever seen~" Lea translated.

"I can't take care of a dog," said Isa.

"Sure you can! You have no school now! You're FREE! You can do whateeeever you want!"

Isa lifted the tiny dog in both hands and stared at her.

"Bark!"
"Me and Roxas and Axel can take care of her if you don't want her," Xion said anxiously.

"No," Isa snapped. He hugged his new Cute Thing protectively to his chest and stalked away.

"Isa?" Roxas wondered.

"Hey, no fair hogging the puppy!" Lea called, hurrying to catch up.

"Saa-chan!"

"Isaaaaa, wait up!"

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I whipped up this drabble real quick as my 500th Deviation on deviantART, yaaay. XD (According to my profile, anyway. And keep in mind that a ton of those Deviations shouldn't really count, since they were stories that later got replaced with properly-formatted versions. But whatever.)

I spent some time trying to figure out how big the box should be, yet I'm still not sure if I got it right. *sweatdrop* The important thing is that Chi was comfortable in it, and hopefully it would still have fit under Roxas's jacket... IDK.

Also, there should have been other family and friends there to celebrate _._. Maybe they got separated and were still trying to find Isa in the crowd...? *facepalm*

Lol, it's a running joke in my other fanfiction that Axel's 'Cute Things' are children or young people he likes. Apparently Isa/Saïx is capable of collecting a few 'Cute Things' of his own. ;p And ftr, Chi is an adult; Lea just called her a 'puppy' because she's so small. ^^;

Hey, are you guys getting ticked off about the daily updates, or do you like them, or not care one way or the other, or what...?
This Kind of Love: Axel & Naminé

This Kind of Love, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

Axel & Naminé (rough draft)

A/N: LOL, what the heck is it with Naminé? She's eating this series. XD

I wish I could have posted this for AkuNami Day, but I'm three days late. ^^; I did something stupid and made myself unnecessarily super-busy on February 8th.

This takes place on the first rainy night after the Organization members move into Castle Oblivion.

In canon, Axel writes in his journal that Xion "looks just like Naminé" to him. This leads me to theorize that while Roxas sees Xion as a black-haired Kairi, Axel sees her as a black-haired Naminé. XD

THIS IS A PLATONIC PAIRING. I get really grossed out at the thought of Axel (well, any adult, but especially Axel) being romantically paired with kids. X( X( X( o.o.o

Axel was awakened by a terrific crash of thunder. He groaned at being so abruptly dragged out of sleep, then rolled over and pulled a pillow over his head.

...No good. The constant sound of the rain hammering the windows was making it too hard to sleep, even when the thunder wasn't crashing. Axel sighed and pushed the pillow aside again.

And, if he'd still had his heart, he would have shrieked in surprise. "What are you--?"

Naminé was in his room for some reason, huddled on the floor near the foot of his bed, her hands pressed over her ears as she stared at Axel with huge, terrified blue eyes.
"......You have GOT to be kidding me."

As if on cue, thunder roared again, and Naminé squeezed her eyes shut in terror, letting out a whimper that crushed his...well, the empty hole where his heart used to be.

"Aaarrrggghhhh." Well, she did look almost exactly like Xion, after all...maybe it shouldn't have been surprising. "*SIGH* Whatever. Come on."

She miserably peered back at him again. "What...?"

Axel scooted aside and patted the bed next to him. Naminé immediately scrambled to his side and latched onto him, and was crying into the bare flesh of his shoulder within a minute, snot and all. This was not the first time Axel wished he was in the habit of wearing shirts to bed. "Geez...."

"What's happening?" she sobbed. "What's happening?"

"It's just the clouds. They run too fast during storms and crash into each other, so of course they hurt themselves and cry like little babies."

Naminé stared at him in astonishment. "Really?"

"...No. Clouds aren't alive. But honestly, it's nothing to be scared of. Thunder can't hurt you at all, Naminé."

"But...it's...."

"It's loud, I know. But it's okay. Really, it's nothing bad, it's just so big and loud that I guess it scares a little girl like you. But you're completely safe in here, okay?"

"With you?" she said tearfully.
"...Yeah. You're safe here with...me." 'From thunderstorms, anyway.'

As the storm went on and Naminé kept shivering in his arms, it almost felt like she was sucking heat out of him, even when he wrapped her in a blanket and experimentally tried using his fire element to warm up. "Look, Naminé. There's a...a song."

"A song?"

"Yeah. A song that you can sing whenever you get scared, and it helps you feel better." He took a deep, resigned breath, and began to sing *My Favorite Things*. "Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens...." 'Geez, why am I still baby-sitting even after I left my babies back at the other castle?'

Naminé listened quietly as he sang. When he was finished, she hugged him tighter and whispered, "That did make me feel better."

"You feel better because of my fail singing, or because the storm's dying down?" Sure enough, another peal of thunder rumbled in the sky - noticeably farther away than the last one, but it was still enough to elicit a frightened wail from the girl. "That's what I thought...."

When the storm faded to a much softer rain, Naminé finally fell asleep. Once he had ascertained this for certain, Axel carefully got out of bed, lifted her in his arms, and carried her to her room. It was so big and empty and white, and she looked very small within the looming walls. 'Next time I'm free, I gotta teach her how to start accumulating clutter.' Axel laid Naminé down on the bed, drew the blankets up to her chin, brushed her bangs out of her face, then, on a total impulse, bent down to kiss her forehead. "The thunder's not what you should be afraid of, sweetheart," he whispered sadly. Then he went out into the hallway so he wouldn't disturb her when he opened a dark corridor.

He emerged in Saïx's room at the Castle That Never Was. The Luna Diviner, who had fallen asleep at his desk again, stirred and peered blearily at the intruder. "...Axel?"

"'Sup." Axel took a hangar out of his friend's closet, held the shirt up to his chest, and surveyed himself critically in the mirror, wondering if it would be too baggy on him to be comfortable.

"Why are you back, and why are you stealing my clothes?"
"Just popped in real quick to get some real pajamas. This sleeping-in-my-boxers thing isn't really working out now that I've got kids."

"What? You don't have children. And get your own pajamas."

"Don't have any. Pajamas, I mean. I do apparently have kids, it's like they're magnetically attracted to me or something...."

"...I'm too tired to deal with this. Just get back to C.O. before Lord Xemnas discovers you're here."

"Fine. Thanks for the PJs."

"I did not give you permission to take those."

Axel, now wearing Saïx's pajamas, gave a casual wave and walked back into the dark corridor to Castle Oblivion.

"...." Saïx sighed, took off his coat and boots, and curled up in bed for the couple of hours he had left before he'd have to start the next day's work.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Random, freshly-drafted Kingdom Hearts update to make me feel better, because I'm frustrated with the RuroKen fandom again. *sigh* It wasn't even really anything bad this time, it's just...someone comes totally out of the blue and makes a story request of me; I refuse to do half of it but am intrigued by the other half (because it was a platonic crack pairing, which is super-rare in the RK fandom XD), then as we're exchanging messages about it, I got frustrated because of the miscommunication and, just, the exasperating attitude of the entire fandom. RuroKen fans are SOOOOOOOOODifferent from Kingdom Hearts fans. I keep getting ideas for RK fics, but they feel like a chore to actually write, so I keep wanting to write them as KH fics instead. *sweatdrop*

Sorry about the AkuSai at the end. I could and should have just stopped when Axel put Naminé to bed, but bleeeehhh, RK fandom; I wanted my OTP. X(
I've actually had this idea for a while.... At one point, I'd considered it as a gift for Akiraxdeary, but decided it wasn't really "AkuNami-ey" enough (though it actually ended up more AkuNami-ey than I expected XD), and that it'd probably be better to draw a picture for her anyway, so I decided to draw or write her something else instead.

Complete: 7/10
Summary: Is it the kids who are magnetically attracted to Axel, or the other way around?

A/N: The timing doesn't fit with canon, even assuming there was at least a day or two between Larxene's death and Marluxia's confrontations with Axel and Sora, but whatever. *sweatdrop*

I think you can consider this a sequel to This Kind of Love: Axel & Naminé. I think.

0.0.0

Now that Larxene was gone, Axel was bored. He idly went looking for Naminé, but when he saw that she was busy being harassed by Marluxia, he sighed and trudged off again. "Bored...boooorrreeed...there's no one fun in this castle...."

Well, except for the Keybearer. It wasn't Axel's turn to play with him, but whatever. Axel corridoried to where he sensed Sora was, peeking out to ascertain the situation before fully emerging.

None of the other Organization members were around. Sora and his weird little friends were grouped together by a pillar - all fast asleep. Axel wondered why in the world they weren't sleeping in shifts, then realized from the duck's posture that he was probably supposed to be on guard duty, but had failed to stay awake.

'They're exhausted,' Axel thought. Sora looked terrible, with bags under his eyes and bruises marking his flesh. He was also curled up tightly, as if cold.

"...Hm." It made sense, what with Sora's long journey through the Heartless-infested maze of Castle Oblivion, fighting his way past the Organization and then the crazy replica on top of that,
being psychologically tormented, having his memories torn to shreds.... "I don't have a heart," Axel remarked, "so of course I can't feel sorry for him. That would be stupid." So he turned away to walk back into the dark corridor and prove it. Then it occurred to him that he should probably stay, kick Sora awake, run him through another boss battle, and play some more mind games. "Yeah. That's what I'll do."

Therefore, Axel had no explanation for why, when he approached Sora, he ended up simply crouching down and resting his hands lightly on the boy's shoulders.

"Not yet, Mom," Sora mumbled, still asleep. "I'm still dreaming about her...."

Axel rolled his eyes. 'You couldn't have at least mistaken me for your dad?' Whatever. He called on his powers and eased warmth into Sora, until the boy finally uncurled and started snuggling happily into him. 'Whoa, whoa, not on me, you idiot!' Axel shifted him until Sora was cuddling between the warmth of Goofy's fur and Donald's feathers instead. Then the Flurry of Dancing Flames stood up and backed away. "Yeeaaahhh, I'm really glad Larxene's dead...." He KNEW she would have somehow found out what he'd just done, and would have never, ever, ever, ever, ever, let him forget it. 'I'm better off interrupting Mr. Cherry Blossoms.'

o.o.o.o.o

In the room where Marluxia was looming over a distressed-looking Naminé, Axel came striding in. "Hey, hate to break up the party, but I need Naminé."

"Not now, Axel," Marluxia said.

"Yes, now. I'm desperate and whatever." Axel grabbed Naminé's arm and tugged her to her feet.

"Whatever you need the girl for can't possibly be more important than her primary task."

"Of course it is. I can't get the olive jar open and I'm reeeeeeaaaaallllly really hungry, for olives, so I need her to use her huge sculpted biceps to open it for me. Later." Axel waved and dragged the girl into a dark corridor.

"You need me to open a jar?" Naminé asked in surprise when they emerged in the kitchen. She was still trembling from her encounter with Marluxia.
"Of course not, I just needed to get you out of there."

"Th...Thank you."

"Though I guess since we're here, you can help me with something."

"Wh-What is it?"

"Wash your hands first."

Axel got out some eggs and sugar, and put them on the counter. "Okay, you remember how to crack eggs?"

"Yes, I just...can't do it very well...."

"No problem, practice makes perfect. Crack these into that bowl there, would you?"

Once Naminé had calmed down from the latest memory-destroying session with Marluxia, she got more curious about what they were making, but Axel refused to tell her until they were squeezing in the food coloring and she figured it out for herself. "Are we...are we making ice cream?"

"You'll find out."

"I-It is ice cream, isn't it! We can make it whenever we want?!"

"That's what recipes are for."

"Ohhhh!" After finishing her task, Naminé flipped to a page in her notebook and added a small ice cream bar to the other pictures.
"What's that?"

"I...I started making a list of all the things you've taught me." Naminé smiled a little as she started paging back through the notebook. "This is when you taught me what ice cream is...this is when you taught me how to play Command Board...this is when you taught me that I'm not stupid and a waste of time like Larxene said I was...."

Axel was staring at the pages and pages of pictures. "That is...a really long list."

"You've taught me a lot."

"Guess I have, haven't I...."

Late that night, Axel couldn't sleep. The kids in this castle were cute and all, but Sora hated his guts, the replica wasn't very cuddly, and Naminé tended to stab Axel's non-heart with lots of little knives of guilt, so it was hard to hang out with her for too long at a time. Axel found himself very much missing the kids back at the other castle, who were adorable and loved him and didn't stab him with nearly as many guilt-knives. "I shouldn't be feeling guilty, anyway! I shouldn't feel. Man, I even fail at being a Nobody, how lame is that...." He climbed out of bed, put his coat on, and opened a dark corridor.

Number XIII's room in the Castle That Never Was was dark and silent. Axel moved soundlessly to the bed and then stared down in surprise. Roxas and Xion were both sleeping in it. He wondered for a second if they'd discovered hormones while he'd been away, but then noticed something that made this theory unlikely. "Why are you both still in your uniforms...?" Was it possible that it had never occurred to them to wear comfortable clothes to bed? "Geez, guys."

Axel carefully removed Roxas's boots and then his coat. The boy stirred a little, but was a heavy sleeper and didn't awaken. Axel tugged up the blanket to cover Roxas better, then moved to the other side of the bed to start on Xion.

"Mmm...Axel?" she murmured.

Oops. "Hi, Xi."
"You're back...."

"No, I'm just visiting," he said, whispering so as to not disturb Roxas. "Give me your foot."

"Hmm...?"

"Why aren't you in your own bed?" He asked as he worked her boot off.

"Because...sometimes I don't like what I dream," she explained sleepily, "but I always feel better when I'm with Roxas."

"Huh." He set the boot down after it was off her leg, then reached for the other one. "Nobodies don't usually dream, you know...I didn't even think they could until a few months ago. 'When I first met you two, and started remembering what it was like to be human, and how awful and not-human I've been acting for a really long time.'"

"Oh...."

"Don't worry about it, Xi."

"I don't like the nightmares, but...the nicer dreams are okay?"

"Of course." It felt awkward to unzip her coat, especially while she was awake and talking to him. She seemed totally okay with it, too, shifting so as to make it easier for him to pull the garment off her shoulders and free of her arms. It occurred to him that she probably didn't even know there might be any reason to object to being undressed by another person. "Hey. Xion." He lightly folded the coat and dropped it down beside her boots. "It's okay this time because of course I wouldn't hurt you, but you shouldn't ever let anyone take your clothes off for you, okay?" 'Not 'til you're much much older and know exactly what they want and are happy to give it to them....'

"Why?" she murmured in confusion.
"Because...it's...dangerous." He could practically hear Isa's icily scathing comments in his head. 'Shut up, Isa, you know I'm not like that!' "Just keep your clothes on, okay?"

"But it feels nice," she said, stretching out luxuriously in the pants and tank top she'd been wearing underneath. "I didn't know I could take off my coat when I go to bed."

'I knew it,' he thought, both exasperated and amused. "You know what would feel nicer, is real pajamas. Or a nightgown, if you like that kind of thing better. Go buy some after work tomorrow, okay?"

"What is pajamas?"

Axel facepalmed. "Just walk into any clothing store and ask where they keep their sleepwear, okay?"

"Okay." She reached out and grasped his sleeve. "Axel?"

"Hm?"

"Can you tell me a story before you leave?"

'...Telling bedtime stories to kids. I really am a mom. How pathetic. I should refuse and save what little dignity I have left.' "Sure," he found himself saying instead. He knelt down on the floor beside the bed so that their faces were more level, and they could hear each other's whispers easily. "You have anything in particular in mind?"

"Mmm...no...."

"Okay. Well, once upon a time, there was a little girl with black hair and blue eyes. She was all alone, but she didn't know she was lonely because she loved the sea so much. Every day she would go to the beach, and she made friends with the seagulls and the dolphins and the...sunbeams. And stuff. Then, one day, when she went to the beach, there was someone else there. It was a boy."
She squeezed his hand in excitement. "Was it Roxas?"

"...The boy had spiky brownish blonde hair and blue eyes just like hers."

"It is Roxas! Right? And the girl is me?"

"So Xion said to Roxas, 'Hi!' and Roxas said, 'Hi. I found a seashell.' They found a lot of seashells that day, purple ones and yellow ones and white ones, all sorts of shapes and colors, and by the end of the day, they were best friends and Xion didn't have to be alone anymore."

"I like...this story..." Xion murmured, already half-asleep.

"When the sun set, Roxas and Xion had to go home, but they promised to meet again the next day...."

When Xion was silent and breathing peacefully, Axel got to his feet and leaned down to kiss her hair, then moved to the other side of the bed and affectionately patted Roxas's shoulder. "I really miss you guys. Sometimes you make me feel...like I have a...."

His chest seemed to ache. Axel shook his head and turned away, going out into the hall to open a dark corridor. 'Back to work. Come on, Axel, game face. No more being a mom for a while, you've got a Keyblade wielder you need to terrorize.'

Axel sighed heavily as he left the World That Never Was and wondered for the first time if maybe it was even worth it to try to get their hearts back. 'I almost feel like...if I didn't have to live in these dead, frozen worlds and jump to Xem's orders like a puppet on strings, that maybe...maybe these kids and I could get along just fine, even without hearts....'

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I got this idea when I wrote This Kind of Love: Axel & Naminé and realized that Axel should have gone to visit RokuShi while he was at the Castle That Never Was. XD This was meant to be just a tiny mini-drabble to fix that mistake, but ended up being a whole story on its own. ^^; I couldn't really let Sora or Roxas be awake, since it wouldn't fit with canon, but I think there was enough room for Xion to see Axel. Since...in canon, they don't even know each other until he gets back from C.O. *facepalm*
Complete: 3/100
It reached a point where even Saïx couldn't drag himself out of bed until after all the other members had left. When he finally did hurry into the Grey Area (teeth unbrushed, stomach empty, and hair a wreck from neglect rather than design...), all he found were his and Axel's mission briefs lying on one of the coffee tables. Vexen had already departed. Saïx started his mission so late that it was the middle of the night before he could RTC.

Axel simply slept the entire day and never got around to even attempting his mission. "Haven't you guys ever heard of weekends?" he protested later when he was being reprimanded. "Seriously, we never catch a break!"

"You're here to accomplish a goal," Xaldin said severely, "and if you're going to fail and make excuses, we have no use for you. Useless elements aren't worth keeping around."

"He's just tired," Saïx intervened quickly. "I know we can't feel emotion, but our bodies do grow weary from working so hard day in and day out with so little chance to rest."

"Looks like we have two useless bodies with no reason to keep breathing," Xaldin rumbled, summoning his lances.

"If I may contribute my input...?"

There was a pause as everyone in the Round Room redirected their attention to little Zexion. "What is it, Number VI?" Xemnas inquired.
The boy looked calm, though he briefly closed his eyes and then opened them again before continuing. "I have actually done some research on this subject in the past. My findings were interesting.... A significant amount of evidence seems to suggest that workers of any kind are far more productive when allowed regular periods of rest and relaxation." He hesitated a moment. "When they are permitted short 'vacations,' as they are called."

There was a long silence. Axel and Saïx held their breaths.

"Show me this research of yours in the next few days," Xemnas finally said. "If I deem it credible and convincing enough, I shall consider the possibility of regular rest periods."

And so, two weeks later, Organization XIII experienced its first ever vacation day, and Axel and Saïx showed their gratitude by never teasing, pranking, or otherwise harassing their younger colleague again. Mostly.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: This is an old fic again, which I kept in reserve for a busy day like today was. I'm too tired to draft anything new tonight.... I woke up at 5:30 a.m. so I could get to work on time, then after lunch I drove home and had just enough time to change clothes before I had to head out to my other job, which I left at 6:00 p.m. XD And I still have to shower and eat and get ready for work again tomorrow.... *lazy orz* (Ftr, I LOVE working at the library. Love it. X3 I'm just really busy~)

By the way, in case anyone cares about making it easier on the people who work in your libraries - if you take anything off the shelf, don't try to re-shelve it, okay? Just leave it lying flat at the end of the shelf or something. It's a lot easier for us to collect/process/sort/re-shelve stuff that's obviously out of place than it is for us to try hunting down stuff that's shelved wrong; and shelving rules can be a lot more complicated than you might think (depending on the category). ^^;

Complete: 67/101
My Heart Can't Break As Long As I'm With You: Valentine's Day 2014 {Lea & Isa}

(rough draft)

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

Valentine's Day, 14 February 2014

Summary: Lea & Isa make Valentine's Day chocolate.

A/N: I can't quite decide if this is pre-canon or just a random AU. ^^; In any case, Lea & Isa are about 12-14 years old.

I'm kind of mixing American and Japanese Valentine's traditions here. XD Sorry~

0.0.0

They used Isa's kitchen, because his father was gone as usual and his mother would have just the right amount of presence without getting annoying. There were also no obnoxious younger siblings around to tease them or get underfoot, the way there would have been at Lea's house.

"Then why don't they just write out 'teaspoon'?" Lea complained. "Why do they have to abbreviate everything?"

"I don't understand why this is even an issue," Isa said. "Haven't you ever cooked before?"

"Of course not! I'm a guy!"

"Being male doesn't mean you're obligated to be completely ignorant of culinary arts. There are places where cooks are expected to be men."
"What does that have to do with teaspoons?"

"It doesn't, I-- For heaven's sake, stop arguing and just pour the sugar!"

Mrs. Tsukino stepped up to them, carrying a box. "I found the cookie cutters. Will these do?"

Isa peered into the box. "I suppose so."

"Perfect!" Lea declared, scooping the box out of Mrs. Tsukino's arms and dumping it on the counter.

"Watch it, Lea! You nearly knocked the milk over!"

"Well, I didn't, so it's fine."

"How can you survive being so careless all the time?" Isa wondered in exasperation.

"Hearts!" Lea proclaimed, lifting two heart-shaped cookie-cutters out of the box and holding them aloft in triumph. "Score!"

Once all the ingredients were combined in a bowl, Isa volunteered to mix them, since he claimed that he couldn't trust Lea to lose control of the electronic mixer and splatter the entire kitchen with chocolate. Lea's task was to smear cooking oil on the cake pans so that the batter wouldn't stick to the metal as it baked.

"Lea, don't write things in the cooking oil."

"Why not? It's not like the cake's gonna care, and no one else will see it."

"I don't think that girl you're after will appreciate the gift as much if she knew you'd written _C cups rock!_ under it."
"Which is why you won't tell her, yeah?" Lea grinned and put the cake pan back down on the counter as Isa rolled his eyes. "Speaking of which, who are you giving yours to?"

"What?"

"Hello, you're making Valentine's chocolate. You got your eye on someone~?"

Isa frowned. "Of course not. I'm only doing this to help you out."

"Oh, come on, Isa! There's no one you like?"

"You are pretty much the only person at school I can tolerate."

Lea looked surprised, then smiled. "Huh. You really do hate people."

"I wouldn't hate them so much if they weren't so stupid...."

When the cakes were ready, they decorated them. Lea's ended up being such a disaster that he switched it with Isa's. "Man, it's no fair that you can decorate a stupid cake better than me!"

"You were squeezing the icing tube too hard, and going too fast."

"Baking is for sissies, anyway! Come on, let's go play basketball."

Isa rolled his eyes and followed Lea out the door.

At school the next day, Lea saw his crush in two classes, but chickened out on giving her the Valentine both times. At lunch, he had no appetite, and when Isa was unsuccessful in coaxing him to take even a few bites, he lost his patience.
"That does it. Isis is sitting three tables away; you are going over there *now* to give her this Valentine."

"What?! Isa, are you nuts?!"

"Why would you accuse me of being crazy when you *baked the Valentine specifically for her*?"

"Yeah, but I just-- I just wanna wait 'til a better time, when she's not, you know, surrounded by...everyone...."

"Either you do it now, or *I'll* do it."

Lea gave him a startled look. "Huh?"

Isa snatched up his friend's Valentine box before Lea could stop him.

"Isa!"

"You have five seconds."

"Isa! Give it *back*!"

"...four, three...."

Lea tried to lunge over the table to grab it, but only succeeded in knocking his carton of milk over into Isa's lunch tray.

"...two, and now you owe me a replacement meal; one...."

"Isa!"
Isa stood up, holding the Valentine safely out of reach.

"Isaaaaa, wait wait wait, I'll do it but please at least just go with me!"

Isa paused.

"I'll do it, give me the freaking box, just...can you come with me? And don't say I'm pathetic, because I know."

"I wasn't going to say you're pathetic."

"Thanks," Lea mumbled. He took a deep breath, accepted the box back when Isa handed it to him, then walked stiffly over to where Isis was sitting with her friends.

o.o.o.o.o

After school, Isa bought the ice cream, about four times more of it than usual. He did not say anything until Lea's rage had faded to depression. Then he said, "For what it's worth, I'm pretty sure there are many girls in this school who like you. You were just unfortunate enough to pick one who...apparently...has different tastes."

"Yeah," Lea said savagely, "for cold-hearted jerks who can bake. This is so not friggin' faaaaaiiiirrr!"

"If it makes you feel any better," Isa grumbled, "I have absolutely no interest in her."

"That just makes it worse! She wants you, not me, but you don't want her, so it's like all I want is the trash you leave behind and I'm not even good enough for that...."

"Don't be ridiculous. Here." Isa handed over another ice cream bar.
Lea ripped off the packaging in a bitter way. "Great, and now I owe you for all this ice cream, too," he snarled, biting into it.

"...This is all on me," Isa said quietly.

"Why, because you feel bad for me? I don't want your pity!"

"It's not pity! I just...don't know what else to do."

Lea eyed him sulkily.

"I could care less what that girl, what any girl, what anyone thinks of me. But you...I don't like seeing you upset. I'd make her fall in love with you if I could, but I can't, all I can do is buy ice cream, and it...makes me feel useless." Isa glared off into the sunset and took a bite of his own ice cream.

Lea looked at him for a minute. Then he scooted a little closer, wrapped his arms around his knees, and rested his chin on them. "Both of us are useless, huh," he said dolefully.

"Valentine's Day is a stupid holiday, anyway," Isa muttered.

"Yeah. Yeah. Valentine's Day is stupid!" Lea declared, getting louder with each word. "Who needs love! I've got ice cream and a sunset and a super best friend, so screw everything else." He paused, then laughed. "Heh, 'screw' everything else...."

Isa rolled his eyes. "Very mature."

"We're in junior high, we're supposed to be immature." Lea grinned. "So, hey, if all this is your treat, then that means I don't owe you for lunch anymore, right?"

"Don't push your luck just because I expressed a moment of sympathy...."
Author's Notes: This was an idea I'd had a year or two ago for my original "Warmth to my Heart" plan. (The WtmH project has changed several times, and I'm back to starting from scratch. *sweatdrop*) Then I wanted to write it for Valentine's Day 2013, but failed. I FINALLY managed to get it done for Valentine's Day 2014 instead. 8)

It was also...a lot shorter and more depressing than I expected ._. I don't know if it was always that way or I simply forgot the 'plot' and failed to write it down, but in any case, I had to make up a bunch of stuff just to pad out the plunny enough for it to pass as a story. ^^; I think Isa was also supposed to have a crush, too, or at least someone he was making the chocolate for, but when I finally started writing the actual draft, he refused to crush on anyone. ^^;

All this time, I've been lazy and used cake for my Valentine's stories, because I already know how to make cake. But I finally looked it up and found that you can make chocolate candy, too, and I think that's actually more common. XD But I'd already finished the draft for this story by the time I looked it up, so whatever. Next time. *shrug*

In case you don't know, "C cup" is a bra size. "A" is the smallest, I think "C" is about average (though pretty big for an adolescent), "D" is bigger, etc.

I had a really hard time with the title again.... I like the one I eventually came up with, but I feel like it's kind of wasted on this fic, so I might reuse it in the future (hence why I put a subtitle on this one, to distinguish it). It's one of the reasons I love AkuSai so much, the idea that Isa/Saïx's friendship with Lea/Axel is by far the most important relationship in his life, and that Lea/Axel's bond with Roxas & Xion is the only thing comparable to it on his own side (and, happily, there's no conflict of interest the way I write it X3). Girlfriends might come and go, but Lea & Isa's friendship with each other runs deeper than all that and will never be broken. It expresses the "I don't understand why romance is hyped up to be so fantastic when it can NEVER COMPARE to the beauty that is this" mentality that I have as an aro ace. ^^;
Beautiful Disasters: Appointment (bonus theme 16) {Riku}

Beautiful Disasters
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl

**Summary:** Riku Crescent might be a disgustingly rich, devastatingly beautiful, and conveniently superhuman Keyblade wielder - but having to grow up with demanding, cold-hearted parents and three wild, ruthless older brothers pretty much evens things out. Written for the 12_fics community on LiveJournal; focused on Riku and his family; might include AUs.

**Introduction:** Back when I still thought it was feasible to collect all my stories about certain characters/pairings/etc. into individual series, I had my heart set on calling the Riku-and-his-family one *Beautiful Disasters*. (Because I love their hair, but all of them except Riku are crazy. XD) However, I hadn't finished any actual fics for them before realizing that I needed to reorganize the way I post stories, grouping them by universe rather than character focus. This meant that my only option, if I wanted to keep the *Beautiful Disasters* title, was to take on a challenge specifically for Riku and his family. However, I didn't want to get locked into writing too many stories for them (100 themes is soooooo many! I didn't realize how many!!! DX), so I yanked the 12_fics challenge away from Xigbar & Demyx (who'd abandoned it anyway X'D) and gave it to the Crescents instead.

The challenge is technically for twelve fanworks (all of which I've already come up with plot bunnies for, btw), but I replaced some of the themes in my set with bonus themes instead, so the numbering might seem strange.

**Appointment (bonus theme 16) [rough draft]**

**Summary:** Riku dutifully attends a meeting.

A/N: Riku is about six or seven years old here.

o.o.o

Mother refused to come, and Father wasn't even home. Riku was full of dread when he finally set off alone, trudging to his school where he knew he was probably going to get into huge trouble except that he didn't know what he had done wrong.
It seemed weird, all empty and quiet. 'So this is what schools look like when all the kids are gone.' Riku went to the principal's office and climbed into a chair to wait, trying not to cry.

"Er...Riku?" the principal's secretary said in confusion.

"Yes, ma'am?" he said in a low voice.

"Um...your parents have an appointment to meet with Ms. Calloway, don't they?"

"Yes."

"Well...sweetie, where are your parents?"

He tried to tell her they weren't coming, but he couldn't talk anymore.

The secretary finally got up and went into the principal's office to tell her something, and they both came out together. "Riku?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Honey, this was supposed to be a meeting with just me and your parents. You actually could have stayed home."

'\textit{Then no one would have come.}'

"Did you tell your parents that they needed to meet with me today?"

'\textit{Of course I did!}' Why did she sound like she thought he hadn't told them?! "I gave them the paper. 'Mother wouldn't even look at it. Father said it wasn't worth his time.'"
"...Are they running late? Will they come a little later?"

"No."

The principal gave a long, frustrated sigh. "What's the point of meeting with parents to discuss their constant absence if they're going to be absent from the meeting, too...."

"Riku," the secretary suddenly said, "you do have parents, don't you?" The principal gave her an alarmed look.

"Y-Yes."

"He couldn't have enrolled if he had no legal guardians. Riku? How come your parents never walk you to school or answer phone calls? Where are they?"

"Father is at work. In another world. Mother works, too, but she stays here. They say I'm supposed to handle school on my own." He drew a shaky breath. "Don't I do good? What did I do wrong? I thought I did everything right, but.... I though...I did everything right." He'd thought he was better than the other kids, actually, but now he was the one in trouble and they weren't.

"Oh, Riku, you're not in trouble at all! We're just worried about you. We think your parents should be more involved in your life. When you're at home, do they...take care of you? Do they feed you?"

"We take turns. Except sometimes Kadaj or Loz make me do their turns for them." He smiled, just a little. "I can cook better than them."

Both women looked worried as they moved aside and talked to each other in whispers. Riku waited, starting to feel a little better. Maybe he wasn't in trouble after all - maybe it was his family who was in trouble, not him. Serve them right.

"Riku, we're going to call someone and have you talk to them, okay? We want to make sure that your family is taking care of you."
People kept coming to the house for a while, asking a lot of questions, but Mother soon got tired of them and started keeping them out. Father kept out whoever she missed. Riku's life didn't really change, but he did wonder if maybe the way his parents raised him wasn't normal, or good.

"Stop thinking like a human. We have no reason to adhere to their societal expectations."

"But what if I want to?"

"Don't waste our time."

"...Then can you help me with my book report?"

"No."

"I can do it on my own, but it will be better if you help me. You want me to be the best and make the highest grade, right? Because I'm better than all the humans? So make sure I don't mess up and shame you."

His father sighed. "Show me the assignment, then."

Riku smiled in relief when he went to get it.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Sorry it's not that good. I needed something short enough to draft in one sitting... I do now have a small stockpile of ready-to-go drafts, though. (All crossovers. XD) If I can get some typing in tonight and progress on a contest prize and stop procrastinating on my novel, I'll be quite pleased with myself.

Complete: 1/12
Riku was too curious now. He crossed the kitchen to look over Sora's shoulder at the notepad he was hunched over. Sora turned out to be scribbling an image of a small, spiky-haired person in a black coat holding another small black-coated person who appeared to be dissolving. "Why've you been drawing so much lately?" Riku finally asked. "I don't remember you ever being artistic."

"Memories," Sora mumbled. "So many...so many memories...I have to catch them all before I lose them...."

Riku slowly began sorting through the drawings scattered over the rest of the table. There was a picture of a yellow-haired figure who was probably Naminé kneeling alone in a dark place; a picture of Kairi behind a set of bars like she was in a jail cell; Axel lying somewhere, dissolving into darkness; a small black-haired figure fighting someone who was probably Roxas; a figure who looked like Riku in his dark suit (the replica, perhaps?) lying like a broken doll....

"Do you think," Riku said softly, "that if you collect enough painful memories, you can make things better somehow?"

"I have to save them," Sora said desperately. "I have to save them. I don't even know who most of them are, but they need me and I have to save them before it's too late...."

After a while, when memories of his own started to fill Riku's mind, he found another notebook, sat down next to his friend, and started drawing, too.
Author's Notes: I finally got around to typing this! (And LOL, it's actually less than 300 words! XD) I actually wrote a much longer Zemyx story for this theme (seven pages as opposed to two), but since it heavily involved Demyx being possessed by Xehanort, I didn't feel comfortable posting it. :/ Which is too bad, since I actually really like how it turned out. But I guess I'll err on the side of caution and keep it private, so I had to write a different story instead, and it ended up being a super-short SoRiku drabble. ^^;

Man, I'd had a little stockpile of fics saved up, and I'd hoped to do a lot of typing while I had the chance, but I failed. Now I'm back to having nothing ready to post ahead of time. -.- I think that, unless I can stockpile stuff again, I might quit at either 30 days or 30 fics (I haven't been posting on Sundays), because I can't keep up this pace and still have a life. :/

Btw, the most recent two (pretty short) installments of Unlost are about Xion & Enishi (who's pretty much the Vanitas of Rurouni Kenshin), so check them out if you don't mind crossovers. XD

Complete: 12/100
Luna Diviner, Across Boundaries: Speechless (theme 17) [postable edition] {Isa, Lea, Xion, & Roxas}

Introduction: I actually haven't finished or posted any installments of my "Wishing-Fire's 100 theme challenge" series yet (except for Stepsiblings: Luna Diviner, 100 Moments - Smile, where Xem attends an awards ceremony for Saix's students, including Miranda). But I've made very good progress on it and am roughly 75% done, so I figure it'll get finished eventually. Besides, I'm getting desperate to keep up the post-a-fic-every-day momentum for at least a little longer, and I had this idea that seemed to fit best in this series, so it's getting posted early. X'D

Oh, and the first 100 theme challenge series is all Stepsibs-Saix, but this second one will be Saîx from any universe.

Speechless (theme 17) [postable edition] {rough draft}

Summary: Lea finally finds out why Saîx made no response back then. Post-canon.

o.o.o

Lea looked like he was dying. A complete overreaction in my opinion, since Roxas and Xion seemed only a little dismayed at the discovery, but Lea was acting as if they hated his guts.

"But it was you who killed them?" Xion said unhappily. "It wasn't...someone else?"

"Who exactly did you have in mind?" I said dryly. She already knew Sora's role in the deaths of half the Organization; was she thinking of him, or someone else?
"What did they do, anyway?" Roxas wondered. "Zexion's always been kind of nice.... Why would you kill him? Or even Vexen. He was supposed to be on our side."

Lea finally uncurled. "HAH! So glad you asked, Roxas, because it was actually THAT GUY SITTING NEXT TO YOU who told me to do it!"

Now Roxas and Xion were staring at me with wide eyes.

"I told you no such thing, Lea Hayes."

"Wha--! WHAT?!"

Roxas's and Xion's betrayed expressions, I could care less about; but Lea's seemed to cut my heart. "I told you to eliminate the traitors," I clarified. "Vexen and Zexion were not traitors. You weren't supposed to eliminate them."

"Since WHEN?! Wasn't it your idea to knock out everyone between you and the head honcho?! We agreed to--!"

"That was Isa's idea." Then, when they all gave me confused looks ("I thought you are 'Isa' now," Roxas said), I felt uncomfortable and tried to clarify. "When Isa and Lea were working as partners, that was our agreement. We wanted Isa to become the Organization's second-in-command for our own purposes, since we cared nothing about the Organization itself at that time."

"How come Isa is talking about himself in third person?" Lea asked warily.

"Because by the time Axel did become powerful enough to eliminate those in the way without drawing undue suspicion to himself, Saïx was the one making the plans. No longer Isa."

Roxas and Xion looked confused, but horrified comprehension was starting to dawn on Lea's face.

"He wanted as many vessels as possible to be available," I said softly. "Yet you unnecessarily destroyed two of them. When he found out what you'd done-- When he found out that you had done it for me...he was so angry." I didn't want to remember that.
"Th.... Wait, what...?!"

"I didn't exactly thank and praise you when you told me you'd eliminated more than just the traitors." What little had been left of me was touched to see that Axel, despite everything, had still remembered our old promise. It was Saïx - Xehanort - who had been silent, too outraged to even speak.

He had left the room without a word so he could concentrate on demanding an explanation from me and then punishing me. Yet what happened afterward was worse...when he encouraged Axel's friendship with the young newcomers, until Axel gradually lost faith in me and then gave up on me. That had hurt worse than anything Xehanort could ever do to me.

No longer, though. Lea eventually came back, and this time he hadn't given up on me, and the reason I'm sitting here alive and well is entirely thanks to him. ...I suppose Sora as well, but it was mostly Lea.

"You are kidding me," Lea said in amazement. "You mean you were so speechless back then because Baldinort was mad at me?"

"I will thank and praise you now, though. Even and Ienzo ultimately came to no harm - quite the opposite, in fact - and your loyalty to our friendship did not go unappreciated. Thank you, Lea."

"It seems wrong to thank someone for killing people," Xion grumbled.

"I'm sorry, Isa," Lea said.

"It's fine. You couldn't have known."

"I should've figured that something was up when my best friend started turning into someone else!"

"I told you, it's fine."
"Baldinort better be glad he's already dead, otherwise I'd go kill him...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I always thought it was weird that when Axel told Saïx that he'd killed Zexion, Saïx had NO REACTION, he didn't say a word.

It occurred to me the other day that what if...what if Saïx actually hadn't wanted the non-traitor C.O. team members dead? As in, what if that had been Isa & Lea's plan at one point, but over time, the Xehanort in Saïx had wanted to preserve as many vessels as possible? Maybe he was actually angry with Axel rather than pleased. o.O

Now, I don't think that's actually what Nomura intended in canon, but it's an interesting theory that I think there's enough room for. XD

My original idea had been to write the incident when it actually happened, but the whole Xehanort-possession thing would have made me too uncomfortable to post it. I decided to make a postable edition that takes place after Isa is free. It's still not great, but my conscience doesn't bother me as much that way. ;/

I might one day try a different take on the RokuShi-find-out-their-mommy-was-an-assassin idea, but I was more restricted in this particular story, because the main point of it was something different.

Complete: 1/100
Lumineuse: Ocean (theme 48) {Riku & Repliku}

Introduction: This is one of only three challenges I'm taking on that are just simple theme lists, without a unique goal or a specific character/pairing focus. I chose to do this one before deciding to save my energy for more mission-specific challenges (the second one was a shiny devART group, and the third one was created by an acquaintance of mine).

I'd originally intended to take on this challenge for platonic Larxene/Naminé because it struck me as an interesting subject to experiment with. (Most of the stories would've been AU, since I can't really picture Larxene & Naminé having a pleasant relationship in canon while Larxene's still a Nobody.) Later, I changed the subject to Larxene in general, but that was before I realized HOW FREAKING MANY 100 themes is ._. I can't really write one hundred stories for any specific character/pairing except my OTP/4, or a well-established universe like Stepsiblings. I'm starting to realize that my drive to write Kingdom Hearts fanfiction, not counting OTP/4 obsession, basically boils down to wanting to write at least one story for pretty much everyone and everything in Kingdom Hearts. My obsession with Pairing Days, challenges, etc. are symptoms of that. As long as I have at least one story, I can check the character/pairing/idea off my To Do List; I don't need to write freaking 100 stories just for one character or pairing that I'm only mildly interested in. -.- Stupid R.girl.

Anyway. I originally intended for this to be a Larxene/Naminé series, I later changed the focus of the series from Larxene/Naminé to just Larxene (I failed to have the first installment ready by 12/12/12 as I'd planned), then I eventually changed the focus again to simply anything in Kingdom Hearts (though I did use a title that references Larxene yet isn't exclusive to her). Other than Lumineuse, Creative Expression, and Escria's theme list, I don't plan on taking on a simple theme challenge again, since I now have way more than enough inspiration and challenges in progress. New challenges will have to have unique goals in order to catch my muse's attention. XD

Ocean (theme 48 ) [rough draft]

Summary: After the war, Riku's replica has trouble finding a place to belong on Destiny Islands.

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Xehanort was finally dead, and the multiverse was safe. The heroes of Light, the Keyblade
wielders and their friends and allies, celebrated for days, in many worlds.

Then the excitement died down, things began going back to normal, and it was time for everyone who'd saved the multiverse to return home. The problem was...not everyone had a home to go back to.

"...I don't know where I'm supposed to go." Dawn, Riku's replica, stood on Yen Sid's front lawn, gazing sulkily out at the warmly-lit abyss as he spoke.

Sora, Kairi, and Riku looked over at him. "Oh yeah," Sora remembered, "you were born in Castle Oblivion, right? But it's the Land of Departure now.... You don't like it there?"

Dawn shrugged.

"Did you want to come home with us?" Kairi offered.

Dawn glanced at her through his long silvery bangs.

"Oh yeah!" Sora exclaimed. "You're kind of like Riku's brother or something, so I guess Destiny Islands is like your home, right?"

"I can't exactly camp out here with Yen Sid forever," Dawn mumbled.

"Then come with us, Dawn! You're our friend, we'd love to have you come with us!"

Dawn looked, almost glared, at Riku, who forced himself to smile. "Yeah, Dawn. You're welcome to come."

"Hmph. Fine, then. I will."

On the Gummi ship, though, Riku spent the entire journey fruitlessly wracking his brains about how to avoid letting Dawn live in his house. 'Maybe Sora's mom'll let him live with them...or maybe he can get an apartment or something...except we're all broke now from defeating that
It wasn't that Riku didn't like Dawn. They had gotten along fairly well after becoming allies. If everything had been up to Riku, he would have been perfectly all right with having Dawn as a roommate.

The problem was with the five people Riku already shared his house with.

Riku and Dawn now stood before them, two nearly identical figures being scrutinized by five sets of glowing eyes. "...so we all thought he was dead, but it turns out he'd wandered through the Realm of Darkness until Xehanort helped him escape, but that meant he had to become a vessel for a while, but we freed him and he fought alongside us in the final battle, and now that Xehanort's been defeated, Dawn needs a place to live," Riku finished explaining.

There was a moment of silence.

Then Kadaj snickered. "'Dawn' is a girl's name."

"I'm SICK of people saying that!" Dawn yelled, and rushed at him, which was exactly what Kadaj had been expecting.

"No fighting in the house," Jenova bellowed, flinging both boys out the door to the backyard without bothering to open said door first.

Sephiroth stalked away wordlessly, which could have meant anything from, 'I firmly disapprove and am preparing punishment accordingly,' to, 'I don't care in the slightest; you know where to find me if anything of actual interest occurs.'

"I'm going back to my room," Yazoo said, and left also.

Loz grinned enthusiastically. "Now I have two little brothers to play with!"

Riku massaged his temples as if he had a headache.
Dawn didn't last a week in the Crescent household. He and Kadaj were constantly fighting, since Dawn lacked Riku's discernment and composure, and allowed himself to be riled up far too easily. Jenova had nothing but scorn and disdain for the replica, considering him even lower than her partially-human sons. Sephiroth seemed not to know quite what to make of the family's newest addition, and mostly ignored him. Yazoo, frustrated with Dawn's lack of wit, got more and more condescending in his comments. Loz seemed to find it endearing whenever Dawn lost his temper, and his games became increasingly challenging and provocative. During one of them, Dawn literally ran away, and never came back.

No one realized what had happened at first. They all simply thought that Dawn had gone off to cool down like usual. But then he didn't show up for supper, and when he was still gone the next morning, Kadaj and Loz threw tantrums over the loss of their newest toy, and Yazoo sulked.

"I'll go look for him," Riku sighed. He stopped by Sora's house first, figuring it'd be nice to have both assistance and enjoyable company during his search.

It turned out that Dawn had been at Sora's house all along. "Oh! Hey, Riku," Sora called, waving him over with a big smile. "Want some waffles?"

"No, I'm fine." Riku peered out the back sliding door. Sora and his parents were eating breakfast and watching the proceedings as if it was a movie. "Dawn's here?"

"Yup. He showed up yesterday all mad, but he wouldn't tell us what was wrong, so we just let him eat dinner with us and told him he could spend the night. He and Ven were already fighting when we all woke up this morning."

"They didn't get along great during the war, either...."

Outside, Ventus flung a fire spell at Dawn and shouted, "You're only saying that because you never had a heart to lose!"

"I DO have a heart, and I made it myself, unlike you who can just toss out pieces of it you don't like whenever you want--!"

Ventus's rage came hurtling at Dawn as a swarm of Unversed. "He DIDN'T throw me away I left ON MY OWN and then I came BACK, but you were the one WEAK enough to let Xehanort treat
"You like the soulless puppet you are...!"

"He's all 'Vanitas' now, isn't he," Sapphique murmured unhappily, seeing the way her son's eyes were now blazing gold.

"They set each other off," Riku grumbled. "Like a couple of children." He grabbed a muffin and sat down next to Sora. "So, you ever finish chapter 13 of the study guide yet?"

"Ugh, yeeess," Sora groaned. "I hate school...."

Ventus eventually stormed off to Dwarf Woodlands, and Dawn to whereabouts unknown. Riku and Sora picked up Kairi and hung out at their island for a few hours. When they got home, Ventus was helping his mother in the garden, Kadaj and Loz were squabbling over which video game to play, Yazoo was helping his mother research potential target sites, and Dawn was still gone. Riku didn't think much of it; he locked himself in his room, studied for a while, logged into a social network site, then went to bed.

Two days later, there was still no sign of Dawn. Kadaj seemed to have gotten over it and moved on. Loz was still upset, but easily distracted, which meant he wasn't too upset. Riku realized that he was the one most worried about his 'brother.' "So...you haven't seen him at all in the last couple of days, Sora?"

"No, not since he fought with Ven. Is he still missing?"

"Yeah...."

Riku looked through town, in restaurants and the arcade and back alleys and then simply everywhere, but no one had even seen Dawn - at least, they couldn't tell the difference between him and Riku. 'How?' Riku thought in irritation when it became apparent that the man he was talking to was simply recalling one of Riku's own excursions. 'Dawn's hair is, like, a foot longer than mine.'

He finally found someone who said they'd seen Riku at the beach at a time when Riku knew he'd been at Beast's Castle. Then he suddenly recalled the two or three stories he'd heard recently about people having stuff, mostly food, stolen from their belongings on the beach while they'd been swimming. 'Could it be...?'
Riku glided among sand dunes until he found what he was looking for. He alighted at the bottom of a comparatively deeper pit. "Hey."

Dawn, leaning against one of the sandy walls, eating a hot dog and potato chips, glared up at him. "What do you want?"

"Have you just been camping out here all this time?"

"Why should you care?" Dawn growled.

"Because you're stealing. You took that stuff from someone on the beach, didn't you?"

Dawn shifted uncomfortably. "They're not gonna miss it, they have so much...."

"Even if that's true, it doesn't make it right, Dawn."

"...."

Riku sat down beside his replica, close enough that Dawn's hair, stirring lightly in the breeze, brushed against his face.

"Dawn," Riku said, his tone softer now, "I also care because you're my brother. I've been worried about you."

"I can take care of myself."

"Do you sleep out here, too? Doesn't it get cold at night?"

"I just collect some driftwood and cast Fire on it...." Dawn sighed and shifted, slouching down so that he was able to rest his head on Riku's shoulder. They sat silently for a while.
"I won't ask you to come home," Riku finally murmured. "I don't even like it there. I kind of...envy you a little."

"Me?" Dawn scoffed. "You're the real one, the original, the one who's better at everything and wins everything...I'm the loser no one wants...."

Riku shook his head. "If you keep telling yourself things like that, you'll start to believe it, and if you believe it, you'll make it come true."

"So it's not true?" Dawn snarled, jerking upright again. "I haven't won a single fight on my own, Riku! I can't stay out of fights even with people on my own team, I--"

"If I've learned anything," Riku said harshly, "it's that darkness is always lurking, looking for weakness. There's no point in handing it access to your heart."

"What are you even talking about?"

Riku sighed. "Do you ever hear Sora complaining about being stupid or not a real Keyblade wielder, or Kairi complaining about being less skilled in combat or having so much depending on her? Do you ever hear them putting anyone down, including themselves?"

Dawn glared. "They're a Princess of Heart and Sora," as if Sora was his own species.

"Dawn, it's everyone. Ven's usually going on about something or other, and Terra's depressed half the time, but Aqua and Cinderella went through difficult times, too, and they still keep a positive attitude."

"Princess of Heart and a Keyblade Master."

"Argh, Dawn, I'm a Keyblade Master, and I still struggle with darkness sometimes.... Lea and Roxas and Xion, and Isa, for that matter; they're always...." No matter what examples Riku tried, Dawn had some petulant comeback, until Riku finally snapped, "It's not a coincidence, Dawn! All the 'happy sparkly people' have just as many problems as we do, but the difference is they don't dwell on darkness! They focus on light. They're always looking toward the light, so of course it's going to be light we see reflecting from them."
Dawn silently slid down again, lying on his back and staring up at the bright blue sky. "...I wanna be happy," Dawn finally said.

"...Me, too." After a minute, Riku stood up. Dawn stared at him, then scrambled to his feet, also. "Dawn. Don't steal, okay? I'll bring you whatever you need."

"I'll be fine," Dawn mumbled.

"Hey." Riku grasped his replica's arm until Dawn met his eyes. "You're my brother, Dawn. Like I said, I care about you. If you need anything, come to me, all right?"

Dawn was silent for a very long time. Just when Riku was about to give up and turn away, Dawn reached out for him, Riku uncertainly put an arm around him, and Dawn clutched him tightly. Riku smiled a little and hugged him properly, and they just stood like that for a while.

"I don't want to be alone," Dawn finally whispered, "but I hate being with other people."

"...You want me to come camp out with you for a while?"

"No."

"Do you want me to try to find someone you can stay with?"

"No." Dawn pulled away.

Riku studied Dawn, slouching there with his face sulkily hidden by his long hair. "Fine. Be some crazy homeless kid, but we'll come visit you. I'll bring Sora and Kairi and Naminé, but no one else without your permission. Sound good?"

"Do what you want," Dawn mumbled, his lips twitching in a brief, relieved smile.
It wasn't long before an urban legend began circulating around Destiny Islands about a mysterious figure on the beach. Some said it would only appear during the full moon, others said it was when the waves were rough and the gulls restless. Some claimed it was a mischievous spirit, others that it was a lost soul seeking something it would never find. It wandered the dunes, or was sometimes spotted in the moonlight far from shore.

Sapphique eventually heard the story and rolled her eyes, writing it off as either a calculated draw for tourists or a prank. Kadaj took his brothers along on a 'ghost hunt,' but all three triplets woke up on the beach the next morning with no memory of the previous eight hours. Riku and his friends heard the story, and simply kept quiet.

On a chilly evening not long afterward, a fire burned at the bottom of one of the deep sand pits. Several teenagers sat around it, eating roasted fish and chatting.

"Nice party, Dawn," Kairi laughed. "Thanks for inviting us over to your place."

"It's cold," Dawn mumbled apologetically.

"Good thing we all bundled up, then!"

"We should cuddle together for warmth," Sora said mischievously. He pushed so close to Kairi so suddenly that she was nearly knocked over, which made her screech and then laugh.

"The phrase is huddle together for warmth," Riku said dryly. Then he noticed Naminé looking at him, and he smiled a little. "But I'm fine with cuddling," he added gently. She smiled at him and scooted closer so he could put an arm around her.

"Dawn~" Kairi said, "there's room here between me and Riku~"

"No, thanks," Dawn said stiffly.

"My other side's cold," Riku snapped. "Get over here."

Dawn squeezed between them, looking relieved to be included.
"The stars are so pretty tonight," Kairi murmured, looking up at them.

"So many of them," Sora said happily, "and so bright. We did good work together - all of us, and our friends."

Naminé's fingers curled through Riku's. "We needed everyone," she said softly. "We almost didn't make it."

Riku saw what she meant. "Yeah. Everyone played an important role. We couldn't have won if we'd been missing even one person." After a pause, he dug his elbow into Dawn's ribs.

Dawn took a deep breath. "We were a team. I was glad...to fight alongside you all. My...." He closed his eyes briefly. "My friends."

"Now all we need is sea-salt ice cream."

"Ugh, Sora, even thinking about ice cream makes me colder...!"

It was a little while longer before Dawn finally settled in a home of his own, but most of his memories of living by the ocean weren't bad ones.

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Author's Notes: I had no inspiration at all to draft anything new for today, even though I tried (twenty-two challenges in progress, yet no inspiration *facepalm*). I ended up typing the rest of an already-completed story. ^^; And then I was almost too tired to post it even after I had finished typing it. XD

I decided I'll probably stop posting stuff every day once I hit 30 fics (two more to go). I could probably just keep going indefinitely, but this unhealthy pace has gotten ridiculous. *sweatdrop* I'm also mad at myself for wasting most of the day today, my precious Saturday.... OCD and addiction are really terrible.
"What are you going to do for Mother's Day?" Reda asked.

Roxas and Xion looked at her. "Huh?"

"You know. *Mother's Day* this Sunday?" Reda said. "Did you get a present for your mom yet? Or...well, you guys don't...have a mom, do you?"

"Axel's mom is our mom," Xion said cautiously. "And Isa's mom. And Roxas has another mom on Destiny Islands, sort of."

"Oh, really?" Geri said curiously.

"We have to get them presents?" Roxas wondered.

"Yeah - like when we first came here!" Xion remembered. "Kayla and Bel and Zeph gave presents to Mom, but Axel didn't have anything, and she hugged him and said it was a present that he came home again."

"Oh..."
"We should go buy presents," Xion realized. "Lots of them, for all the moms."

"But what about your real mom?" Peyton asked. "You guys are adopted, right? Who's your real mom?"

"We didn't have one," Roxas said uncomfortably. "That's why Axel adopted us, because we don't have parents."

"Peyton!" Geri exclaimed. "You can't just ask them that!"

"Why not? It's a simple question. It's not like it's a secret they're adopted."

"Are you guys brother and sister for real?" Reda asked.

"Huh?"

"I mean, we know you're adopted brother and sister, but are you a real brother and sister, too? Or did you come from different families?"

"I don't know," Roxas muttered.

"What do you mean you don't know?!"

"Brothers and sisters are people who have the same parents, right?" Xion said.

They all burst into laughter. "Duh," Peyton snorted, though Sally's tone was kind as she said, "Yes, that's right."

"They're so funny, they don't know anything...."
"We're learning," Roxas huffed.

"We told you, we don't have parents," Xion tried to explain. "But me and Roxas have always been together. Axel, too, pretty much. That's why he said we could come live with him after...uh, afterwards. Because we didn't have anywhere else to go."

"Awwwww," Geri cooed.

"Well, Sora said we could live with him," Roxas mused. "And that Eraqus guy. And Vexen wanted Xion. But Axel couldn't come to the Islands because Isa really wanted to go to school here, so...we went where Axel went."

Reda giggled. "IIIesa."

="What about him?" Xion asked.

="He's your other dad, right?"

="Sort of," Xion said, a little wistfully.

="We don't have a dad," Roxas said. "Axel only adopted us so we could go to school, and Isa only likes us because Axel does."

="Are they married?"

="Huh? No."

="But they're together, right?" Reda persisted.

="No," Geri objected, "Lea was my sister's boyfriend for a while."
"He likes girlfriends," Roxas said. "He's just bad at them, so we started betting on how long he can keep the new ones."

Laughter again. "Then he's bi or something, right? He and that other guy you live with are so together."

"All they do is fight," Xion grumbled.

"Some kind of together! So what's-his-name's fine with Lea or Axel or whatever his name is cheating on him all the time?"

"Maybe it's an open relationship...."

"But I haven't seen anyone dating what's-his-name."

"Let's talk about something that's not confusing," Roxas said, and wished they wouldn't laugh.

After school, Roxas and Xion went shopping together. They had no idea what to buy, so they asked a lady who worked there. She suggested lots of things, and Roxas and Xion put them into the shopping cart. "Okay...so this is for Mom, Kaasan, Sora's mom, your grandma...who else?"

"Everybody else lives with their mom," Xion said uncertainly. "But we just live with Axel and Isa. Should we buy them something, too?"

"Whatever." Roxas tossed a couple more items into the cart.

That Sunday, Lea and Isa were surprised to each be presented with a wrapped gift.

"What is this?"

"For Mother's Day!" Xion said eagerly.
Lea gave her a strange look. "Guys, you already gave Mom and Mrs. Tsukino their presents."

"I know, dummy. These are for you," Roxas said impatiently.

"For us?!"

"Neither of us are your mother," Isa growled.

"But we live with you," Xion protested, "and you guys take care of us, and...I dunno. You didn't even open it."

Isa sighed and pulled off the wrapping paper. "...Hm."

"We gave you the cookbook because you like to cook," Xion said eagerly.

Isa started paging through it. "The recipes seem decent enough, but I am displeased with the cover." He glared at the tile, *Mom's Essential Cookbook*, emblazoned in large cursive letters above the head of a voluptuous woman in full housewife attire.

"Do you like it, Axel?" Roxas asked.

Lea laughed helplessly as he held up the apron with the word 'MOM' and a large heart printed on the fabric. "It's very...pink."

"Yeah," Roxas said in satisfaction, apparently interpreting this as approval. "We thought you'd like the heart, because you have one now."

"Sometimes I think you kids do this stuff on purpose...."
Author's Notes: I used COMPLETELY RANDOM names for Roxas and Xion's nosy classmates...I literally opened my baby name book to completely random pages. Except Sally, who really is Xion's friend and was borrowed from Gundam Wing.

I might have messed up on Lea's surname, since I forgot that Lea's mom is a widow who remarried. I also decided to name his brother "Zeph," so I have to fix that mistake (and some others) in Beyond the War: Vacation Notice.

Man, I'm still trying to be sensitive in my writing, but in real life, I'm even more anti-yaoi than before. It's just that, like AkuShi a while ago, yaoi has been really bothering and upsetting me, so apparently the OCD's making me obsess over it until I can finally get it processed. *deletes trollbait rant XD*

[This A/N was written back when I first drafted the story months ago, when I seemed to be getting indirectly attacked a lot by yaoi fans. I guess I did manage to finish processing it, because I've calmed down by now.]

In actual recent news, I have one more fic left to post (that is, if I can get anything ready in time) before I'll try to stop posting every day. Also, I now hate devART almost as much as I hate FanfictionDotNet, and will be transferring most of my dA journal posts (including the fanfiction indexes and life/writing update) to LiveJournal. LiveJournal's not perfect, but in the ten years since I've been using it, it's never treated me particularly badly. (Though I've heard that a lot of other people have had various troubles with it. ^^-;) But FFN is run by control freaks, dA is a mess, my e-mail site made an overhaul that ruined the way I process correspondence, Angelfire's way more useless than it should be now because of the advertisement overload, YouTube has gotten control-freaky and invasive, Twitter started throwing unwanted stuff in my face that I can't get rid of, I don't even use Tumblr and I still hate that site.... What is with the Internet these days? -.-

I've been pretty pleased with AO3 so far, but I haven't been on that site long enough to make a final judgment yet. For now, it's my main fanfiction site, since MMO is dead and I hate FFN & dA so much. XD

Complete: 1/100
Beyond the War: BbF&ML, Day 21 - Cooking/baking

A Kingdom Hearts fanwork written by Raberba girl for Ericandy's 30 Day OTP Challenge

Summary: What's the point of receiving a Mother's Day gift if you're not gonna use it? Direct sequel to Beyond the War: Life Lessons - Mother.

A/N: Lol, if this drabble idea hadn't occurred to me, I don't think I would have been able to finish typing anything in time to post today.

"Yes, it's not expired!" Xion proclaimed in relieved triumph as she brought the cream cheese over to the counter.

"Perfect!" Lea cheered. "Okay, so Xi, I'll put you in charge of beating the sugar and vanilla into it, okay?"

"Hey," Roxas said suddenly, "we're cooking."

"Yes, Roxas," Lea said, patting his back, "we are cooking."

Roxas gave him a Hey,-you're-making-fun-of-me,-aren't-you frown. "You're supposed to wear aprons when you cook, right?"

A heartbeat later, Lea understood, and the light in his eyes died. "Uh...well, I mean, it's a suggested practice, but it's not like it's required or anything... We've cooked without aprons all the time, right?"

Isa, who could tell where the conversation was going, seemed to be intensely focused on taking the croissant dough out of its packaging.
"But you have an apron now," Roxas said. "Aren't you going to use it? This is what it's for."

Isa's hands went still during the long pause that followed.

"I'll get it for you," Xion offered obliviously, and went to fetch Lea's Mother's Day gift.

When she brought it to Lea, he looked it, then at Xion, then at Roxas.

"There's no point in having it if you're not gonna use it," Roxas said sulkily. "Isa's using his...."

"We're making the cheesecake from his book," Xion said happily, "so it's perfect!"

Lea took a deep breath. Then he placed his hands on Roxas's shoulders, looked him straight in the eyes, and said with the utmost gravity, "Roxas, Number XIII, Key of Destiny, I love you very, very, very much."

"Okay," Roxas said uncertainly.

With the air of a man stoically performing forced suicide, Lea lifted the bright pink apron from Xion's hands with delicate fingers, unfolded it, and placed the strap around his neck. Xion helpfully tied the strips around his waist.

"There," Roxas said, looking pleased. In a genuinely innocent way, which was the only reason Lea didn't immediately rip the thing back off.

Submitting to fate, Lea instead struck a pose and asked his partner brightly, "So, Isa! How do I look?"

Isa, who now had his arms crossed, lowered his head, but not before Lea caught a glimpse of his expression.
"You're laughing at me!"

"Ahem. It's a very practical garment," Isa said, his voice and expression perfectly composed when he raised his head again.

"Ohhh, we should have bought aprons for all of us, not just Axel," Xion said unhappily, "since all of us are cooking."

"No," Isa said quickly. "As Lea said earlier, it's completely unnecessary, I've cooked countless times without an apron."

"Oh," said Roxas. "Well, whatever. Here, I'll help you with the dough."

"So not fair, Isa," Lea said, "so, so, so - not - faaaaaiir...!"

"They're your children, not mine," Isa said primly.

Xion sighed. "Sometimes I think you guys have a secret Axel-and-Isa code, where you can understand each other even when you don't make sense...."

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Author's Notes: I know that a lot of people these days use the word "partner" as the equivalent of "in a romantic relationship," but I'm obviously using the broader meaning of "two people who work together in some capacity."

I've actually intended to draw a picture similar to this for a long time, but the drabble idea suddenly occurred to me yesterday, and stories, especially short ones, are WAY easier to make than pictures. XD I do still eventually want to draw it, though.

Random: For the first time in my life, I sat through the Academy Awards Ceremony from beginning to end. Since it was hard to focus on reading a book, I multi-tasked by drawing an AkuSaiRokuShi picture for this challenge instead~ (the "doing something together" prompt). I need references to fill in the details, but I did get all four poses sketched, yay. That's the hardest
part of drawing for me.

I'm so happy that "Let It Go" won an Oscar, that song truly deserved it. X3

Anyway, that is it! Starting on January 30th and ending today, March 4th, I posted at least one story/drabble/chapter/etc. on EVERY SINGLE DAY (not counting Sundays), for a total of 30 fanfics. I would actually love to continue, but hey, you several people who've been demanding yet more updates - I have a life, my dears, which (along with my physical health) has been getting very sadly neglected because of this experiment! You will understand one day when you, too have a job (more than one, in my case), bills to pay, doctors to visit, paperwork to process, etc. I obviously need to get back to that because it's more important than nursing my fanfiction hobby, and in regards to fanfiction itself, I need to focus on higher-priority projects like the Ansem/apprentices (mostly Ienzo X'D) story I ought to be working on for sonicdisney's contest prize, the Terra/Riku(/Sora) fic for Medli45's contest prize, the super super super super late Zexion/Namine fic (likely a multi-chapter) I wanted to gift Mirae-no-sekai with, the Aqua/Vanitas kiriban (also possibly a multi-chapter) for Taliax, and many others, not to mention all the incomplete WIPs that have been languishing (including Before Sora, Blood and Faction, and An Extraordinary Household - which, as you might recall, ended on a hideous cliffhanger several months ago :p). There are also a very great many other long stories that need more than just one day to sort out and craft (the next The Light In Their Eyes installment, for example, which has been giving me trouble; and until I get that one finished, it's difficult to write anything else in that universe). I can't work on those when I'm constantly distracted by a daily quota! So by taking a break, you will eventually get more fanfiction (in terms of word count and quality) than if I continued to desperately churn out drabbles just to keep my head above water, 'k? Maybe I'll even get a chance to read some other people's fanfiction and answer more e-mail now, too. XD

(I still can't believe that everyone I heard from actually liked getting daily updates for a month. o.O If it were me, I think I'd get overwhelmed by the author spamming my inbox like that....)

Complete: 11/30
"Hey, I got an idea! Why don't we split up? We'll probably find it sooner that way."

If it had been any other member making that suggestion, Xion would have taken it at face value without it even occurring to her to question it.

However, because the one making the suggestion was Demyx.... After about twenty-five missions with the man, Xion had started to sense that what he said and what he thought were not...always exactly in alignment.

"...I think maybe we should stick together," she finally said.

"Aw, but we've been wandering around looking for the target forever! We won't get home 'til midnight at this rate."

She would miss ice cream with Roxas and Axel. "...Okay, but...if I find the Heartless, how will you know to come help me?"
"Eh, these giant Heartless are usually pretty noisy. I'll hear the boss battle as soon as it starts!"

Xion really, really did not want to agree to Demyx's proposition, but she also didn't know how to disagree. "...Fine. But--"

"Awesome! See you later, Xi!"

Demyx waved merrily and set off at a brisk pace until he disappeared around a corner a few seconds later.

"...I think I just made a mistake." What else could she have done, though?

Xion sighed and resumed her search. She patiently moved from one end of Twilight Town toward the other, working her way down to the Sandlot. *If Demyx finds the Heartless first, then I'll hear it, right?*

"SCREEEEEEEEEECCHHHHH!!!!!!"

Never mind. Townspeople were screaming and running from the giant creature that had just emerged from a dark portal. "Demyx!" Xion shouted. "It's time to work!" Then she ran at the Heartless with her Keyblade raised high and shouted out an attack spell.

Xion eventually finished the battle. Alone. Teeth gritted, she went to go claim her prizes, then stormed off in search of Demyx. *When I find him, I'll...I'll....* Well, she wasn't sure what she would do. But Demyx had been bad (again), that much she was certain of.

The Melodious Nocturne turned out to be in an empty lot, cooing over a box. "Ooooh, you're a feisty one, aren't ya. Yes you are, yes you aaaaaare, CUTIE! Squeee!" He scooped up three tiny squirming creatures and snuggled his face against them.

"Demyx," Xion said. "I found the Heartless."

"Oh, hey, Xi," Demyx said vaguely.
"And I defeated it. The mission's over. I did it *all by myself*, and you didn't help me at all even though you're my partner."

"D'awwww," Demyx said, apparently to one of the things in his arms, "you want down? Okay, buddy, here ya go. Nuh uh, *you* are staying with me, sweetie; yeeeeeessss, yes you aaaaare, because you're so cuuuuuute, and I love you *sooooo much*!"

"Nobodies can't love," Xion said dubiously. That's what everyone always said, right? Even Axel.

"You are my Fluffy and I shall name you Fluffy. *Yes*, that's *right*, Fluffy-wuffy-puffy-poo! I wuv yoooouuuu!"

"What *are* those things?" Xion said in exasperation, coming closer. Demyx was always cheerful and sometimes silly, but never *this* incomprehensively ridiculous. Had the creatures cast a status effect on him or something? "Are they some kind of Heartless?"

"HEARTLESS??" Demyx yelped, hugging the thing protectively. "*These* balls of adorable? They're PUPPIES, Xion!"

"What are puppies?"

"They're--! What--?! Just--! Gah, come here!"

"But--"

Demyx pulled her down to join him on the pavement, yanked off her gloves, and pushed a 'puppy' into her bare hands before she could finish her startled protest.

"Whaaa...?!

"Aren't they the *best - thing - ever*?" Demyx said rapturously.
"It's so soft," Xion whispered.

Ten minutes later, Number XIV was snuggling an armful of puppies against her face, too, and cooing gibberish like, "Oooohhhh, you're so softie-woftie-moftiiiiieeee, oooohhhh, how can you stand being so oobie-goobie-woobie? I love them!"

"See?" Demyx said triumphantly.

"I'm a Nobody! But I loooooove them!"

"Everybody loves puppies! I bet even X-Face loves puppiiiiiieessss!"

"X-Fa--? You mean Saïx?!" Xion gasped, then burst into giggles. "We should bring some home...."

"Sneak them into his room...."

"I bet he'll smile...."

They looked at each other for a moment. Then they both burst into laughter. "No way," they agreed at the same time.

It wasn't until they finally started thinking of RTCing that Xion remembered to be mad at Demyx. "Hey! You abandoned me and made me do all the work while you played with these puppies!"

"Nuh uh!"

"Yes, you did! I fought and defeated that Heartless all by myself!"

"Aw...well, it just means that you're super-strong and X-Face will be proud of you," Demyx said with a smile.
"But I don't want Saïx to be proud of me! I mean, I actually kind of do, but... That's not the point! You-- You weren't-- Fair! You were not fair, Demyx!"

"I taught you what puppies are," he said persuasively.

"...."

"Puppiiiieeeees."

"...I'll ask Axel what he thinks," Xion decided.

The smile immediately dropped from Demyx's face. "No, don't."

"What?"

"Don't, um, tell Axel." He smiled again, though he looked nervous this time. "There's no need to tell him anything, right?"

Xion thought for a while. "...You don't want me to tell Axel that you made me do all the work."

"No, I--"

"Will he make you be fair if I tell him?" Axel was her friend. He always helped her when she couldn't help herself.

"No, wait, Xion, I-- Munny! I'll give you lots of munny, to make up for it. Or synthesis items, or...hey, whatever you want. Just name it, and you'll get it!"

"Hmm...how about five Challenge Sigils?" They were so difficult to earn, it'd be nice to get some for free.
"...Anything but that."

Xion frowned. "You said I could have whatever I want. I want Challenge Sigils."

"I meant, whatever you want that I *have*. I don't have Challenge Sigils!"

"Fine," she pouted. "Then I want a spell leveler."

"It's yours!" he said immediately, making a dramatic show of ripping one out of his panel grid and handing it over.

Well, this was kind of nice. "And a Range Tech. I want one of those, too."

"Whaaat?"

"Or I can tell Axel...."

"I'll give it to you as soon as we get home," he pouted.

Xion smiled. Maybe being teamed with Demyx wasn't so bad after all. "Thanks Demyx."

"Hmph. No problem."

The puppy in Xion's arms suddenly blinked awake and stretched out, biting curiously at one of her coat's drawstrings. "Sssh, sssh, Destiny, we're almost home," she cooed soothingly.

Demyx laughed. "I can't believe you're *actually* taking a puppy back to the castle...can't wait to see Sai's face when he finds out...."
Saïx was processing mission reports when Axel came striding into his room. "Have you forgotten how to knock before you enter someone else's territory?" Saïx said coldly.

"I am entering your territory," Axel announced cheekily.

"That's not--"

Axel reached the desk and set something down on top of it.

Saïx stared at the thing, which was alive, furry, and had four legs and a tail. ".........."

"His name is Destiny, and he's Xion's, but I'll let you borrow him for an hour or two," Axel said sweetly.

"...I hate you," Saïx whispered.

"Of course you don't hate me! You can't: you're a Nobody. Nobodies can't squee, either. Just FYI." Axel winked, then left the room again.

The puppy had wandered curiously over to the edge of the desk and was sniffing at Saïx's chest. Saïx stared at it for a while, then picked it up and held it in front of his face. It whimpered eagerly and wriggled, one of its paws catching in a lock of the Luna Diviner's shaggy hair.

"I'm not going to get any work done in the next hour or two, am I," Saïx said flatly.

"Yip!"

Saïx lowered his arms, bundling the puppy close. It struggled into a more comfortable position and gnawed happily at his sleeve.

"These are not...real feelings...they are simply memories of feelings...only memories...." Saïx
stroked his fingers through Destiny's fluffy soft fur. "Very, very strong memories...."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Okay, so we've established that binge-writing for extended periods of time is bad for me, but so is going for too long without writing anything. XD Writing has become so much a part of me by now that I NEED to write on a regular basis. Not every day; but if I go for, like, a week or two without drafting anything, I start feeling a NEED to write. XD

The problem is that, even though I've got a gazillion ideas and works in progress, they're such a mess that I sometimes have a hard time picking one and trying to progress on it when I'm under pressure (limited time, other obligations, etc.). :/ And for some reason, none of the loads of challenges I've started were helping, either. I literally went through every single page of prompts several times, trying and failing to get inspired.

So then I was just like "FORGET IT" and flat-out asked for requests. XD But people were shyyyyy, and I ended up getting some ideas while I waited - I brainstormed RikuNami ideas for Tali's FFN kiriban, since the AquVan idea I originally had for her looks like it'll take a long time to finish and probably won't even be suitable as a kiriban. (Plus, AquVan is difficult for me to write for some reason, even though I like them as a couple in other people's fanwork. XD I like AquVan, I just don't ship it. Vani's latched onto Xion, and Aqua/Axel is really working out for me now that I've finally figured out how to ship them.)

Anyway, yesterday I got an idea for a light fluffy RikuNami drabble that seemed writable, but then suddenly Riku & Naminé started throwing (marital) sex scenes at me, of all things...and then, as I was freaking TRYING TO GET READY FOR WORK, half the Kingdom Hearts cast started assaulting me with Beyond the War ideas that I was frantically scribbling down in-between trying to leave the house, and I was like, "GUYS, SHUT UP, WHY CAN'T YOU GIVE ME THIS STUFF WHEN I'M ACTUALLY ABLE TO WORK ON IT?!?" (And they were like, "Because you're always wasting time on the Internet and tuning us out whenever you have time to write us!" XD) When I came home from work, I started drafting the first RikuNami lime, since it seemed like the best place to start, but I didn't get to finish it before I had to go to bed. And I don't even know if I'll post it anyway, even when I do finish it. X'D (My main concern is that I have no business writing sex when I have no firsthand experience with [or desire for] it.... Granted, it's an extremely atypical 'sex scene,' but still.)

Then today at work I started drafting the light fluffy kiriban RikuNami idea, but it was on a scrap of paper and also unfinished, and I was like, "GAH, I NEED SOMETHING I CAN POST!" So then I went and finished watching Prom, which is a ridiculous movie but made me, yet again, want to write an epic totally ridiculous full-cast Kingdom Hearts romance drama / soap opera. As I was getting on the computer and trying to convince myself to NOT brainstorm for that, and try to finish one of the RikuNami fics instead - I found that someone had finally given me a list of drabble
ideas. XD (And someone else requested Thor/Loki~ Which I can't write yet, but maybe someday, I'm not sure.)

So here we are~! One of LadeedadaLa's suggestions was, "Xion has to deal with Demyx's laziness while on a mission." Lol, I drafted it in 49 minutes. XD (It took me 121 minutes to quick-edit and post.) I'm not sure yet whether to count this as an actual devART kiriban or not, since it's a special kiriban (7,878! 8D) that I want to be AkuSai, but...whatever; it's a new fic! Yay! XD

Now hopefully I can go back to trying to get some higher-priority work done. ^^; (Drabble suggestions are still welcome, though~ Especially AkuSai ones!)

Complete: 2/100
Lumineuse: Kiss (theme 83) {Riku & Namine}

Lumineuse, a Kingdom Hearts fanwork by Raberba girl, written for Reku14's 100 Words challenge

Kiss (theme 83) [rough draft]

Summary: Naminé thinks they should break up, but not for any of the usual reasons. Luckily, her boyfriend has the same 'problem' she does, which means there's actually no problem at all.

Riku/Naminé

A/N: I give up on trying to make Naminé IC. :/ I don't even know how to write IC Naminé (except by accident in a couple of random AUs??), so I'll stick with characterizing her the way she acts in my headcanon rather than the way she acts after CoM....

Lol, I am in suuuuuch a Riku and RikuNami mood. XD The more Riku's characterization develops in my headcanon, the more I like him and enjoy writing about him.

Oh, this fic is post-canon, btw.

O.o.o

Riku thought that Naminé seemed unusually pale and anxious when they met up after work. She practically jerked to her feet when she noticed him approaching the porch where she'd been waiting, then she kind of froze and stared at him like a frightened animal.

"You okay?" he asked as he hugged her. "You spilled some of your tea...."

"I'm, um, I'm all right, I...." She squeezed him hard for a second, then abruptly let go and stepped back, searching his face. "R...Riku?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I...." She drew in a deep, shaky breath and then let it out. "I...dreamed...that you broke up
He was genuinely taken aback. "What?"

"That didn't happen, right?" she asked in a rush. "I was thinking about it, and I think it was just a dream, but it felt so real in my memory that I wasn't sure...."

He kissed her cheek and hugged her again. "I've never even thought about breaking up with you. I love you."

She exhaled and finally seemed to relax, then gasped a little said belatedly, "I love you, too, Riku."

He smiled. "Good. Come on, I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise?"

He'd finally learned how to transform one of his spare Keychains into, not just an extra suit of armor, but one that would fit someone other than himself. Naminé, self-conscious in the armor after she'd put it on, stood in what she didn't realize was a cute pose and looked apprehensively at Riku. "Is this right?"

"Yeah, it worked perfectly," he said happily. "It looks good on you."

"It does...?" She lifted her hands and examined them uncertainly.

"Here, come sit behind me and put your arms around my waist." He activated his own armor, then waited until she was settled on the Keyblade Glider with him. "You ready?"

"Mm-hm."

For the first time, they were able to travel between worlds together in a way that was more exposed and more intimate than any Gummi ship ride. Naminé, breathless in awe at the vastness of the multiverse, huddled against Riku and marveled at how tiny she felt in this place, yet how strong
and safe Riku felt against her. "This is amazing...."

"I was wondering how you'd like it," he murmured.

"It's incredible. It's...scary, but...I kind of like it."

He chuckled. "I won't let anything happen to you, Naminé."

"I know." She smiled and touched the front of her helmet to his back. "I trust you, Riku."

Afterward, they sat at the top of Big Ben and gazed up at the stars, looking for Neverland. "I think it's that one. Those two stars look brighter than the others, but...."

"It's hard to tell, isn't it," Riku said, agreeing with her uncertain tone. "I think they change, depending on what Peter Pan's doing or thinking about."

They talked a little longer, then eventually lapsed into a comfortable silence. Naminé leaned against Riku, and he shifted in order to wrap his arms around her. They sat like that for a while. Then Riku leaned his head down and tilted her chin up so he could kiss her.

There was an unmagical meeting of lips, a hesitant parting, a brief touch of tongues and teeth. The moment held, tense and not quite pleasant. Then they drew apart, and were silent, and Naminé finally leaned her head back against his chest and Riku settled back against the cool brick wall.

It seemed like a very long time later when he finally thought of something to say. "We should probably get off the tower pretty soon, it's about to strike the hour...."

"Oh - it's loud, isn't it?"

"Heh, when you're sitting this close to the bells, yeah."

By the time they returned to the Islands, Riku was certain of it: Naminé did seem to be in low spirits. All her smiles and delight from the first journey was gone, and she hadn't said a word on the
"Thank you for taking me out there, Riku," she said quietly. "Good...good night." She stood on the tips of her toes to give him a very quick kiss, then turned away without actually making eye contact and started walking up the porch steps.

"Naminé, wait. Do you, um, want to have dinner with me?"

Her hesitation itself made him uneasy, and she took so long to decide that it confirmed his feeling that something was wrong. "I...I shouldn't, I--"

"Are you angry at me?"

"No! No, of course not."

"Was it...did I-- I don't have to kiss you, if you don't want me to."

"No, I--! I just...I'm sorry, Riku, I--"

"Please come eat with me. I'll cook whatever you want."

"No, no, please-- Just cook whatever you like, and I'll help, I--"

He suddenly hugged her, tightly, and after a startled pause, she hugged him back. "I love you, Naminé," he whispered.

She squeezed him tighter, but did not answer.

At his house a little later, things almost seemed to settle back to normal between them as they cooked. Naminé was happy as always to learn something new, and Riku quietly enjoyed her company and her innocence and her sweetness.
"So...this is...turmeric?" she guessed hesitantly after tasting the sauce.

"Yup."

"I'm right?!"

He chuckled. "Yeah, it's turmeric. See? You are getting better."

"I used to think all seasoning was 'pepper,'" she said sheepishly. He gave her a playful smile and dabbed a bit of sauce onto her nose. She laughed and leaned to wipe her nose clean on his shirt.

"Hey!"

Even though Naminé's light seemed to have come back, Riku unhappily watched her dim down again as they ate. Her responses grew slower and more absent-minded, and finally she failed to answer one of his questions altogether, she was so lost in thought. He watched her for a while, then reached over and touched a fingertip to her forehead. She gasped and stared at him, and he looked back at her gravely.

"Riku...."

"Please tell me what's wrong, Naminé."

"...."

He sighed. "Naminé, I'm your boyfriend. I hope you feel like you can trust me enough to talk to me about anything...I mean, I gave you The Talk, for crying out loud, it can't get anymore awkward than--"

"I think we should break up."

He stared at her. "What?"
Her eyes were brimming with tears now, which he wasn't quite sure how to interpret. Was she crying because she'd hated him all this time and was now finally able to stop pretending? Because she still liked him as a friend and hated hurting his feelings? Because she was so relieved to finally be free of him? Because the food sucked? "Riku...I don't...think...."

He carefully set down his fork. "Naminé...what am I doing wrong? All I want is to make you hap--"

"It's not you, it's me!" she burst out. "I, I've been worrying about it for a long time, and I thought it would get better but it's like it's gotten worse, and the more I think about the more I-I-- I'm scared. It scares me. But you're a good-- you're perfect, you're the best-- I really love-- You deserve better, Riku."

"...What?" Naminé had always been shy, but she'd never acted like one of those needy girls with such low self-esteem that they had to be constantly told how loved they were. "Naminé, I love you, I--"

"I know! And I love you, too, Riku, but I don't think it's going to work, I mean, eventually-- We can't-- Are we just going to stay like this forever?"

"Like...?"

"People get married, don't they?" she said desperately. "People don't just date forever, like this, eventually they...um, 'take it to the next level'...and I just...." She buried her face in her hands.

"...Naminé, I still don't even understand what the problem is here. You did say you love me, right?"

She started crying in earnest. He shifted into the chair next to her and held her until she could speak again. "I'm sorry, Riku...I'm so sorry...."

He took a deep breath and tried to ignore his own feelings. He'd probably understand better if he just focused on trying to puzzle out Naminé's. "Can you tell me what it is you're scared of, Naminé?"
He waited.

"I don't like being kissed," she finally whispered.

"You...." 'Wait, what? Has it...has it been mutual - all this time...?!' A thought suddenly occurred to him, and he let go and scooted his chair back, staring at her. "Do you not want me hugging you, either?"

The expression on her face was so adorably, heart-wrenchingly forlorn, he wanted to kneel at her feet and beg her to tell him what he could do to make her smile again.

"No...I l-like hugs, I just...." She covered her face with her hands again and continued in a muffled voice, "I don't like being kissed, I don't like...when I think of someday having to...have sex...I don't...." She raised her head again and looked at him desperately, "Even if we got married, I wouldn't want it, but with anyone, not just you, and I love you but how can I really love you when I never want you to touch me like that?! When the only, only times I ever don't like you are when you kiss me, but in the books and movies people like it, why?! Am I misunderstanding again?! Is just because there's something else you need to explain to me that I never learned, or is it because I used to be a Nobody, or...?! What's wrong with me, Riku?"

He suddenly wanted to cry, it was like whatever was in his heart was somehow in hers, too, except she'd said it with Naminé words instead of Riku words, and he loved her more than ever because, incredibly, they were exactly the same. "Naminé...you still love me, don't you? You only said you wanted to break up because you think, you think we can't work if we never have sex or something?"

"You deserve better," she whispered miserably. "A girl who can give you what you want."

'How do you know that's what I want?' "...You know...do you know one, just one of the many things I like about dating you, Naminé?"

She ducked her head as if cringing away from a blow.

"Because I can relax around you. I didn't feel like I could do that if I dated anyone else. I barely
ever have to force myself, and you never complained. You're kind of...shy...so I didn't feel pressured-- I mean, I wish you'd told me this sooner, I only ever kissed you because I thought you wanted-- I mean, I'm your boyfriend, I thought I had...obligations...but if I'd known you didn't like it, I--" 'Now I'm sounding like her,' he thought ruefully. "Don't break up with me, Naminé. You can stay a virgin forever, I'm happy with that."

Now it was her turn to stare at him in astonishment. "What?"

"I just...I mean, we're the same. You know? I have no idea what's supposed to be so great about sex, either; and if you're not interested, that's great, because neither am I."

Now she was looking at him dubiously. "You're just saying that because...?"

"Because it's true. I'm not 'just saying' it. If I had to choose between making out with you or going back to eating dinner with you, it's dinner, hands down. Honestly, I have no interest in kissing you or seeing you in a skimpy bikini and stuff like that." 'Please don't suddenly turn into a stereotypical girl and hit me.' He didn't think she would, but they'd never talked about this sort of thing in such a personal context before. "It's actually kind of a relief that you might not ever want me to kiss you again. I... Maybe that makes me a bad boyfriend but-- Naminé, I think we're the same. 'And it's amazing, and I love you.'"

She was still staring at him, but now she was leaning toward him rather than shrinking away.

"And I'm not gay, either, for the record. I just...." He reached out to take her hand, and was glad when her fingers curled warmly around his. "I like being your boyfriend, Naminé. I like things the way they are, and for all I care, they can stay that way forever."

"But...." She simply looked confused.

"I know it's...not normal. But if both of us are not normal, then it shouldn't be a problem, right? It doesn't matter what other people think of us, as long as we're happy."

After a moment, she shyly slipped into his lap, and he hugged her in relief. "We can do this forever?" she whispered. "We can be like...friends who date? Just friends, but...still dating? Forever?"
“Yeah. Of course. Whatever you want.” ‘Just don’t leave me.’ He kissed her cheek without thinking, then froze. "I-- I'm sorry, I didn't mean--"

“That's okay.” She kissed his own cheek. "Kisses like this are okay. Just not... I like nice kisses, but not icky ones."

He laughed. "Got it. Same here."

She sort of nuzzled him for a second, and he nuzzled her back, then she reached over to retrieve her fork and offered him a bite. He readily opened his mouth to eat it. "It's gotten cold, hasn't it...."

"S okay. Still tastes good."

"I'm going to go put them back on the stove."

"Okay."

"Sorry," she said as they got up to take their plates back over to the counter.

"For what?"

"Just...for everything...I'm sorry."

He took both her hands in his and kissed them softly. "I love you. Don't apologize."

She took a deep breath. "All right."

They shared a smile.
Author's Notes: My Riku has always always always been asexual (before I even knew that word XD), at least off-screen if not onscreen; and every time I tried to make Naminé sexually attracted to him, she turned OOC and things got gross and stupid. So I finally gave up and made Nami ace, too, and that fixed the problem beautifully. XD

Ever since I figured out that I apparently ship RikuNami as a mutually asexual couple, every plot bunny I've gotten for them (and I've been getting a lot, since I've been in a RikuNami mood lately...) ends up veering in that direction. I wish I'd been able to post those other fics first, but this newest idea is the first Ace RikuNami fic I was able to actually finish. *sweatdrop* I think my muse was determined to 'officially' establish that piece of headcanon before it let me write anything else for them, but now hopefully it'll let me play with RikuNami more casually again. (So maybe now I can get your kiriban done, Tali. XD Unless you have plunnies for something other than RikuNami that you'd rather see.)

Have you ever been going about your business, then suddenly realized that something that you totally thought had happened in real life was actually just something you'd dreamed? Or have you ever had to conclude that something you clearly remember was actually just something you'd dreamed, since it's completely impossible for it to have happened in real life? Because that kind of thing happens to me ALL THE TIME when I have uber-realistic dreams __. It's disconcerting.

Complete: 4/100
The Next Life: Lumineuse - Guilt (theme 54) {Ienzo & Ansem}

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl, written for Reku14's 100 Words challenge

This fanfic is a prize for A-Sign-of-Insanity (sonicdisney), whose story The First Step won first place in KHplatonicLove's "Freedom" contest on deviantART! ^^

Summary: Ienzo, now human again, unexpectedly faces the master he betrayed over a decade ago.

A/N: I am soooooooooooooooooo sorry this is so late...I am a mess. DX

Sorry to you guys who were expecting more little kid fluff, or a continuation of Rejection of Fate...this story really is technically in the NextLifeverse, even if it may not seem like it!

Dream Drop Distance doesn't make any sense, having five of the former Org members waking up all at the same time, a whole year after three of their Nobodies were destroyed. I'm not sure if I'll do this for all the other Next Life fics, but for this particular story, I changed the scenario so that they each wake up as humans soon after their Nobodies are killed, and the Nerd Herd are doing stuff during the rest of Days and KH2 without (almost?) anyone being aware of their restoration.

When Ansem & Ienzo are talking at the end of this fic, Xehanort still hasn't been defeated for good, so I'm going to assume that Xion still looks like a teenager and the Keybearers haven't turned into kids yet.

Ienzo had been...disconcerted, upon awakening in the old control room to find himself both human and tiny. The memories were hazy at first, but he could have sworn he was supposed to be bigger and much older than this.... However, he didn't give much thought to it at first, since he was more preoccupied with the fact that he could feel again (had his emotions really been this powerful the first time around? His restored heart felt like it was killing him for a while).
After Ienzo had had a chance to rest, and the weight of his heart had started growing easier to bear, and bits and pieces of his memories began to trickle in...he grew more and more sure that something was wrong. "Aeleus?"

The man glanced at him questioningly as they picked through the master's old study together, taking inventory of the surviving books and equipment.

"How...er, how old do you think I am?"

"...Was the Organization simply a dream, or did it really happen?"

"...I'm...fairly certain that...it happened." Ienzo looked down at his own body. "But then this doesn't make sense...."

"I want to put your age at about 20 or so."

There was a long pause as they both considered the fact that Ienzo didn't look a day older than 11.

"How...how old do you feel, Aeleus?"

"87."

That actually made sense. In some ways, Ienzo felt like he'd lived several lifetimes. "...Let me rephrase the question. How old do you think you ought to be, and how old do you think you actually are?"

"I think the transition from Nobody to human altered our physical ages but left the memories of our life experiences somewhat intact. It's far more noticeable with you because you were so young when you lost your heart."

Ienzo burst into a wild little laugh at how neatly Aeleus had cut through his uncertainty and voiced the exact theory Ienzo had come to himself. "How do you test something like that, I wonder...."
"I think you have more pressing concerns at the moment."

They did, so they carried on with their work, and Ienzo tried not to give the matter undue consideration. Fruitless obsession wouldn't do anyone any good. 'I can still fight, at least, can't I...?' His Lexicon no longer seemed to have magical properties, and Ienzo's body unfortunately seemed to have lost its muscle memory, but he found that his power and knowledge of spellcasting seemed to be almost on par with his abilities as the Cloaked Schemer. 'So I can defend myself, at least. I'll have to find time to resume training, I don't like being so much weaker than my Nobody....'

Life went on, months passed, extremely interesting things happened, and Ienzo grew. A little; only as much as any other child would during the same length of time. It was annoying, since more and more of Ienzo's memories of Zexion kept returning, and it irked him to compare himself to his older, more powerful Nobody and find himself wanting. 'At least I have my heart now. That's an area where Zexion can never surpass me.' Except for the times when it would have been convenient to experience no pain or embarrassment or revulsion. 'HAVING A HEART IS BETTER THAN NOT HAVING ONE. Everyone who thinks so wins all the most important battles, which means it must be true.' Ienzo doggedly continued sifting through the specimen's waste matter for the tiny data-collection device that was supposed to have been excreted, and tried to not imagine Braig (or Xigbar) saying in response, "Yeah, keep tellin' yourself that, half-pint."

More news, more experiments, more secret missions. Ienzo got used to life after the Organization. He decided he was happy.

Then, one day, as he shouldered his way into the control room carrying a large jar of Emblems in his arms, he started calling out, "Professor, I found it, it was in the--" but did not finish his sentence. It was not Even standing before the computer, gazing at it as if it were a long-lost dream - it was Ansem. The king. The master whom Ienzo had not seen since betraying him long ago.

The jar crashed to the ground, cracking into several pieces and sending Emblems skidding across the floor, as Darkness wafted into the air and dissipated.

Ienzo automatically fell to his hands and knees, scrambling to collect the now useless Emblems. "I- - Apologies, that is-- I can't believe I-- Let me clean up this mess..." 'What is, what's happening, what is he doing here?!' They'd learned that Ansem had apparently survived his imprisonment in the Realm of Darkness, they had anticipated a meeting, had then heard from Yen Sid that Ansem had vanished again.... Ienzo had not expected to suddenly see him here, in the middle of his home and workplace. 'Well, why not? Master Ansem used to live and work here, too. I'm a fool.' A terrified fool, he realized when he observed his hands shaking.

The Emblems were now collected together. Ienzo kept trying to squash them into the biggest piece
of broken glass, but there were too many and they kept sliding out of his hands, 'like intestines from a man who's had his gut slit.' He shuddered. Ansem's footsteps were approaching. "I-I should--" 'Please, Master, don't come any closer.' Shame made his cheeks feel hot; he could not bring himself to lift his eyes away from the floor. "Let me--" Clutching the glassful of Emblems, Ienzo struggled to his feet and backed away. "I, er, need to dispose of these safely, I ought--"

"Ienzo." The voice was a whisper.

Ienzo couldn't tolerate it. "Would you like some tea?" he burst out in a rush. "I'm going to go make some tea. I'll be back." He fled.

'Fool, fool, fool, fool!' He dumped the Emblems and broken glass into the nearest garbage chute and then escaped to his room, where he pressed a hand tightly against the deepest cut on his arm as he paced back and forth. 'Master Ansem... he's returned... he'll-- Of course he'll take over again, he's the king; we're done for, aren't we, the traitors, we who conspired against him and sent him into darkness, I wonder what he'll do with us, should I flee? Escape this city, this world.... Can I hide from the inevitable?'

He wasn't even sure he wanted to. He rather wanted to kneel at his master's feet and beg forgiveness, but at the same time, he couldn't bear the thought of knowingly going near him again. 'What should I do....'

He had claimed he was going to go make tea. He hadn't had any intention of actually doing so, but he felt so frazzled that it was the only non-ridiculous course of action he could think of taking. 'Don't be a coward, Ienzo. Zexion was the coward, always working from the shadows, deceiving, trying to keep his hands clean even though he did such terrible things. I'm not him. I am Ienzo. I have a heart and I am in my right mind, and my master has suffered enough at my hands. I have to face him sooner or later, and I might as well get it over with.' He stopped pacing and squeezed his eyes shut for a minute, then took a deep breath and went down to the kitchens.

The familiar routine was soothing: heating the water and teapot, spooning in the tea leaves, letting them steep.... Ienzo found himself taking rather longer than necessary to clean everything up and fuss over the tea tray to make sure everything was perfectly positioned. He eventually ran out of ways to procrastinate; there was nothing left to do other than pick up the tray and take it back to the control room.

Ansem was standing right outside the kitchen, his hand raised to open the door. Ienzo practically crashed into him as he came out. Cups and teapot went cascading to the floor; both men exclaimed in alarm and danced out of reach of the ceramic shards and scalding hot liquid gushing across the carpet.

There was a long moment of silence. Ienzo realized that he was hugging the tea tray against his chest like a shield, so he told himself not to be a coward and pulled it away. A few seconds later, he
realized that he now had it clasped behind his back with both hands like a prim and proper girl, so he leaned it against the wall.

"Is...is it...?" The king's hands reached out softly to touch Ienzo's face, raise his chin, brush the long bangs aside. Forced to meet his master's eyes at last, Ienzo felt hollow and light-headed, as if his heart had drifted out of reach again. "It...really is you...Ienzo...isn't it?"

Ienzo swallowed and tilted his head out of Ansem's grasp. "Yes, Your Majesty. I know that my physical age does not reflect how old I ought to be, we have a few plausible theories about that. Yes, I'm Ienzo."

There was another long pause. Ansem simply stared at the boy, looking a little lost. Ienzo was trying desperately to hold onto his composure. He finally pressed his clasped hands tightly together and added, "If you were wondering...yes, I-- I do, in fact, still have my memories from...from before. When I...." Why did this have to be so hard? "I remember-- I know what I did to you, and I--" He finally took a deep breath and bowed in formal apology. "I beg your forgiveness."

More silence, until Ienzo's back started to ache and he began to consider kneeling down to formally grovel. 'Would it make a difference? Does he just not know what to say, or is he simply drawing out the apprehension of the moment? Is he still trying to decide what our punishment will be?'

"Ienzo...you were the one I trusted most. I loved you like my own son. I...."

'Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.'

Ienzo was startled by the unexpectedly gentle touch on his shoulders, tugging him upright again. "Ienzo, why did you betray me?" Ansem asked, sounding desperate for a satisfactory answer, yet also as if no answer could possibly justify what his apprentices had done.

"It...had seemed like a good idea at the time." The truth, deliberately stated without any attempt at self-defense.

"What?"

Despite his best efforts, Ienzo could not continue to hold his master's gaze. "We...we wanted...you were in the way. We were so close, but you threatened to destroy all that work. I didn't...want to,
but at the same time...I felt like you'd left us no choice."

The long pauses were becoming increasingly unbearable.

"So," Ansem finally said, sounding incredulous, "it's my own fault that you turned against me, disobeyed my direct orders and cast me out into darkness?"

"No," Ienzo whispered. "...Master, I'm sorry."

"...What?"

Ienzo squeezed his eyes shut, no longer caring that he was hugging himself like a child. "You were right...we should never have ventured so close to darkness...we all paid the price, and it was wrong of us to treat you as we did. I...truly regret it. I'm sorry. If there is any chance at all that you could ever forgive me, I...I ask for it. If you can give it. And if you can't, I certainly underst--"

It had been so long since he had been embraced, he'd forgotten how good it felt.

"Ienzo, my son," Ansem whispered, "I've missed you so."

Ienzo had been rigid with shock at the unexpected gesture, but now he sagged in relief and freed remorse, hugging Ansem tightly and weeping together with him. "Forgive me, Master. The darkness clouds your judgment, draws you away from the light before you realize it, none of us had any idea how badly we'd been corrupted, all the worst parts of us were at the forefront, making terrible decisions without even realizing how far we'd strayed from logic and reason and plain simple human decency...." That was when his voice broke and he couldn't continue, but it didn't seem to matter.

"I know," Ansem whispered. "I, too, lost my humanity to darkness. I'm so grateful that you found your way back, Ienzo."

"Master...."

Eventually, they got around to making a fresh pot of tea. They went out to the nearest balcony to
drink it, surrounded by the warmth of the sun and the cheerful splashing of the Garden's fountains as they caught up on what they'd been working on since they'd last seen each other.

"Fascinating," Ansem murmured. "A transformation of her very matter? And you're sure she did it on a subconscious level?"

"Nothing else makes sense. But she is human now; and while Riku's replica seems to also have become human, Xion's case is more interesting since her origins were far less clear-cut. Her sense of self-identity is nothing short of amazing."

"I see...yes, I do seem to be frequently guilty of underestimating these brilliant young Keyblade wielders...."

Ienzo smiled. "We all did."

"I suppose that turned out to be fortunate."

"Yes."

o.o.o

Author's Notes: Sign won a prize, and she asked for an Ansem/apprentices fic, and I started writing it - but then I got stuck, and life happened, and I got more and more stressed out, then I finally asked her for another idea and wrote...something close to it, which is this fic. ^^; (I'm sorry, Sign; Ienzo's by far the easiest apprentice for me to write. DX) So this is her prize~! But I do intend to finish the other story eventually, it'll just probably take me a long time because I'm so stressed out and disorganized. ^^;

I like to make Ienzo an 'adorable victim' who was forced to betray Ansem against his will, but honestly, I think he probably did have a choice about it. ^^; For this story, I went with the latter route.

Taliax's RikuNami kiriban drabble is done, but I still need to type it! Medli45's RikuNami prize is outlined, and I'm working to outline HawkRider's 7,878 kiriban. Having more trouble with Mirae's giftfic, though I came up with a couple more newborn plunnies that I hope will survive.
I wish I'd thought of asking for reboots of these highest-priority fics WAY SOONER. 8'D

Complete: 5/100
This fanfic is a prize for Medli45, whose comic BBS: Don't You Hate Me? won first place in KHplatonicLove's "Freedom" contest on deviantART! ^^

Summary: Riku is having a tough time, so Naminé thinks of a way to help him out.

A/N: ...Medli drew Naminé so well, I thought it would help me write her better; but NOPE, started drafting and she turned out just as painfully shy as she usually is in my stories. *facepalm* Dang it, Naminé, I don't think you like me very much....

Bleh, titles are not my strong suit. *hides face*

This takes place during the year Sora was asleep. Also, I think I might have messed up on where certain areas are in the mansion; I'll have to look it up and fix it later. :/

Naminé, noticing red stains on the mansion floor, frowned in puzzlement. The drying splashes seemed to make a trail, so she followed them upstairs and down the hall and into the library and down into the secret basement and through the pod corridor. Just as she was getting frightened that something bad might have happened to Sora, she emerged into the white room and saw that it was only Riku.

She breathed a sigh of relief and went over to where he was standing before the pod, staring up at Sora with a tense look on his face. "Riku?"

He didn't move.
"Um, Riku...are you okay?"

He slowly glanced at her.

"You look, um...." The red trail ended where he stood. His hair, due to extraterrestrial genes, was impossible to tangle, but it seemed uncharacteristically windswept, locks of it criss-crossing and lying unevenly across his shoulders. He looked weary, and his coat was torn. "I'd better mend that before you go back out again."

After a looooong pause, he looked down at the rips in the thick black fabric, then back at her. "What?"

"Your, um, coat. It's not safe to wear it in the corridors when it's torn like that.... If you take it off, I'll fix it for you."

Slowly, he unzipped the coat and started shrugging off, wincing as he did so. The shifting fabric pulled his tank top up for a second, briefly revealing bare skin.

Naminé gasped. "Riku! Are you hurt?!" The red stuff was coming from him - not a leaking potion, but his body. She took hold of the hem of his tank top with her fingertips and very gently lifted it until she could see it again: a deep gash in his flesh, still slowly leaking bright red liquid; lighter gashes on either side, just like the claw marks in the walls of the ruined dining room. Naminé had once cut herself by accident, using a knife in the kitchen. It had stung, and a few red drops had welled out of her skin. This looked like that, except a lot worse.

"I'm fine," Riku said through gritted teeth.

Naminé was not sure what to say to this, since it was so obviously not true. "Do you...have a Potion?"

"I'm out of Items...."

'Why didn't you go find some and heal yourself when you got home?'
Riku's legs suddenly buckled; Naminé barely managed to catch him, and she helped lower him down until he was sitting on the floor, leaning back wearily against the base of the pod.

"Riku?" she said, distressed.

He let out a sigh and closed his eyes. "Sorry, Naminé."

"Riku, something's wrong with you, isn't it. What can I do to help?"

After a moment, he opened his eyes again and regarded her directly for the first time that day. "...Sorry, Naminé," he said again. "I'm just.... I'm so frustrated. I--" He gave another sigh. "Never mind. Would you mind...getting me an Elixir or a Hi-Potion or something...?"

"Of course!" Naminé hurried to the closet where their stock of Items were kept.

Riku looked a lot better after he was healed, but he still seemed tired. He stood up again and just stared at Sora for a while with a helpless look on his face, then finally trudged away, his head hanging.

"...Riku, I made some fish for dinner. Would you like some?"

He peered at her in surprise. "You made dinner?"

"I.... Yes.... With that...recipe...you used...last time...."

A little ghostly smile flickered across his mouth. "You sound like you did something bad."

"Is it okay that I used your recipe?" she asked apprehensively.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course, Naminé. Sure." His voice seemed lighter now, and he was holding his head higher. "You okay, Naminé?"
"Yes, of course! You're the one who looked...not okay."

He paused, glancing back toward the pod room. "Yeah..." He sighed. "I just feel like I'm going in circles. Out in the field, in my thoughts, can't sleep, can't concentrate, it's all just Have to save Sora, how do I save Sora, find a lead, follow the lead, lose the lead, nearly get killed, find another lead, hit a dead end, look for more leads, can't find any leads, I'm not saving Sora, I'll never save Sora, I'm a huge failure, over and over and over again for months.... I'm just tired."

"Maybe you should go to bed early tonight."

He laughed. "Maybe."

They ate dinner together, and Naminé felt like she was glowing when Riku said it tasted good. After they cleaned up, she didn't realize she was following him, even when he kept glancing at her, until she was standing in the doorway of his bathroom and he was at the sink holding a toothbrush and giving her a slightly helpless look and saying, "Hey, is there any chance you can, you know, not watch me brush my teeth and stuff...?"

"Oh! I'm so sorry, Riku; I-- Personal space, I remember! I promise I'll remember, I'm leaving now!" She ran out into the hall and then just stood there, not sure what to do. It was so rare that she had company, and all DiZ cared about was Sora's chain of memories, and Riku was gone so much, it just...she just wanted to be close to someone. "I'm sorry, Riku," she whispered. She went to go brush her own teeth and go to bed, because there was nothing else to do.

She woke up hours later from a nightmare. The darkness seemed suffocating and her skin wouldn't stop crawling, so she finally got out of bed and went to get a drink of water, turning on lights as she went.

...Riku's bedroom light was on. She saw the sliver of light shining through the crack beneath the door just before she flipped the hall light switch. Naminé hesitated in front of his room for a while, wondering if Riku had awakened, too, or if he'd simply never gone to bed at all. Then she lifted her arm and knocked.

"...Who is it?" Riku finally called.

"It's...Naminé."
"...Do you need something?"

"...No." Just as she was deciding to go back to bed and try to sleep, the door opened. She stared up at Riku, and he stared back. "Umm...."

"Why did you knock?"

'Because I was worried about you.' "I don't know."

"...."

"...."

"...Well, come in, I guess." Leaving the door open, Riku went over to his bed, which was still made, and flopped onto it. He lay there for a minute, then suddenly swept back to his feet and began to pace the room.

Naminé watched him for a while. Then she went back to her room, fetched both her own sketchpad and a blank one she hadn't started on yet, and brought them both back to Riku's room, where she found him still pacing.

"Riku?"

"What," he muttered.

She went to stand in his path, and he came to an abrupt stop so as not to crash into her. "You know," she said, "not everything I draw is for Sora."

"Huh?"

"Sometimes...sometimes I draw for myself, too." She offered him the blank sketchpad. "It might help if you draw," she said softly.
Riku was still staring. "Me? Draw?"

She took his hand and tugged him along with her, both of them taking a seat on the floor. "Draw what you're thinking," she said. "So that the thoughts won't just circle around and around and drive you crazy." She slipped a colored pencil into his fingers.

Riku looked at the blank paper for a while. Then he set the colored pencil tip to the white sheet, drew a line, tightened his grip, dragged the pencil some more, and ended up bent low over the paper, scribbling a wild mess and breathing harder than most people did when simply drawing. "That's what I'm thinking," he said. Without waiting for her to reply, he tore the page out of the notebook and started drawing on a fresh sheet, a picture of Sora falling helplessly, a dark shadow monster about to swallow him whole.

"Riku."

"What?" he snapped, looking more agitated than ever.

"...Do you like my picture?"

He stared at the figure she'd drawn. A young man with long silvery hair, wearing a black coat and a kind smile. Naminé set down a second picture next to the first: a yellow-haired girl in a white dress. Then a page that looked like a kitchen; another with a stove and countertop covered with cooking supplies and appetizing food. "I'm not so good at drawing them all on the same page," she admitted sheepishly. "So I draw them on separate pages and put them together."

"...."

"It's, um, us. You teaching me how to cook spaghetti. I wanted to keep the memory safe, so...I drew it."

Riku reached out and gently set his fingertips on the images, bridging the little space between picture-Riku's hand and picture-Naminé's.

"I don't know if it works for everyone else the same way it works for me, but I was thinking if you
drew one of your memories of Sora, where you're together and safe, maybe you'd feel better and wouldn't be so scared and worried all the time...."

Riku began to draw again. He looked calmer, so Naminé settled back and began working on another memory of her own.

She'd drawn several pictures before she finally got a little bored and looked over to find that Riku was still working on the same picture, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Can I see?" she asked, and was surprised when a blush crept across his cheeks.

"It's so bad," he mumbled, and hesitantly tilted the sketchpad so that she could just barely glimpse black lines and yellow color.

She had to practically lean on him to see it properly, and when she saw what he had been working so hard on, she gasped and then smiled widely. "It's me. You drew me."

"I can't draw," Riku groaned, "I haven't drawn since I was, like, a little kid, I don't--"

"Ooohh, Riku, it's so nice! I really like it."

"Are you kidding?! I thought the legs were too long but then I realized it was really the skirt was too short, but I don't wanna erase it because gaaahh, I don't wanna erase all those little lacy bits on the bottom of your skirt and draw them again so much wasted work, by the way sorry for talking about your skirt, and every time I try to fix your arms either you look fat or anorexic, but you're not fat or anorexic so I can't get it to work, and geez I just realized your hair's longer on the right side, not the left, hold on, let me fix it...."

She giggled. Despite his dissatisfied rambling, the invisible darkness that seemed to have been hovering over him all evening had dissipated. "It's a beautiful picture, Riku."

"Only because it's a picture of a beautiful girl; my fail drawing skills have nothing to do with it...."

It felt soooo nice to hear the first part of that. "It's a beautiful picture because it's helping you come closer to the light, it doesn't matter if it's a picture of me or anyone else you love. Here, draw Sora next." She turned the page for him. Then she noticed him looking at her. "What?"
"...You said 'love.'"

She frowned in confusion. "You're human, right? So you can feel love, even though I can't?"

He said softly, a little apprehensively, "There's all kinds of love, Naminé."

"I know. You told me already - we're friends, and friends love each other, right? You...you're my friend, right?"

He smiled and rested his hand over hers for a second. "Yeah. We're friends, Naminé. And you do remind me that the road I chose to walk leads to dawn, not darkness."

"You'll get Sora back someday," she said. "You'll get to be together with all your friends again."

"Yeah. All my friends." He smiled again and started sketching a new picture. "Sora...and Kairi...and you...."

Naminé's eyes stung with happy tears as she watched Riku drawing a memory that had never happened, but which she desperately wished had been real - the four of them all together on the Islands. "You draw better than you think," she whispered.

"Man, I only just started and look, all the heads are different sizes, Sora looks like a girl, why can I not get these stupid arms to look like arms...."

She laughed. "It looks good, Riku." She covered her mouth to stifle a yawn. "I think I'll probably be able to go back to bed soon, and not have nightmares this time...."

"Yeah. Me too." Their eyes met. "Thank you, Naminé."

She smiled at him. "You're welcome."
Author's Notes: Medli45 on deviantART drew a picture called "Drawing Together," where Naminé & Riku are doing exactly what the title says. X3 In the description, she pretty much outlined an entire story idea to go along with the picture, and I wanted to write it. XD When I (temporarily) gave up on her prize from the previous contest, I asked her for a new idea, and she said I could use this one. XD So here you go, Medli~! (After eight long months! X'D) Hope you like it!

Lol, small reference to Riku being Jenova's kid again. XD It's funny watching Advent Children; Sephiroth and Yazoo and them are in these intense battle sequences, but their long, loose hair magically never gets tangled or anything. ^^;

I tried to watch the end of CoM again, but I couldn't really figure out what Riku's supposed to be doing during the year Sora's asleep. *sweatdrop* Helping him wake up, yeah, but isn't that Naminé's job? Other than grabbing Roxas and shoving him and Xion back into Sora's heart, what was Riku working on that whole time?

Yay, I finally finished both prizes! ^^ Now for the two kiriban fics! XD (Still haven't typed yours, Tali, but I will soon...)!

Medli's picture, for those of you not on FFN: medli45.deviantart.com/art/Drawing-Together-446683067
Everyone Starts Somewhere {Namine & Riku}

Everyone Starts Somewhere
A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl

20,000 FFN profile hits kiriban drabble for Taliax

Summary: Practice makes perfect. RikuNami, post-canon.

0.0.0

The first thing Riku became aware of when he awakened was the sound of his wife's gasp of surprise and frustration. "Oh! Riku, don't--" She sighed. "Never mind."

He opened his eyes fully and sat up, frowning. "What's wrong?" Then he saw the notebook she was holding, and her partial sketch of what appeared to be the pose his hand had been in while he'd slept. "...Oh." His mouth quirked in remorseful sympathy. "Sorry."

"It's all right."

He hugged her. "No, it's not. It's frustrating."

"Why won't it work?" she cried, leaning into his embrace and holding up her sketchbook as if it was a misbehaving pet. "No matter how hard I try, no matter how close I look, I can't even get it to look like a hand...!"

"Hands are hard," he said soothingly, "even for people who've been drawing for a long time."

She jerked the page over and started attacking the next clean sheet of paper with her pencil. Four strokes in, she threw the pencil across the room; tore the picture out and threw it, too; pulled out of Riku's hug; and marched out of the room. A minute later, she came back with a handful of crayons. She nestled back into Riku's arms and started sketching again, this time in her usual style rather than the more realistic portrayals she'd been attempting lately.
Riku felt himself relax right along with her as they watched colors streaking across the page, forming a human figure, two, a white dress, a black suit, flowers and a gathered audience: their wedding day. When the memory was finished, they both gazed at it for a while, feeling peaceful.

"How," Naminé finally murmured, "can drawing be so easy but then so hard at the same time...?"

"You've been drawing your memory-pictures for your entire existence," Riku said softly, "but you only just started trying to draw realistically. Just give it time, and don't give up. You'll never master it if you quit."

Naminé silently drew another picture, and as he looked at it, Riku could practically feel the impression, 'I love you' in his spirit. He gently took the crayon out of her grasp and, with her still in his arms, drew another picture beside it: 'Two hearts as one.'

"I'm so glad I have you," she whispered.

"Me, too. Here - hold out your hand." Looking back and forth between it and the page, Riku proceeded to draw Naminé's hand as best he could.

The finished product looked a bit like a spider. Naminé even laughed. "It's kind of a relief to know that there's something you're bad at...."

"Whenever you get frustrated with your art, you can look at my picture and remind yourself that everyone has to start somewhere."

"Are you going to be an artist, too?"

"Nah, that's your job. Keep making beautiful pictures, Naminé."

She smiled. "Keep inspiring me, Riku."
Author's Notes: Sorry this fic kind of ends awkwardly, but everything I tried to write after that last line just didn't work, so I finally gave up and deleted everything after that line. ^^;

Tali won this kiriban and requested Aqua/Vanitas, with Riku/Naminé as a backup. I did get an AquVan idea and started writing it, but...after a while, I realized that it's a multi-chapter that's probably gonna take me years to finish. ^^; (Not exaggerating. Years __.) That is way too long for her to wait <strike>and way too long for me to stress out about it X'D</strike>, so I used a RikuNami idea in the meantime. ...I just wish it wasn't so dang short. :ohnoes:

This was actually written before Pages Filled With Memories, but I procrastinated so much on typing it that Pages got posted sooner even though it was written later. ^^;

Lol, drawing frustration...how familiar thou art to me....
Lumineuse: Courage (theme 38) {Namine & Riku}

Lumineuse: Courage (theme 38) [rough draft]

A Kingdom Hearts fanfic by Raberba girl, written for Reku14's 100 Words challenge

Inspired by Medli45

Summary: Riku is in trouble, and Naminé will do everything in her power to help him.

O.o.o

Naminé was taking a break - very guiltily eating a chocolate cream snack pie while hiding from DiZ in the kitchen storeroom - when there was a crash in the distance.

She was already on edge; the sudden noise startled her into dropping the uneaten half of the chocolate, and she let out a dismayed cry. A few seconds later, she realized that she ought to be concerned about the source of the crash rather than standing here staring forlornly at her lost treat, so she hastily wiped the mess clean and then went to investigate.

A pair of black-clad legs were sticking out of the Item closet, surrounded by scattered empty bottles. "Riku!" Naminé cried. She ran the rest of the way and knelt down beside him.

He seemed to be leaking that red 'blood' stuff again, since there was a bunch of it smeared on the floor beneath him. He looked weak and helpless as he lay there, one of the closet shelves on the floor beside him as if both he and it had fallen down when he'd tried to pull something off of it.

"Riku?"

"Where are...all our...?"

"Oh...it was my turn to go shopping," Naminé said uneasily, "but I forgot. I meant to, but...I've been so busy...I didn't know...." She saw the stupidity of it now. It should have been a higher priority. Riku obviously needed an Item right now and must have run out of his personal stock, but
there was nothing left even here in the closet, and-- "Riku? Is there...someone you're supposed to be fighting?"

"Heartless," he whispered. There was something wrong about the way he was breathing. "Too many. Need...to stop them...they're coming...mansion...."

"Are they outside?" she whispered.

"Potion...need a...Potion...."

They had nothing. Nothing. Naminé had used their last Potion the day before yesterday, when she'd had a sleep-deprivation headache that made it so hard to work. Now she very much wished she had just endured it and saved the bottle for Riku. "Riku, I'm so sorry."

His hand reached out, groping weakly at nothing until she put her own hand into it. He squeezed her fingers. "Can't help you...like this," he whispered.

"You're hurt really bad?" she said diffidently.

"Trouble...in Agrabah...Shadows swarmed...on the way home...."

"...Maybe I can go buy some Items now and bring them to you."

"Too dangerous."

"...But how are you going to get better if I don't get some Items for you?"

"...."

"I have to do it, don't I?"
"...Can you...use...Keyblade?"

"I think so?" She'd never tried it, but she was pretty sure she could. If she had to.

He shifted, and after a long moment, Way to the Dawn appeared in his hand. "Take it."

"Take...your Keyblade?" Uncertainly, she put her hand near his on the handle, and when she tugged a little, she was surprised and a little pleased when a phantom weapon seemed to materialize in her fingers, drawn out of its parent. Even as she watched, the copy solidified until she could no longer tell with the naked eye that it wasn't a real weapon.

"Good.... Worked this time...."

"It's a prettier model than yours," she said, admiring the more feminine design. Then her eyes widened. "I mean-- I didn't mean to-- Way to the Dawn is very pretty too, it's a good Keyblade, it just, I kind of like this one, it's nice--"

"Naminé...."

"Yes?"

"Be careful."

"I will."

"Coat."

"Huh?"

He started struggling to unzip his protective black coat, but then he fell still.
After a minute, Naminé got worried. "Riku?"

"...."

"Riku?!" She set the Keyblade down and hesitantly tapped his chest. "Riku? Are you okay?"

"...."

"Riku?!" She shook his shoulder, gently at first and then harder.

"Owww," he moaned.

"You were going to lend me your coat...."

"Can't...get it off."

"Can I help?"

"Yes...."

She unzipped the coat. Underneath, half his clothes seemed to be stained red, which was alarming. "Riku?"

"...."

"Riku?!"

"Hurts...." He yelled when she finally got the coat free of his body, which scared her, especially when his face went white afterward and he became very pale and still. She shook him some more, but stopped when tears started leaking out from beneath his blindfold. "Stop."
"I'm sorry, Riku. I'm so sorry."

"Really...really hurts...."

"I'm sorry."

"Get me...Items...please."

"Okay. I will, Riku, I will." She put the coat on. It took a while for her to figure out the two-way zipper. The sleeves covered her hands; she had to push them back in order to pick up her Keyblade copy again. "I'm going, Riku."

"...."

"Riku...." She put the Keyblade back down and laid her palms on the floor on either side of his head and bent down until she was close enough to his face to feel his breath brushing her skin. "Riku, please don't die while I'm gone."

"...."

"Riku...."

"I'll...stick around...for you...Naminé...."

On an impulse, she pressed her lips to his cheek. "I'm really sorry, Riku. I'll save you. Please wait for me."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry."
"I know."

She fetched a blanket and laid it over him, then she gripped the Keyblade in one hand, took a deep breath, and went outside.

The woods around the mansion were swarming with Heartless - she could see them massing just outside the front gates. "Help," she whispered. But she walked forward alone, and struggled to get the gates open, and then stood facing the army of Shadows. "I'm going to get some Items for Riku. Leave me alone."

They swam through the ground right up to her feet, shuddered up within reach of her weapon, and wriggled around her as if anticipating the taste of her heart.

"I'm the Nobody of a Princess of Heart," she told them, a little proudly. "And I have Riku's coat. You can't turn me to darkness." She reached out and bopped the closest Shadow on the head.

It swiped at her. Its claws raked through the coat, drawing what felt like lines of fire across the front of her leg. It hurt. "Aaaaahhh!" Naminé stumbled back, stared down at her leg in shock, and was even more astounded to see red liquid welling up out of the wounds. Red blood. Just like Riku's. It hurt much more than cutting herself with a kitchen knife. And Riku's wounds had been ten times worse. He must be in agony right now. "You Heartless...!" She swung the Keyblade and hit one of them, harder this time. "Don't hurt people!" She hit the Heartless until it finally, finally burst into smoke with a satisfying pop. A munny orb and an HP orb flew through the air and landed nearby, bouncing a little on the grass. By then, the other Heartless had slashed up her legs and lower back, and it hurt so bad that tears were streaming down her face. "Stop!"

Naminé waded through the dark creatures until she reached the green orb, which she was too desperate to eat; she crushed it in her palm instead. It seemed to melt into her skin and brought a cool, sweet relief with it. But just a little bit. And not for long. Because more Heartless were clawing at her, and she wanted to run back to Riku and lie down next to him and die, because that's what you did when something hurt this bad. "Leave me alone!"

She gave up fighting and tried to just run, feeling like she was stepping on fire. But the Heartless kept catching her, until her ears started ringing and she knew that one or two more strikes would kill her. "Sora, help me...."

Sora. Sora could fight the Heartless, and...she could always reach him. Even when she wasn't
supposed to.

With tears streaming down her face and no paper or anything to draw with at hand, Naminé began scratching her own forearm with a fingernail, sketching invisible pictures into her skin. 'Sora, I need you...I really need you, I'm so sorry....' Memories began to flow into her mind. Memories of gripping a Keyblade firmly in both hands, of swinging into darkness, of dodging and rolling and counterattacking....

Naminé relaxed her body into Sora's muscle memory, her vision distorted as the forest around her half-blurred into Sora's memories of Wonderland, stealing more and more precious chain-links of memory away from Sora to help her carve her way through the Shadows. Spots of quickly-fading sweet coolness startled her whenever an HP orb happened to land close enough to be drawn into her body. "Sora...your light is so strong...forgive me...." This was going to be such a mess to sort out later, but Riku needed her, and she didn't think Sora would mind if he knew. "Leave me alone," she told the Heartless. "Leave me alone, leave me alone...!"

She reached the hole in the wall and crawled through it, trembling until Sora's memories slowly finished slipping away (some of them to Xion or Roxas instead of back to their true owner...) and she no longer felt like she was struggling in a nightmare. People were giving her strange looks as she limped through the streets. She practically fell through the door of the Item shop and staggered to the counter, leaving a trail of blood behind her. "I need healing Items. Please."

The clerk stared at her, then picked up a bottle and poured the contents over her head.

Naminé nearly cried in relief when the pain finally went away. "Thank you so much."

"That was, um, a promotional special," the man said cautiously. "Er, could I interest you in our high-quality Tents?"

"I need some Elixirs."

"Ah...Elixirs, yes. How many, ma'am?"

"I think maybe thirty."

He raised his eyebrows. "Thir--? Er, wonderful." Then he told her how much that order would cost,
and Naminé nearly fell down, she was so shocked.

"I don't have that much munny!"

"Perhaps you would like to place a more affordable order?" he said delicately.

"Um...can I at least have one Elixir to give to Riku, then we can come back shopping later?"

"Of course. One Elixir will be 800 munny, ma'am."

"Eight hun--! For just one Elixir?! That's still too much!"

She didn't like the way he was looking at her now.

"Riku's hurt really bad. He needs it."

"Perhaps I could interest you in a Hi-Potion, ma'am?"

Hi-Potions were much cheaper than Elixirs, so Naminé agreed to buy one. Then she discovered that she'd forgotten to bring any munny with her at all. "Oh no! I should have stopped and asked DiZ for some when I left.... Can I have the Hi-Potion now to give to Riku, then come back and pay for it when he's better?"

Minutes later, Naminé was nearly crying as she rushed toward the closest news board, feeling humiliated. 'I'm so stupid, I forgot to bring munny and now I have to earn it, but it might take a long time and Riku's still lying there and he's hurt so bad and he's going to think I abandoned him...what if he dies...?'

She didn't know how to use a skateboard. If she could barely even kill the weakest of the Heartless, she would certainly be no good at most of these jobs. But....

"Poster Duty?" All she would have to do was put up posters as fast as she could. If she used dark corridors instead of just walking, she could finish a route in a minute or two...though only if the
corridors cooperated. Which...didn't happen often. Oh well. Naminé would make them cooperate. Maybe she could reach through Sora's memories to get to Riku's, and use his knowledge of the corridors? Maybe? If that was at all possible, Sora and Riku's bond was strong enough for that, right? She could at least try. "But this isn't enough munny for a Hi-Potion...maybe I could do it more than once?"

Ten extremely frustrating minutes later, with a Hi-Potion finally gripped in one hand, Naminé rushed back to the hole in the wall, ran through the woods, ignored the Heartless, stumbled and kept running when they hurt her again, slammed the gates closed, limped into the mansion, struggled over to the Item closet, and was hugely relieved to see Riku still lying there.

Until he failed to respond when she called him. "Riku! Riku! Riku!" He didn't move or say anything when she shook him this time. Frantically, she felt his chest, and had to stick her hand down his shirt and press right on his skin before she could finally sense his heartbeat. So weak. "Wait, Riku! Don't die, I can fix you now!" She opened the Hi-Potion and poured it straight onto the worst of his wounds.

He made such a huge gasp that she jumped, and the last of the potion splashed into his face. "Ack!"

"I'm sorry, Riku! I'm sorry!"

"Am I still alive?"

"Yes...I think...."

"I feel awful."

"Even with the Hi-Potion?"

"Yes."

But Riku stood up. "You still got my coat?"

"Yes."
There was a pause.

"Can I have it back?"

"Oh! Yes." She struggled to get it off. "Are you going to fight the Heartless now?"

"Yeah." He took the coat and pulled it over his shoulders. She crouched down to stick the insertion pin into the slider, then rose back to her feet as she pulled the slider up to his chest. He was standing very still with his face turned to her, as if he was staring at her through the blindfold. She stared back. "Um...you zipped my coat for me?"

"You need to wear it, don't you?"

After a long pause in which she wondered if she'd done something wrong, he finally laughed. "You're so funny...."

"Was I not supposed to zip it?"

"People don't usually zip other people's clothes."

"Oh. They don't?"

"Usually."

"Oh."

"...."

"...."
"Well, I'm going to go fight the Heartless now." He awkwardly reached to unzip the lower part of the coat so that he could walk. "Just for the record, you pull up both of the zippers when you're putting the coat on. You leave the lower one wherever you want it, and keep pulling up the top one until it's all closed."

"Oh. Okay." No wonder it had been so hard to get the coat on earlier. "Be careful, Riku."

"I will."

She went to the window and watched as he strode across the lawn. He was so quick and graceful and strong as he fought, it made her a little jealous even though at the same time she thought it was beautiful. Whole swaths of monsters disappeared in the wake of sparkling light. The puny ones she'd had to hit so much to destroy took only one blow from him before vanishing. He barely even stumbled the one or two times the stronger ones managed to land a hit on him. "Go, Riku," she whispered.

The horde was wiped out in minutes. Naminé went down to join him outside. "You did a good job, Riku."

"Heh. Thanks." To her surprise, he leaned close and laid a light kiss on her temple. "You did great yourself, Naminé."

"When I got the Hi-Potion for you?"

"It was very brave of you to do that."

"It was my fault. I had to fix it."

"You didn't have to."

"...."

"Heh. I insulted you, didn't I. I'm sorry."
"I had to."

"Thank you, Naminé. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. And I'm sorry, for wasting the Potions and not going shopping and stealing your corridor memories and them wrong anyway--"

"You've already apologized a lot. Once was enough. And if messing with my memories helped you just now, you don't need to apologize for that."

"Okay."

After a pause, he dismissed his Keyblade. "Well, come on."

"Huh?"

He smiled. "We both worked hard today. We deserve a reward."

"A reward?"

"I'll treat you to dinner."

"Treat...?"

"It means I'll pay for it."

"You'll pay for dinner?"

"It's..." He shook his head. "Just come on, Naminé."
Okay, but I don't have a reward to give you back.... I already ate one of the cream pies when I was supposed to be working, DiZ will notice if I take another one for you."

"Huh?"

"And I don't have any munny until DiZ gives me some for shopping, so I can't buy new treats unless there's munny left over after I buy supplies and food and stuff."

"I don't know if you're overly modest, or if I'm just really bad at explaining things...."

o.o.o

Author's Notes: Well, it's about that time again.... It's been ten days since I last posted something, and my muse got restless. ^^; I'd been intending to save the plunnies people have been suggesting for something else, but it was handy to have them now, especially when a couple of Medli's plunny suggestions wrote themselves in my head. XD (One of them was this story [lol I guess my muse is still obsessed with RikuNami]; the other one is a VenVan AU that I'm debating whether to write now, or later when I'll need the plunny list.)

Speaking of which, do you guys have anymore short, specific Kingdom Hearts ideas for me~? :3 I'm collecting a list of suggestions for a couple of upcoming events where I temporarily won't have access to my older projects, and I won't be able to do anything fun except write entirely new stories.

Man, I'd VERY SPECIFICALLY tried to write this fic in an attempt to characterize Naminé better, but she ended up exactly the same as I write her in my other fics. DX Argh, I feel like a failure when I can't meet a writing goal. :/ If I want to be a professional, I ought to be able to do this sort of thing, so it's alarming when I can't.

Again, Naminé seems to be able to use the dark corridors normally in KH2, but in the manga, she totally fails at them. XD It's cute.

I wrote Riku & Naminé's relationship in this fic intending it to be entirely platonic. I know that it's probably easy to mistake as romance unless you're familiar with my other writing, but there's absolutely no romantic/sexual element in the love they express for each other here (both kisses were innocent ones); their affection is meant to be platonic. At this point in their relationship, Riku sees Naminé as sort of a younger sister to look after, and Naminé sees him as the closest thing she
has to a friend.

Complete: 6/100
After the Battle: Everything Fades (theme 28) - Xemnas

Summary: There were a lot of things that Xemnas didn't understand when he was a Nobody.

A/N: This does not take place in the Next Life universe, but it uses that same "turned into a little kid after the war" concept for Xemnas.

It is understandable that I would feel nothing at this moment.

Nothing is my element, my greatest strength. Nothing is our very definition as Nobodies, as beings that were never meant to exist. All I have ever known is nothing: a complete lack of anger, passion, sadness, and especially the concept of 'love' those Keyblade wielders are all so consumed with.

As my body fades away and my thoughts disintegrate along with it, I have no response, no sense of regret or fear. Before I can decide how best to react, I am gone.

Where am I?

It's dark and cold. I don't like being alone. I push, and something moves and it doesn't hurt as much, so I push harder and shove and kick and oh look I can breathe easier, I guess it was hurting because I was buried. But I'm not buried now.

I'm alone. I should find someone else, because I don't like being alone.
"Xigbar?" I don't know who Xigbar is, but it's a name and I say it because maybe he'll come if I say it. "Saïx?" I don't know him, either, but I want them. Xigbar and Saïx are important and I want them but they're not here. Why are they not here? They're being bad. I'll tell them they were bad when I see them again, but I can't tell them right now because they're not here. "Come back! Hey! I want you! Why aren't you coming?"

They still don't come, and I'm still alone, so I finally just start walking. It's hard. There's blood all over me, it's from the scratches when I was climbing out, and it hurts but I'll never get anywhere if I don't walk. "I'm hungry! Xigbar come here right now and take care of me. Or Saïx. I don't care which one of you comes, but you have to come now."

There's another name I know, but I really really don't like that name. It's 'Xehanort.' It's a bad name, and I don't say it out loud because I don't want him to come. His name makes me hurt in my chest, but Xigbar's and Saïx's names make me feel warm, so they're the ones I'll say, but they're not coming and I'm mad at them. "Heeeeeeeeeyyyy, come help me!"

They don't come. Something else does. I'm saying 'something' and not 'someone' because it's not a person, it's a thing, and it's black and wiggly and I don't like it. It makes my eyes hurt to look at it. It'll come and eat my chest if it touches me, so I have to kill it before it touches me but I don't know how to kill it. I crunch up my hands until light comes in them. "Hey. Go away or I'll kill you, Heartless." I didn't know it was a Heartless until I said it, but I called it a Heartless so I guess it's a Heartless. I still don't know what a Heartless is, but they're bad because this one is bad. "I'll push my light on your head 'til you blow up."

It doesn't listen to me, it swims in the ground 'til it's right here at my feet and now it's climbing out of the ground and when it climbs out it'll eat me. I won't let it eat me. I hit it with the light in my hands, and I'm hurting it, and finally it pops and the smoke goes away and it's gone.

It left something behind. There's a green thing that's good, so I eat it and it tastes sooooo good, and there's a yellow thing that's shiny and I don't really want it but I think I might need it later, so I keep it. "Find Xigbar and Saïx," I tell it, but it doesn't listen to me. Oh well. I'll keep walking until I find someone who listens to me.

0.0.0.0.0

I had to walk until I nearly died. I walked and walked and walked and walked and it was SO BORING and I hated it and my feet hurt, and I would've died except I killed more Heartless and they left more green stuff and I ate them so I was okay but I wanted food. I didn't really remember what food was like, but I needed it and I wanted it and I didn't have it and finally I met a person who wasn't Xigbar or Saïx but he had a key, and I knew that was important. I thought it was bad, and I thought I maybe had to fight him, but I liked that he was a person and not a Heartless so I
didn't, and he took me home.

There's lots of sand and wind and something called 'ocean.' And there's lots of food here, and I'm eating it, so I guess Sora wasn't bad after all, but I don't know. I think I'm supposed to kill people with keys, or eat them or something, but I don't want to. I think the old me who used to do that was stupid. I'm a lot better now.

"...This is just too weird." They're still talking about me and staring at me, but I don't care. I like this food. "There's just no way I can believe that's Xemnas."

"I know, right?! I mean, we-- Eeeerm, I mean, we defeated him, didn't we? So he can't be Xemnas, but...."

"My name is Xemnas," I tell them. They're kind of stupid, but it's okay.

"Why are you just a little boy?" the red-haired girl asks me. Her name is Kairi. "The last time we saw you, you were a grown up man, but now you're...very small."

"I was a grown up?" I like that.

"Do you remember anything?" the biggest one asks. His name is Riku. I like his hair. It's a little silver like mine, except mine's *all* silver so it's better; and it's really soft like mine, too. I touched Sora's hair, but it was all spiky and I didn't like it.

"I want Xigbar and Saïx." I already told them this a lot, I don't know why they won't do what I say.

"Yeah.... Well, we called them. We're still waiting for Braig to answer, but Isa, um...Isa's not coming."

"It's Xigbar and *Saïx.*"

"Xem, um, Xemnas, they're different now, you know. Braig might not mind you calling him Xigbar, but Isa really, really wants to be called 'Isa.' He hates being called 'Saïx.'"
"Why?"

"Because he...you know. He has bad memories from when he was Saïx."

"Why?"

"...Maybe you should let him tell you that."

"Then he has to come so he can talk to me."

"Oh yeah...."

Xigbar doesn't come and I'm mad at him and it turns dark and I fall asleep, but when I wake up and go look for more food, there he is. I didn't remember what he looked like, but as soon as I see him I know who he is and I run to him. I think I meant to hit him, but I put my arms around him and squeeze instead. I don't know why I did that, but oh well.

"Waaaahhhh, you weren't kidding!" he says, and he laughs really hard.

"Stop laughing," I tell him. "I wanted you but you didn't come. Why didn't you come?"

"Because I thought you were dead, Xem."

"I wasn't dead."

"I watched them kill you."

I don't know what to say. "I'm not dead now. "You can't leave me again, okay?"
"Xem, I'm not your dad. I only came to see what all the fuss was about."

I don't like this. He's smiling but I don't like that smile, he's going to leave me. "How come you don't like me?" I ask. I like him, I really like him, but I can tell that he likes me but he doesn't like me at the same time, and I don't know why.

"Most people don't take kindly to having their bodies stolen, kiddo."

"I'm not Kiddo, I'm Xemnas. You can call me Xem if you want but not Kiddo."

"I don't take orders from you anymore, kiddo."

He's doing it on purpose. He's making me mad on purpose. I don't like it, but I don't care as much because I really want him to like me and not be mad at me anymore. "I want Saïx."

"Pffft, he hates your guts."


"You can't have everything you want, kid."

"Why not?"

"Because you're not the boss anymore, and you're not the only person in the multiverse. All of us are people just like you, and you're no more important than anyone else."

I have to think about this for a long time. I eat a lot while I'm thinking, and they talk a lot, they're talking about me but I don't care because I'm thinking.

Really? Everyone here is just as important as me? Everyone? Why? I thought I was the best, but I guess not. Why are they all the best, too? It's not fair. But if it will make Xigbar like me, okay. And Saïx. I have to make him like me so he'll come. "How can I make Saïx like me?" I ask.
They stop talking. "Um," says Sora.

"Do you want to write him a letter?" says Kairi.

"Yes." But when I try to write, I don't know how. I think I'm supposed to put the pencil on the paper and draw on it, but I don't know what to draw, and I don't think the things I draw mean anything like they're supposed to.

"What's that supposed to be?" Sora asks.

"It's messed up." I throw the paper away and give the pencil and a new paper to Riku. "Write it for me."

He makes a face at me.

I remember that he's an important person, too, just like me. "Please write it for me. I would write it myself but I can't, so please write it for me instead."

He stops making the face. "Okay." He holds the pencil over the paper. "What do you want me to tell Isa for you?"

"His name is Saïx."

"He'll get upset if you call him that."

I don't want Saïx to be mad at me. "....Okay. Tell him I'm sorry and please like me and please come so I can have you."

"He won't like that, either."

My chest feels empty and cold and I DON'T LIKE IT AT ALL, it feels scary because I think I felt
like that before. I don't think I was scared last time, but I'm really scared now. I don't like feeling like this AT ALL. "What will he like?"

"...Xemnas, do you not remember anything from when you were grown up?"

"I didn't know I was grown up. But I know you were all bad and Xigbar and Saïx were good. But I think it's different now because now you're all nice and I can't get Xigbar and Saïx to like me."

"That's all you remember?"

"I guess so."

"Okay. Well, Xemnas, you did some pretty bad things to Isa. That's why he doesn't like you."

My chest doesn't feel cold and empty anymore; now it hurts. Why does it hurt? My face feels funny, too, and it's wet when I touch it. "I didn't hurt Sai-- Isa. I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"I didn't!"

Crying. I remember what it's called now, when water comes out of your eyes. But I don't think I ever cried before, and that's why it hurts now.

"You had a lot of darkness in your heart, and you put it in his heart, too. You hurt him, and you stole things that belonged to him. I guess you probably don't remember all that, but it did happen, and that's why he doesn't want to see you."

I kneel down and cover my face and I cry, because I don't know what else to do. Xigbar doesn't want me, and Saïx doesn't want me, so I might as well die again because it hurts too much and I don't know what else to do.

They're talking about me again, something about a video and a phone, but I don't care. I don't
remember hurting before. I think it was all just nothing before, nothing nothing nothing. I wish I could be nothing again. I don't think I had a heart in my chest before, but I have one now and I hate it because it hurts. I don't like being me. I want to be nobody.

"Come here, Xemnas," Kairi finally says, and she hugs me for a while and it feels better but I wish she was Saïx, and she takes me outside and we play a game with a black and white ball and I feel better and I stop crying, but I can still feel the tears on my face and my heart still hurts, and she's nice but she's not Saïx. I still want to die. Maybe after everyone goes to sleep tonight, I'll figure out how to be nothing again and then I won't hurt anymore.

We go and get ice cream, me and Kairi and Sora and Riku. It's sweet and really cold. I hurt the top of my mouth and I get mad at them, but then it goes away and I eat more ice cream and I forget to be mad. It's really good. I wish I could eat it with Xigbar and Saïx, but Xigbar left and Saïx hates me. "Do Xigbar and S-- I mean, does Isa like ice cream?" I ask.

"Hmmm, I dunno."

"Yeah, I've seen him eating sea-salt ice cream with Axel and Roxas and Xion."

Sea-salt ice cream. Maybe if I make Saïx eat sea-salt ice cream that's special from me, he'll like me again. "Sea-salt ice cream is good."

"It's my favorite flavor," Sora says.

"What's my favorite flavor?" I ask, and they laugh at me but I don't know why so I get mad at them.

We come back to the house and we go inside.

Saïx is there.

Saïx.

Saaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii, and I'm so happy but then I remember he hates me and it makes me cry again.
After a while, I look up and it's the red hair man, his name comes in my head it's 'Axel,' and he's laughing at me and touching my hair and saying, "Oooohhh, flaming pants he's so cute! What the heck!"

"You did bad things like me," I tell him, "a long time ago when we were bad. How come Saïx I mean Isa likes you and hates me?"

"Can I hug you?" he says.

"Fine," I say, and he hugs me but I want Saïx to hug me, but Saïx is still all the way over there staring at me.

"D'awww, I just wanna take you home and cuddle you and feed you ice cream," Axel says.

"I already did that. I want S-- Isa." I look at Saïx. "I won't call you Saïx if you don't like it. I was going to get you sea-salt ice cream, too, but I didn't know you'd be here so I didn't save you any." My eyes hurt because more tears want to come out. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

He finally comes, and he walks so slow that I'm scared and I put my face on Axel's shoulder so I don't have to look. Axel hugs me, and I push his arms away, and when I look up Saïx is kneeling right there next to me. I want to tell him 'I love you,' but I don't think he wants to hear it. But it's true. I don't know what 'love,' is, but I think it's this big warm feeling in my chest, and for some reason I think that's why I'm hurting so much, but I don't know why because they all said 'love' was a good thing and that doesn't make any sense.

"Xemnas," Saïx says.

"I'm sorry," I tell him again. "I wish I didn't hurt you so you wouldn't hate me. I think the old Xemnas was bad, when he was all nothing." I look down at my chest and touch it. "I don't think I'm nothing anymore. There's a lot inside. And it hurts. I never hurt before, but I do now. I don't like it."

"This isn't fair," Saïx says, really soft.
Then someone puts his hand on my head and messes up my hair, and I start to push him away but then I don't because it's Xigbar. Xigbar came back. I'm glad. Now I have both of them here at the same time, and I hope they don't leave.

"Geez, kid. Be more bratty," Xigbar says.

"Why?"

"Makes it easier to hate you."

"I don't want you to hate me! I won't be bratty," I say, and he laughs.

It takes a long time. No one knows who I'm supposed to live with, so I sleep in one house and then another and another. It's fine. Xigbar comes and sees me a lot, and sometimes Isa does, too. Xigbar likes me all the way now. Isa doesn't, but at least he doesn't hate me anymore. Sometimes we do things together. People ask me questions all the time, and I try to be nice and answer them but usually I don't know the answers and after a while I get tired and I can't be nice anymore. But I try.

I go to this place called school now. I like it. I'm really smart and I'm the best in the class. I pretend I'm not, but I really am. I get to play with the other children; sometimes I take my light-swords out and they think it's really cool. One time there was a Heartless on the playground and the teachers screamed, but I killed it and everyone thought it was amazing.

I learned that I don't have to have everything I want as soon as I want it. That makes it easier. As long as I can have a little bit of what I want, I can wait for the rest; and I'm waiting, and waiting, and Xigbar said he'll adopt me soon. And Isa smiled at me yesterday. It made my chest feel so warm I thought I'd fall apart. It makes it easier to keep waiting, for when Isa will finally love me.

I know what love is now. It's when you really like someone and care about them, and you want them to be happy and you'll do things to help them even when it doesn't help yourself. My old grown up self never knew that, and I think he was really stupid. I think that Nothing is stupid, too. There are so, so many things in my chest now, and sometimes it hurts a lot and I don't like that, but it's better than Nothing because sometimes it feels really good, too. I learned all the words for those: happy, joy, laugh, peace, light. And some other words, too, that I forgot; but I remember again when I feel them. They feel so strong, and I know they're stronger than my Nothing ever was.
Sora says we had hearts all along. If I had a heart back then, I guess it was dead, but it's definitely alive now. I like being alive. I've been growing all this time, and when I'm a grown up man again, I'm going to be different than I was last time. I'm going to do things better. Riku says not everyone gets a second chance like I did, so I should make the most of it. I think he's right, so I will.

Author's Notes: I'm still kind of on hiatus.... Not as strict as at first, but there's a lot of messages I haven't been answering because I just can't right now. I'm sorry, guys.... As always, I love hearing from people, it's just difficult to respond, and I've been focusing on other areas of my life lately. :/

Well, I tried to work on that list of plunnies during the first event, but all I ended up doing was outlining one of Medli's VenVan suggestions and drafting the beginning of a random Rise of the Guardians fanfic that wasn't even on my list. ^^;

Afterwards, I was focusing more on drawing than anything else; I have several drawings that I didn't get to post because I haven't had a chance to color them yet.

Today, I was really exhausted and sleep-deprived and frustrated, but after a nap and dinner, I felt a lot better, especially when I got an unexpected gift from someone. X3 Then I felt like writing and looked it up and saw that the last time I posted a fic was twelve days ago, so I rooted through my files and ended up randomly drafting this Xemnas fic for my After the Battle challenge series. ^^;

It's unbelievable how much I adore writing small children even though I dislike them in real life. XD

Complete: 7/50
It was an afternoon just like any other in Twilight Town. Axel, Roxas, and Xion sat together at the top of the clock tower, eating ice cream and talking about whatever came to mind.

"Oh," Roxas said after they had finished laughing about Axel's latest misadventure in Wonderland, "I've been meaning to ask you, Axel. What's a toy?"

Axel chuckled, marveling again at how incredibly much the younger two Nobodies didn't know about perfectly ordinary, mundane things. He was about to answer when Roxas continued, "I thought a toy was an angry boy, but there were only happy boys in the shop and I asked the lady about the boy she had but she said he wasn't for sale and she got mad at me, so now I'm confused."

"...I'm confused, too," Axel said flatly. "Where in the worlds did you get that idea?"

Roxas frowned. "Well, because when Xigbar and Demyx were saying--"
"OKAY NEVER MIND I'VE HEARD ENOUGH; I swear I'm going to kill those guys one of these days...."

"What? But Larxene was the one who said it," Roxas said in confusion. "When they were talking about some place called Castle Oblivion."

"Vexen calls me a toy sometimes," Xion offered.

Axel slapped his face into his palm. "Maybe I should just kill the rest of the Organization while I'm at it...."

Roxas sighed, sensing that he was somehow being stupid again. "So what are toys?" he huffed. "Are they boys, or girls?"

Axel took his face out of his hand and gestured severely. "Okay, listen up: PEOPLE ARE NOT TOYS, especially you two, so don't let anyone tell you that or treat you like one, okay?"

"Okay," Xion said doubtfully.

"How do I know not to let them treat me like a toy if I don't know what a toy is?" Roxas challenged.

"Argh!" Axel burned his ice cream stick to ashes, stood up, and opened a dark corridor. "Come on. Time for a field trip."

"What's a field trip?"

The three of them traveled to the closest toy shop, where Roxas widened his eyes and pointed. "There! Look, see? That's the shop I went into. The lady got mad at me."

"Of course a mom would get mad at some creep in a black coat trying to buy her kid."

Once inside, Roxas and Xion started following various children around until Axel grabbed their
arms and steered them over to a central aisle. "Guys, the kids are not the toys. *These* are toys." He pointed. "They're things that you play with, to have fun."

"Ohhh." Xion picked an action figure off the closest rack and looked at it. Roxas peered curiously at it over her shoulder. Xion turned it around in her hands, then held it up. "I *guess* it could be fun," she said dubiously.

It took a minute for Axel to figure out the misunderstanding. "After you buy it, you're supposed to take it out of the box, and *then* you play with it."

"Oh."

"Do you want that one, or do you want something different?"

The young Nobodies looked around. "Wait.... Wait a minute, you mean ALL of these things are toys?!?!"

They must have spent a good hour in that shop. Axel soon grew bored and stationed himself at a video game console that was bolted near a display case, playing various demos. Roxas and Xion kept scampering up to him, showing him whatever they kept finding as if they were looking for his approval or something. Which in some cases was a good thing.

"........Yes.....Roxas.......you can get the baby doll if you *really, really* want it, just...don't let anyone else at home see it, most of 'em'll never let you hear the end of it...."

Xion finally ended up with a sparkly purple My Little Pony, as well as a Hiccup And Toothless Viking Heroes Play Set because she thought the black plastic animal was cute. Roxas, at Xion's insistence, eventually decided on a yellow pony to be best friends with Xion's, and then a Valka And Cloudjumper Mysterious Dragon Warriors Play Set because it was bigger than all the others.

"...At least you guys are fairly balanced," Axel remarked. "I guess."

"Which ones are you going to get, Axel?"
"Me?" he said in surprise. "Guys, toys aren't for grown-ups, I'm not gonna buy anything here. ...Never mind, FINE, stop looking at me like that!" Which was how Axel reluctantly ended up with an orange pony, Snotlout, and Hookfang.

When they got home, Axel helped the kids take their new toys out of the packaging, then he sprawled his bed and started working on the day's mission report. On the floor, Roxas and Xion seemed to have pretty much figured out how to play with toys all by themselves. Axel had a vague idea that he ought to be proud of them, but mostly he just felt relieved. ...That is, if he'd had a heart, he would have felt relieved.

"My name is Twilight Sparkle," Xion said in a higher than usual voice, pretending that it was her pony speaking, "because that's what it said on the box. I'm Number XV in the Organization."

"Hello, Twilight Sparkle," Roxas said in his normal voice, though he was presumably speaking for his own pony, since he was waving it at Xion's. "I'm, uh...." He looked at his pony's box. "I'm Fluttershy, and I guess I'm Number XVI."

"It's nice to meet you! Do you want to be best friends and eat ice cream on the clock tower together after work today?"

"Yes."

"Yay! That makes me really happy." Xion knocked her pony against Roxas's, then paused. She turned her head. "Axel, how do we make the ponies hug each other?"

"You pretend it. You can pretend anything you want."

"Oh."

Roxas frowned. "So we can pretend that the toys have hearts?"

"Roxas, you can pretend they have a million munny and a private island paradise in the middle of the ocean; you can pretend anything you want."
"Good." Roxas bounced Fluttershy. "I have a heart, Twilight Sparkle, so we don't need to build Kingdom Hearts anymore."

"Yay! I'm so happy, Fluttershy!"

"So we can eat ice cream on the clock tower forever."

"Oh...but how are we going to buy ice cream if we have no munny?"

"...We can do some missions. Just until we have enough munny for ice cream."

"Okay. That's a good idea, Fluttershy!" Xion trotted her pony over to the biggest dragon toy. "Good morning, Cloudjumper! Can we please have our mission assignments?"

"Cloudjumper is too cool to be Saïx," Roxas objected.

"Oh." Xion took Cloudjumper away, studied the toys, then put Hookfang in his place. "Good morning, Hookfang! Can we please have our mission assignments?"

Roxas put down Fluttershy and picked up Hookfang so that he could make the toy speak. "We are running behind on heart collection again because we always are. Go to Wonderland because it's really hard and confusing there, and fight two giant Heartless because I'm really mean."

"And collect hearts too?" Xion gasped in half-feigned dismay, forgetting just a little that it was only a game.

"Yes. And get all the treasure chests, or I'll be really mad and say you're incompetent. I found out what 'incompetent' means, it means you can't do stuff the right way."

"Ohhhh, this is going to be a hard mission," Twilight Sparkle / Xion lamented.

Axel must have fallen asleep at some point. When he groggily blinked his eyes open, the kids were being much louder, the time had drastically changed, and when he dragged himself upright and
started investigating why his head felt so weird, he found, to his horror, that the Snotlout figurine had been tied into his hair and covered with (judging from the smell) honey.

Roxas was poised on his desk across the room in a proud stance, brandishing Twilight Sparkle in one hand and Applejack in the other, declaring with a decent villainous laugh, "You will never find where I hid your friend's heart, and she will be stuck building Kingdom Hearts in my horrible Organization with no sea-salt ice cream forever, mwahahaha!" He seemed to be using his powers to make the lights flicker in an unsettling way. On the floor below, Hiccup and Cloudjumper were tied up with string and dangling from the edge over the desk over an ACTUAL FIRE that the kids must have started in Axel's trash can.

Xion was crouched on the floor with Fluttershy gripped in her left hand, and Valka and Toothless in her right. "We'll never let you hurt our friends!" she cried heroically, starting to glow more and more brightly with her own Light powers. "We're going to find Twilight Sparkle's heart and rescue Snotlout from the evil giant and save Hiccup and Cloudjumper from--"

Axel rose to his feet with a thunderous expression.

Horrified looks crossed the kids' faces. "Nooooo, the giant's awake!" Xion cried in dismay.

Roxas leaped to the floor, grabbing Hiccup to make him talk. "Don't worry about us! Defeat the evil giant before it gets your hearts, too!" Then he seized Hookfang, starting to fly the now-glowing dragon straight toward Axel's face.

Axel Gravity'd the toys out of the kids' hands, snapped his fingers to put out the fire in the trash can, then pointed at the action figure tangled hopelessly in his own hair. "NOT ACCEPTABLE."

He could see the Keybearers slowly falling out of character as the heroic expressions died from their faces, their Light faded, and they started fidgeting guiltily. "I told you we should've used glue," Roxas muttered.

"COMPLETELY MISSING THE POINT." Axel now stabbed his finger at the clock. It was past midnight. "GO TO BED."

"But--"
"NOW."

"But Hiccup and Cloudjumper are still--"

"BEFORE I SET EVERY SINGLE ONE OF THEM ON FIRE."

Both teenagers scurried out of the room.

Axel corridored to the bathroom to start wrestling Snotlout out of his hair, so angry that he was practically crying and laughing. "They are ridiculous...they are so freaking ridiculous...!"

He slept in the next morning, ordering his Assassins to keep everyone out, including the Keybearers. However, by the time he'd finished his mission that afternoon, the incident now seemed more amusing than anything else, and he was eager to see his kids again when he arrived in Twilight Town.

Of course they wouldn't have known about his mood change. Roxas and Xion both looked very subdued and repentant when he arrived on the clock tower; before he could even speak, they had crept up to him, Xion hugging him from the side, and Roxas putting three ice cream bars into his hands. "You can have ours, too," the boy said solemnly.

"We're really sorry, Axel," Xion mumbled.

"Guys, it's fine. Here, take your ice cream, I don't want it."

"But...."

"It's no fun eating ice cream by myself! Eat yours with me. I want you to."

The kids reluctantly agreed, but still seemed a bit anxious even after they had all gotten settled. "Axel," Xion said, "Applejack and Hookfang and Snotlout and Cloudjumper and Valka and Hiccup and Toothless and Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy were all very bad last night."
"It's fine, guys."

"So we're going to punish them," Roxas continued. "All of them have to fight five giant Heartless when we get home, and they'll have to earn five Challenge Sigils each and they won't get any ice cream for a whole week...."

He looked like he was about to cry, so Xion continued, "And they're not allowed to touch any honey EVER AGAIN and they have to pay the evil giant 500 munny each and enough synthesis items to make a really good Item for him. It's okay. Twilight Sparkle doesn't have to have a heart, and Applejack's really a nice pony it's just that she wanted someone to be friends with and didn't know how to ask nicely. And we'll save Hiccup and Cloudjumper from the Scary Trash Can Of Burning Hot Fire even though their friends can't."

"I honestly can't tell whether you guys are still playing or not...."

   o.o.o

**Author's Notes**: I *honesty* did not intend to put any HTTYD references in here, I really did. XD (I was debating on whether to have Roxas buy Astrid/Stormfly or not, but decided that he'd probably think Cloudjumper looked cooler.) Btw, I got to see HTTYD2 for the fifth time on the day I started drafting this story; yaaaayyy~ X3

My first idea for the ending didn't work out, so I tried a completely different idea, and it's better, but still not...urgh, this whole drabble wasn't AkuRokuShi-ey enough, but I was desperate and this was the best I could do....
Summary: Four-year-old Riku has a feeling that his family might not be getting this "Christmas" thing quite right.

A/N: Um...if you're not familiar with FF7 canon, sorry if parts of this story are confusing. I think the most important thing you have to know is that Jenova is an evil alien in FF7. The way I write her in the KHverse, she's more like a cranky alien who's obsessed with pretty hair and doesn't care that she's a terrible mother. *sweatdrop*

Also, I decided that their family name is "Crescent," because out of Sephiroth, Jenova, Kadaj, Yazoo, Loz, Riku, & Repliku, the only one with anything remotely resembling a surname is Sephiroth, whose mother is Lucrecia Crescent. XD XD *facepalm*

*WARNING for child abuse throughout the whole story.*

I have already finished the rough draft of this story, and I plan to update every few days. My aim is to conclude on December 24th or 25th.

0.0.0

Part 1

Riku was starting to notice that the decorations on the walls sometimes matched the stories and crafts.

When he'd first started coming to the preschool, the wall pictures had been colored leaves and smiling children in front of schools. That was when he had to learn about school, and how it was
different from the laboratories he'd had to stay in when he was younger.

When the pictures changed to black cats and pumpkins, that was when he learned what "Halloween" was. The teachers read them stories about candy and costumes, and ALL the grown-ups kept asking him over and over and over what he was going to 'be' for Halloween. He'd gotten tired of saying 'I don't know,' so he started saying he was going to be Batman like a lot of the other boys did.

Halloween wasn't fun at all, because Riku hadn't gotten any candy (except what Loz had stolen from that boy to hide the jewelry, but Riku didn't get to eat it because he'd dropped the bucket when they were running from the policeman). All he'd gotten was a cut on his hand from when Yazoo had put him through the window Kadaj broke, and his brothers had gotten arrested again which always made their parents mad, and Riku wondered what was so great about Halloween, anyway.

Then the pictures on the walls had been turkeys and people in weird clothes. Some of the people were called 'Pilgrims,' and others were called 'Indians,' and they ate a lot of food. On the day the preschool was closed and Riku had to walk back home, he waited until his parents got back and then asked if they could eat turkey, since that's what people were supposed to do on Thanksgiving, but they said no.

The only thanks that happened that day was when Kadaj had twisted Riku's arm behind his back and made him say 'Thank you for being a good big brother and toughening me up' ten times. Riku's arm had really hurt even after Kadaj let him go, but he hadn't cried until he was alone, so he was kind of proud of himself for that.

Now the pictures had changed again. There were trees with colored dots on them, and snowmen and stuff. Riku stopped in the hallway to look at them for a while, wondering if the new special day was going to be a good one or a bad one.

"Riku!" a teacher said. Riku turned to look at her. "What are you doing here?"

"Coming to school."

"Come on into the classroom, dear! Why are you dawdling?"

Riku didn't know what 'dawdling' was. "What's the new one?"
"New what? Did you walk here all by yourself again?"

"Yes." The other kids all got dropped off by their parents, but Riku's father was always gone before Riku woke up in the mornings, his brothers were always still asleep, and his mother wouldn't take him. Riku didn't really need anyone to take him, anyway, since he knew how to get to school by himself.

"Oooh, I really want to have a talk with your parents, but they never answer the phone...."

Riku shrugged uncomfortably.

"Oh well. Come along, Riku."

Sure enough, there was a new month during calendar time. Riku knew it was the only month that started with 'D,' the card on the wall with snowflakes on it. But he didn't say anything when the teacher asked, because the kids called him 'smarty-pants' and 'know-it-all' when he got all the answers right. He sighed and tried not to be bored when the first kid didn't say anything, and the second kid got the answer wrong, and the third kid got the answer wrong, and Riku wanted to scream, 'IT'S DECEMBER YOU STUPIDHEADS' because December came after November in the Months Of The Year Song, but he managed to keep his mouth shut.

"It's December~!" the teacher finally said. "Everyone, say it with me, December!"

"December," Riku repeatedly obediently with the others.

"Shirone, will you come change the month for us?"

Finally came the part Riku was waiting for, when the teacher said, "Okay! Now, who can tell me what very special day we have in December?"

Riku could see it, the special card with a colorful tree on it where the 25 was supposed to be, but he didn't know what it was, and there were no letters on the card for him to try to read.
"It's Christmas!" several of the other kids cried. Riku was surprised. Usually he was the one who knew answers they didn't, not the other way around.

"That's right! It's Christmas! Who can tell me what happens on Christmas?"

"Santa comes!" someone yelled.

"Santaaaaa!"

'What's Santa?' Riku wondered.

"That's right! Very good, boys and girls! On the twenty-fifth day of December, we will have Christmas! There will be no school that day, because we will be home with our families opening Christmas presents!"

'No school again,' Riku thought, resigned. 'So it's a bad one.'

"Yaaaayyy!"

"Presents!"

"Christmaaaas!"

The story that day was about a snowman that was alive because of a magic hat. He made friends with a bunch of children, but he had to go away when it stopped snowing.

"Is that snow?" Riku asked.

"What? Oh, you mean all this white stuff? Yes, it snows and gets very cold, and you can build snowmen like Frosty, and make snow angels, and--"
"Is it going to snow when it's Christmas?"

"Er-- Well, actually, no, since it's so warm here all year round, but.... Hey, boys and girls, how many of you have traveled somewhere and seen snow?"

The craft was something called an 'ornament,' and Riku made his teacher say it a bunch of times and write the letters on a paper until he knew he could recognize the word again if it saw it. "Ornament," he said to himself. "Ornament."

An ornament was something you were supposed to hang on a special tree that was only for Christmas. Riku colored his with different crayons, trying hard to keep the colors inside the lines, bent down close to the paper with his hair hanging low over the picture like a shield.

He finally finished and leaned back and looked at it, but he had messed up so much, the colors kept jumping across the lines when they weren't supposed to, crayons were hard to color with but his teachers wouldn't let him have colored pencils when everyone else was using crayons. He wanted to throw the picture away because it was a pathetic failure like the experiments that got killed, but he knew his teachers would get mad at him if he did that. 'Whatever. I'm going to put glitter on it now.'

He would have cut it out, too, but the baby scissors were useless, and he knew already that the teachers wouldn't let any of the children touch grown-up scissors, even though Riku had already figured out how to use them with his small hands. At home, his parents were making him learn how to throw knives. He still couldn't get it to where the points would stick, but he'd at least been able to get the blades closer to the dolls' hearts yesterday. "Miss Emily, I finished coloring my ornament."

"Oh, it's beautiful, Riku! Here, give it to me and I'll cut it out for you."

"Okay."

It wasn't until he came home from school and came into the living room that he realized his family didn't have a Christmas tree. He looked around for a while. 'Should I hang my ornament on one of the bushes?' he thought uncertainly. Probably not, since it would definitely be lost or destroyed before Christmas. 'I'll hide it in my secret stash, and I won't take it out until we have a tree to hang it on.'
His mother came home while he was reading a book. "Hello, Mother."

"An idea occurred to me," she said. "Go make the Internet work."

He sighed. Jenova had a hard time with some types of this world's technology, but she still used it all the time, so she would sometimes enlist the help of her family. Usually Riku, since he was the one who was home the most often. "Yes, Mother." Riku closed his book and went to turn on the computer. "Mother, there's a special day coming soon. It's called Christmas."

"I didn't tell you to talk."

Now he couldn't say anything, or he'd be punished. Riku resentfully logged into his parents' account once the computer had finished booting up, and opened a Web browser.

"Find something that will fly but isn't an airplane or a space vehicle," she ordered.

Riku typed 'fly' into the search engine.

"Not an insect, stupid!" she cried when the results popped up. "Things I can USE!"

"Like when you rode on the meteor?"

"Yes. But it can't be a meteoroid this time because there are none close enough; we checked."

Riku typed 'rid in the sky.' It took him a while to figure out that he should have put 'ride in the sky' instead, and by that time, his mother had lost her patience and was dragging him away from the computer. "Mother, wait, I typed the wrong thing--"

"SHUT UP."

She locked him in the basement. He sat at the bottom of the stairs for a while, seething with the injustice of it, then made himself breathe like Yazoo had taught him until he calmed down. Then he was bored, but he couldn't get up because he was afraid of tripping over things he couldn't see
and hitting his head.

So he tried to practice making his hair glow like he was supposed to whenever he was in a dark place and not hiding from anything, but he couldn't do it. His mother never listened when he tried to tell her that his brothers and even his father couldn't do it, either (mostly), so he had to try it even though it was impossible. "Come on, glow. Glow. Just a little bit." He ran his hands through his hair, and it was soft to touch and made him feel better, but he still couldn't see it. "I hate this."

When he woke up, he could hear his brothers stomping around upstairs and being loud. He could hear almost every word they said, though his mother's voice was too muffled.

"Where's Riku?"

"Mother, you'll never guess what happened today--"

"I'm bored! Where's Riku?"

Riku curled up tight against the wall, wanting to be found and set free, but dreading being found by his brothers.

"Rikuuuu!"

"Why is there never anything good to eat?!"

"Hey, RIKU!"

"What are you planning, Mother? These are still in the experimental stages."

"I'm starving."

"Did you throw Riku in the basement again?"
Sudden light cascaded down the stairs. Riku scrambled to hide under a shelf, but he should have done that earlier; they could hear him moving. They bounded down the stairs and found him quickly, dragging him out again even though he tried to hold on to the box lid beside him. They just yanked harder, and his fingernails hurt.

"Eewww!"

"He's dirty!"

"There's cobwebs in your hair, Riku. Ugh."

"Let's go get this disgusting boy cleaned up."

So they hauled him out to the beach and nearly drowned him. When he was underwater, he miraculously slipped free of their hands, and then he just swam hard, he didn't care which direction. But of course he had to come up for air eventually.

"There he is!"

Riku cringed, but was surprised to see how far away they were. Maybe he had a chance. He ducked back underwater and swam hard again, toward a very big lady who looked like she was sleeping on her big floating chair. Riku surfaced behind the chair and held on, and watched cautiously until he knew his brothers were swimming and yelling in the wrong direction.

Then Riku breathed a sigh of relief and went underwater again and swam until he reached the beach, trying to stay where there were the most people swimming and playing so he'd blend in with them. Then he ran across the sand and crawled under the deck of a cafe and hid there so he could rest. He was so tired from swimming so much and being so scared that he fell asleep again.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: I started writing this story a year ago, as one of my attempts to celebrate Christmas 2013 with fanwork, but the fic kept getting longer and longer, and I finally realized that I wasn't going to be in time to finish it for Christmas.
This year, thanks to some very gentle prodding from Medli45, I thought about taking another shot at it. This fic was pretty easy to write once I got back into the groove of it, and although it was originally intended to be a one-shot, it ended up being over 13,000 words long. I decided to split it up into a seven-part multi-chapter. If I post one chapter every three or four days, I ought to be able to post the final chapter on Christmas Eve or Day 2014.

Although this was supposed to be one of my fics that's sort of like fluff wrapped up in some angst, it still ended up darker than I intended overall, and not very festive. :/ Riku's family and childhood (in my headcanon) really are awful. *sigh*
The sun was setting when he woke up, and he knew he had to get home. He hurried over the dunes and down the streets until he reached his neighborhood.

The house was so quiet.... That could either be a good thing or a bad thing. The door was locked, too. Riku didn't want to knock on it in case the house was bad quiet, and he hadn't been able to bring his key when his brothers had taken him away. He hadn't been able to bring the lock picks, either; and it didn't matter even if he had, because he couldn't pick most locks yet, anyway. He went around the house and none of the windows were open, so he crawled through the cat-door in the back.

His parents were waiting for him in the living room. His mother's hair stayed drifting around her and didn't grab him, so he knew they weren't mad at him yet, which meant the quiet had been a good quiet.

Riku took a deep breath. "Kadaj and Yazoo and Loz took me away against my will," he started reporting. "It took me a long time to get away from them and I'm sorry," he winced, hoping his mother wouldn't grab him before he could finish, "but I did get away later," he added quickly. "This is how I did it." He explained it to them.

His father nodded. "That's adequate. I will give you a chain for the house key. The excuse you gave for parting with it is unacceptable."

"Yes, Father."

"You're disgusting," his mother said, wrinkling her nose at the remains of sand and saltwater
crusted on her youngest son's skin and hair. "Go bathe immediately."

"Yes, Mother." He hesitated. "When are you letting Kadaj and them out? I need to know so I can plan." He meant *plan to avoid them*, since he was too tired to plan revenge, but his parents didn't have to know that.

They both smiled, just a little. "You're back safely and got some good practice in, so soon. Before school tomorrow."

He'd hoped it would be longer, but he tried not to show that he was disappointed. "Okay. I'm gonna go take a bath now."

The next day, the story was about a little boy and his sister and father who went to get a tree for Christmas. They searched through the snowy woods for the best, most perfect tree, then they cut it down and took it home and decorated it until it was a Christmas tree. *'I can't do it by myself,'* Riku realized unhappily. *'I need help.'* He was sure his mother wouldn't help. He hoped his father would, but Sephiroth wasn't usually helpful, either, even when he wasn't gone working. *'I'll have to ask Kadaj and the others....'*

"Riku, dear, what's wrong?" one of the teachers asked, looking at his bowed head and untouched snack. "You're not eating."

"I'm not hungry," he said sadly.

"Ohhh, poor baby, do you feel sick?"

*'I'm not a baby. And Crescents don't get sick.'* "No. I just want to get a Christmas tree by myself, but I can't, and I know they're going to mess it up because they always do."

"...Er, well, go ahead and take a drink of juice, okay? It looks so yummy!"

Riku sighed and obeyed. He wished there were adults who were both smart *and* nice, instead of just one or the other.
That afternoon, he hid as soon as he heard his brothers come home from school, and he was glad that they took longer to find him than usual. "Wait," he said as they were dragging him downstairs, "wait wait wait wait wait, I have a mission."

They burst into laughter. "You? With a mission?"

"ALL of us," he said firmly. He wasn't really scared, but he could feel his body trembling, and it annoyed him. "We all have a mission."

Kadaj grabbed his hair and forced him down to his knees, but Loz was still holding his arms up, so it hurt. "Well, then, captain, what's our mission?"

"I can't tell you until you let me go," Riku managed.

"Nice try!" One of them hit him.

He squeezed his eyes shut and gave up, but as he was trying to be brave, Yazoo said, "At least stop pulling on him so much. He can barely breathe, much less talk."

"Oi, Yaz--"

"Put him on the ground."

Kadaj sighed loudly, but he and Loz dropped him, and Yazoo stepped on his back before he could run. Riku cracked his chin on the floor and then just lay there for a while, trying not to cry as he waited for his head to stop spinning. Then he sucked in breaths until he could talk again, and said, "We have to find a tree."

They hooted with laughter.

"A SPECIAL tree," Riku snarled. "For Christmas. It's a Christmas tree. But you're all so stupid I bet you don't even know what that is." He knew Kadaj would kick him, so he was ready for the blow.
As he was gasping to get his breath back, he was glad to hear Loz say, "Kadaj...."

"Shut up," Kadaj snarled, hearing the same tone in his brother's voice that Riku had.

"But we can just ask him--"

"NO."

"I know what Christmas is," Yazoo said. Of course he did. "It's just a human tradition, we don't have to do anything about it."

"Help me get a tree," Riku said desperately. "and I'll tell Mother and Father you guys did all the hard work."

The were silent, assessing this. If anyone else had suggested a mission where the others would get all the credit, they would have seen through it at once. However, they knew that Riku was much more unpredictable, and might very well be telling the truth.

"...It won't count as a mission if it's not useful," Yazoo finally said.

"But you're so smart, Yazoo, you can say why it's useful," Riku said craftily.

"Duh he's smart, smarter than you," Kadaj growled, kicking him again, "but not me."

Yazoo frowned dangerously. "You better not have said what I thought you said."

Then Kadaj and Yazoo got in a fight. Riku wondered if he could crawl away, but he still needed his brothers' help, and Loz picked him off the floor and started cuddling him, anyway. "They're so fast," Loz murmured admiringly, watching the two combatants as he held his little brother like a teddy bear. Riku sighed and waited.
Yazoo won. He started turning back to the other two with a smug smile, but then had to whirl around again and knock out Kadaj, who was mad and kept cheating even after he'd lost. When their oldest brother was finally unconscious on the floor, Yazoo came back to the others, now looking more annoyed than smug, and fixed his eyes on Riku. "What are you planning?"

Riku felt a sudden hope that they might actually be able to do it after all. "We have to find a tree. It should be the biggest and best, but I don't care; we just have to get a tree. We'll put lights and gold strings and ornaments on it. I'll do that. I can do most of it. But I...." He looked at the floor and said in shame, "I need help."

Yazoo set a hand against Riku's face and pushed it briskly to the side. Too gentle to be a slap, or even to hurt at all, but still a warning. "You're so weak."

"You're too big," Riku grumbled. "And you guys are older than me. I can't catch up. And there are three of you, and only one of me. Just help me a little bit, and I can be strong the rest of the time. I just need a little. I'll trade the report. Tell Mother and Father whatever you want, I'll lie whatever you lie, but you have to help me get the tree."

"We don't have to help you do anything," Loz said, squeezing him.

'I hate you,' Riku thought. He was so helpless and frustrated, he hated it. 'Yazoo's right. Christmas is stupid. I don't care. I'll never beat them. I want to fall asleep and never wake up.' "Then just beat me up. 'Since you always do, anyway.'"

Loz put him back on the ground and stuck a boot in his stomach and shoved - again, not hard enough to hurt much, but Riku knew how weak he was and how much stronger than him they were and that they could hurt him so much and he'd never, ever be able to do anything about it. But...he still had to try, or else he'd die. He looked around and tried to think how to escape before Loz started kicking harder, before they beat him up too bad so he couldn't run. 'If I go down the hall....' Wouldn't work, they were too fast. No matter what he did, they'd catch him. It was hopeless.

"Loz," Yazoo said.

"He's not fun when he's like this," Loz mumbled. "Fight back, Riku. Be stupid. Make me mad."

It suddenly occurred to Riku that maybe he could just lie here and not fight back. He couldn't do that with Kadaj, but Kadaj was knocked out, and Loz was...different than Kadaj. And Yazoo was
different, too; different than both of them. 'I can fight different ways,' Riku realized. 'I can escape different ways.' He rolled over and let the tears start to come as he looked up at Loz and didn't move.

Loz stared at him. "R...Riku! Stop it! Weakling! Fight back!"

Riku didn't move, he just cried. "Please don't hurt me anymore, big brother," he said. It felt scary to say it, because he knew if he said that kind of thing to Kadaj, Kadaj might hurt him enough to kill him. But Loz...Loz was crying now, too. Loz fell to his knees and took Riku and held him close like a kitten as he cried. "Yazoooon, I can't kick him when he's looking at me like that!"

Yazoo rolled his eyes. "Now who's the weakling? Idiot...."

Riku couldn't breathe, he was so amazed. 'It works. It works.' He had to remember this, for the next time it was just Loz trying to hurt him without Kadaj around. "Big brother," he said, still crying, "I don't know what to do. I need help, but no one will help me, and I'm all alone."

Loz held him tighter and bawled. After a while, Riku thought that he kind of liked being held like this, by someone who wasn't trying to hurt him. "He's so cute!"

"You're pathetic, Loz."

Kadaj was starting to wake up, stirring and groaning, and Riku knew that he had to stop this new way of fighting now. He wriggled his arms free of Loz's embrace and did his best to wipe the tears away.

"I don't care anymore," Yazoo was saying. "I'm bored, anyway; I finished all my homework at school, and I'm sick of doing Kadaj's. Let's just do Riku's stupid mission."

"What stupid mission?" Kadaj groaned.

"Yazoo got you pretty good, huh," Loz said. He was laughing now, though he was holding Riku tighter. Protectively.
"Shut up...." Kadaj pushed himself up to his hands and knees, and peered blearily at them. "You're all still here?"

"We're doing Riku's mission," Yazoo said. "As soon as you stop lying around and get up."

"I've been up! Your punches are like-- Like mosquito bites!" Kadaj scrambled to his feet. "See?!"

Loz stood up, too. "Let's go find a tree, Kadaj."

"Huh?" Kadaj stared. "Why are you holding Riku like that?"

"His hair is soft," Loz said defensively. He petted Riku's head. "See?"

There was a pause. Then all three of them started petting his hair. Kadaj even bent down to press it against his cheek. Riku stared at them all in amazement, wondering why he'd never tried to fight them differently before. He hadn't even known he could fight like this - why hadn't anybody told him?

"Where's the stupid tree?" Kadaj snapped.

Riku went cold, not knowing how to answer, but Loz was just laughing. "Pick a tree, any tree."

"Preferably one far away from here," Yazoo added. Then they were bounding outside, whooping and laughing, dragging Riku along with them, and Riku couldn't believe it had actually worked. He'd gotten them to do it. They'd get a Christmas tree, and they'd have a real Christmas, just like humans.

'I learned a lot today,' Riku thought, trembling. The world suddenly seemed so big, and he felt so small, but for once, he was small in a good way. The world was so huge, with so much he didn't know and could learn, he wanted to start finding out new things right away, but...they had to get the Christmas tree first. 'Christmas.' He smiled a little. 'Kadaj and Yazoo and Loz are helping me get a Christmas tree.'

To be continued....
Author's Notes: They have a cat-door because Kadaj loves cats and will feed strays right in the kitchen (or his room). XD XD His pet Ao-chan first showed up in my FF7 fic, *My Brother Sephiroth is a Jerk*, though I don't know yet how old he is when he gets her in this universe.

Requests are open for the month of December (though I make no promises about being able to actually follow through on them). For more details, see either my devART journal or my FFN profile.
Yazoo insisted that they go all the way across town to find a tree. The town wasn't very big, so it wasn't that far away, but they still had to walk a lot and Kadaj started complaining. He and Yazoo had another fight and Yazoo won again, so Kadaj was in a horrible mood and started hitting Riku, but Loz didn't like that and started hitting Kadaj, so then Kadaj and Loz had a fight and it ended in a tie. As they were both sitting there crying, Yazoo rolled his eyes and grabbed Riku's arm and dragged him on again.

Once they decided on a tree, the triplets suddenly seemed to be cheerful again as they worked together. Yazoo made Riku the lookout as he and the other two began hacking at the tree trunk with their weapons.

Riku kept an eye on the street, but he was also watching the building closely. It was some kind of night club, so it was closed now and looked deserted, but he kept getting the feeling that someone was watching them from a window. But if a person saw them back here vandalizing a tree, surely they would have stuck their head out the window and started yelling at them by now, right? Or come running out of the building?

Then Riku caught a glimpse of something down the street. There were no blaring alarms or flashing lights, but Riku knew before it finished moving past the trees that it was a police car, and in an instant, he realized what must have happened - there was someone at the window, but instead of yelling at them, he had just quietly called the police instead, so that the boys wouldn't know to escape until it was too late. It would make them easier to be caught.

"Run!" Riku yelled, already scrambling to the ground.
He didn't stay to watch, and he didn't wait for his brothers; he knew that none of them would have waited for him if it was the other way around. He just fled, as quickly as his small legs could carry him, heart pounding with fear and with a sense of guilt. His brothers had been out here on Riku's mission...if they were caught, it would be all his fault....

The guilt was very quickly wiped away by dismay and apprehension. If they were caught, they would blame him and punish him. He should have stayed after all and tried to help them escape; even if he himself was caught, it would have been better than him running away and leaving his brothers in danger so that they would have reason to retaliate. 'Please don't get caught,' he mentally begged, 'please don't get caught, please don't get caught, please don't get caught...!'

He waited alone in the silent house until Yazoo made it back. "Are Kadaj and Loz coming?" Riku asked anxiously.

Yazoo paused and seized him by the shirt, nearly lifting him off his feet. Riku squirmed but couldn't take his eyes away from his brother's face, desperate for the answer even though he had a sick feeling that he already knew.

After a pause, Yazoo dropped him again without hurting him. "Not 'til Father and Mother get them out of jail again," he said, seeming to relish Riku's wince. "I'm not even gonna bother to hit you. They'll take care of that when they get home." He ambled upstairs to his room, and Riku fled.

He managed to stay hidden for two entire nights and days afterward. He spent the first night on the roof of a bakery, and the second night in a dog house that shielded him from the rain. The dog was happy to let him curl up with her for warmth, and the smell stopped bothering him after the first hour or so. He fed himself during the day by filching leftovers from restaurant patios, or unattended food on the beach.

The triplets finally caught sight of him near sunset on the second day. Even then, Riku managed to elude them for two hours, running and hiding and squeezing through spaces he was small enough to fit through and they weren't.

He had started out in whatever direction was easiest, but it soon occurred to him that they were eventually going to catch him, and when they did, he ought to be in a good place. Nowhere with humans, because even if other townspeople did pull the triplets off of him, the boys would just pick up where they had left off later. Riku had to let himself be caught where his father was nearby, since Riku could sometimes use Sephiroth to his advantage.
So he began making his way home. He still ran and hid, he shoved over obstacles to impede his brothers' progress and he cut through yards and climbed over things and dodged around other things and ran across open stretches as fast as he could. But when he was finally caught, it had to be near their house.

Riku nearly sobbed with relief when he saw that his father was home. Then he scrambled up to the roof.

"Oh, Riiiiiiikuuuuu~"

"Come out, come out, wherever you are~"

Riku crept very quietly across the shingles until he'd reached where he thought the living room was, then he jumped hard to make extra sure his parents heard it and knew there was something going on.

"He's on the roof!"

Riku then kept it up for as long as he could, the cat-and-mouse chase up and down and around their property. He caught glimpses of his parents watching, analyzing the strategies of both hunters and hunted.

He did his best until at long, long last, his leg buckled under him as Kadaj managed to land a hit with one of the rocks he'd been throwing, and Riku crashed to the ground with a yelp. He scrambled to get up and run again, but hadn't quite managed it before he felt Loz seize the back of his shirt; then he was trying as hard as he could to defend himself and break free, bellowing in the deepest voice he could make, before Loz finally got a good grip on him and clamped down his limbs so that Kadaj was free to hit him in earnest.

Now Riku's priority was to compartmentalize the pain so that it wouldn't interfere with his decision-making, and to keep performing as well as he could in a fight he would inevitably lose. He went limp, which was difficult because he still instinctively wanted to struggle, and sobbed, which was very easy because it helped a little to have an outlet for the pain. "Stop, Kadaj, stop...!"

He knew that Jenova would be disgusted with him for begging, because she always loathed seeing her offspring humiliated, but Sephiroth would understand. Riku had already confided to his father (he didn't trust his mother with the information) that readily surrendering after the point of no
return and exaggerating the pain was a strategy he used to manipulate his brothers into giving shorter, milder beatings, thus minimizing the damage to his body.

Though it was extremely difficult, because the beating did still hurt a lot and was very distracting, Riku tried hard and finally managed to sent a silent message to his father's mind, hoping that he was adequately hiding it from his mother's mind as well. "Training message, count by twos, to twenty: two, four...s-six, eigh--" The next blow hurt so much that he lost his train of thought; then, a few seconds later, raging at himself, he frantically tried to pick it up again. "Ten?! N-No-- Two four six eight ten, t-twelve...." What came after twelve? Not thirteen...right, he was counting by twos....

He got frustrated again when he realized he'd once more lost count. He had to master this, had to be able to send a coherent message even while under torture. If nothing else, it was the only thing preventing his current capture from being a complete failure, his only chance to still pass his father's assessment even though he'd already failed his mother's. Riku tried counting slowly this time, synchronizing the numbers with his breathing. "Two...four...six...eight...."

"Come on, Kadaj," Loz was saying, "I think we're done--"

"This was ALL YOUR FAULT!" Kadaj raged in Riku's face, "All your fault!!!

"I know, I know, I'm sorry!" Riku sobbed, trying hard to hang onto whatever number he was on. Eight. He'd been on eight.

"You are sorry! I am making you sorry!"

"Ten...twelve...." "I learned my lesson! Next time I won't leave you behind!" "Fourteen...." This was so hard to do when he had to say one thing and think something completely different at the same time. He had to either get Kadaj to ramble without needing responses, or provoke him into just wordlessly hitting again. Riku immediately shrank away from the idea of more hitting...it already hurt too much....

"Mother, please," he wailed brokenly, please...please...." "Ei-- No, fourteen and then sixteen...." Ignoring his mother's outraged nagging was easy, and it served to shut Kadaj up. "Eighteen. Twenty." Riku sobbed again, this time in relief at finally completing the task. Then Kadaj's fist hit his chest again and he nearly gave in to despair, but - something blocked the second hit, the one Kadaj had been aiming at his stomach.

Loz. Loz had gone from pinning him to now shielding Riku with his arms. "I don't wanna kill him, Kadaj. He said he learned his lesson."
Kadaj seized a fistful of Riku's hair. "There's not gonna be a next time! Next time, you won't even have a chance to ditch us because you are never giving us orders again, you little--!" He paused before actually calling Riku a name.

"I know, I know," Riku immediately sobbed into the pause, "I'm just worthless pathetic trash, I'm sorry, tell me what to do, I'll do it...." His mind was already racing frantically, trying to think of how to turn whatever Kadaj would come up with to his advantage, how to somehow undermine Kadaj even as he complied with whatever humiliation his brother came up with.

Riku's mind jolted to a halt when he realized with surprise that Kadaj's fingers in his hair were no longer gripping hard, were shifting as if to relish the softness. 'They like my hair,' Riku noted for future battles. Loz's hair was always stiff with hair products as he experimented with various 'supervillain hairstyles,' Kadaj and Yazoo never let anyone touch their own hair, and as much time as Yazoo spent caring for and styling his silky long locks, Riku had never seen him play with it. Maybe Riku's status as their inferior made them feel more comfortable playing with his hair as if he was a pet or a toy, and he knew he would be able to use that to his advantage.

The fingers gripped tightly again, as if Kadaj suddenly realized what he was doing. Then Kadaj grinned and let go. He stepped back and held his head high. "Kiss my feet."

Riku didn't even want to know what his mother was thinking, but as Loz released him, he got an idea for how to improve his score with the other judge. "I'm gonna plant a tracker," he silently told his father. Of course he didn't actually have a tracking device at the moment, but he presumably would if this was a real mission rather than a training one.

As Riku slowly got to his knees, using one hand to wipe tears and blood from his face (a gesture he had been working to perfect ever since Sephiroth had taught him how to use misdirection), he moved his other hand in what he hoped was an aimless-looking movement that would still allow him to withdraw an imaginary tracking device from his clothing. Then he crawled forward and reached for Kadaj's foot, a gesture that both looked natural and would have given him the chance to plant a real device if he had one. "Tracker planted," he told his father, as he touched his chin rather than his lips to his brother's shoe.

"Good." The response was unexpected, and seemed to pierce Riku to the heart. A sob burst from his throat, a genuine one this time, partially from relief but also from other, darker emotions that he could not put a name to.

"You're pathetic," Kadaj snapped, kicking Riku aside. He whirled away and bounded over to their mother, beaming up at her hopefully as he searched her face for approval. Loz stooped down to pat
Riku's head, then hurried to join him.

Riku dragged himself to his feet and trudged slowly over to his father, not having to exaggerate at all. He felt awful. He had just opened his mouth to speak when he was seized by thick tendrils of hair and hauled off his feet.

Gasping in surprise and fear as the hair tightened, wondering if he'd choke to death before he was torn apart, he finally registered his mother's raging words. "...compared to this useless fool, I am ashamed that its body shares any DNA with mine--!"

Sephiroth's voice cut through the tirade. "Let him go."

The triplets, eyes wide, immediately burst into a chorus of protests as soon as they saw that their father also objected. "I already beat him up, Mother--!" "Don't hurt him!" "He's not completely useless--"

Jenova raised a hand, apparently intending to blast her youngest child to oblivion.

Masamune sliced through her hair before any of the boys even saw the blade being drawn. Riku tumbled to the ground, where he curled into a ball and tried not to cry. As Sephiroth and Jenova tore into their own battle, the triplets ran anxiously to their younger brother.

"Riku, are you okay?!"

"Did she choke you to death?!"

"Back up, you're overwhelming him!"

Riku was trembling with sudden hatred, outraged that they could act so concerned now when they had been eagerly hurting him just minutes before. If he'd had a weapon, if he had any chance of hurting them, he would have torn them apart, but as it was, he could only put his arms over his head and try to keep his sobs silent.

"Rikuuuu!" Loz finally managed to pry him open enough to hug and cuddle him. Kadaj rubbed his
face against Riku's hair and crooned to him as if to a pet, and Yazoo patted him. Riku wanted to tell them, *I hate you, let go of me,* but he couldn't without them knowing he was crying, so he didn't.

Their parents thundered to the ground again, the mere force of their inflamed presences flattening and scorching the yard as if a meteorite had hit. Jenova, the ends of her severed hair wiggling wildly like worms, snarled something in her alien language and then marched into the house, slamming the door nearly off its hinges as she went. The wound on Sephiroth's face was visibly healing as he looked at his sons, and was almost completely gone by the time he'd approached them. The triplets had long since tossed Riku aside and were clustered nervously together. Riku crouched on his knees, fighting for composure.

"...We caught Riku," Kadaj finally offered, his voice unsteady.

"Then explain to me," Sephiroth said coldly, "what exactly was the purpose of beating someone younger and weaker than you, after he was already at your mercy and had no information for you to extract or spirit for you to break."

Kadaj jerked back a step and made a little horrified noise, realizing that no matter how well his mother might have approved of his performance, he'd still failed as far as his father was concerned. Yazoo stared at the ground, and Loz burst into tears.

"I don't like looking at you," Sephiroth informed them. "Get out of my presence."

Kadaj fled. Loz, still crying, stooped down to hug Riku again, then trudged after him. Yazoo, shaking and white-faced, lifted his head and said with great effort, "He...the enemy often s-seems to be weak, even insignificant. We...we had to make sure--"

"*You* had no quarrel with him, therefore you only stood aside and watched. Why are you trying to justify what your brothers did? Are you deliberately intending to be a subordinate in the future? Do you think that will impress me?"

"No, sir," Yazoo whispered. Completely cowed, he went to take refuge in the house as well.

Sephiroth glanced at his remaining son, who was struggling to get to his feet. "You need to bathe, and to tend to your injuries."
"I know," Riku sighed, though he almost wanted to just go straight to sleep. His life wouldn't be quite so difficult if he wasn't expected to look and smell good all the time, even when under duress. "Do you want my report now, or after?"

"Tend to yourself first."

It was impossible for Riku to walk into the house normally, even though he tried. He didn't know whether it was better to keep as much composure as possible at a very slow pace, or to increase his speed by allowing himself to crumble a bit. Then he reached the stairs, and he stared up at what might as well have been a mountain, and he wanted to just collapse and cry and then fall asleep. But he forced himself onto the first step, paused to gather his strength, struggled to the second step-

Sephiroth sighed and picked him up. Riku was frozen in astonishment for a minute, not even realizing that his father had still been watching him. "I shouldn't have to wait all night for you to finish," Sephiroth grumbled as he ascended. Riku relaxed and curled into his father's chest, tears flowing freely and silently down his face, trying to make the most of this rare, unexpected mercy.

He was set back on his feet when they reached the bathroom. Riku withheld a sigh and went about the task of undressing and cleansing himself, washing away the grime and the smells of his past two days of hiding on the streets. He was laboriously retrieving the first aid kit when his father returned.

"Well?"

"I decided to make my own mission," Riku began reporting mechanically as he tended to his injuries. "I needed teammates, so I tricked Kadaj and Yazoo and Loz into helping me...."

When he had finished, he sat there dully and waited for the final verdict. Sephiroth touched one of the bandages that Riku had applied as best he could with his small hands. The man finally said, "Obviously a failure overall, but I commend your efforts to salvage the situation, and your performance wasn't terrible when taking your young age into account."

"Yes, Father," Riku muttered.

"I have reason to believe that you will do quite well once you have gained more maturity and experience."
"Yes, Father." It was the closest thing to praise that Riku was going to get, but Riku couldn't seem to muster up any emotion at all.

Sephiroth started to leave.

"Father?"

The man paused, glancing back with slight impatience.

"...I already missed two days of school. My teachers will try to bother you again if I go to school tomorrow still beaten up, or if I miss more school to get better." He paused, trying to think of how to word it so that he would have the best chance of getting what he wanted. "A Potion would solve those problems." It would mean that all his work of treating his injuries would go to waste, but he didn't care. He couldn't stand the thought of being trapped in this house for another day.

After a moment, Sephiroth took out a Potion, tossed it at him, and left. Riku clutched the bottle to his heart as if it was a precious treasure, and tried not to cry again.

To be continued....

Author's Notes: Although Sephiroth was slightly biased in Riku's favor, he still would given the triplets a few 'points' (not that they literally keep score or use points) if they'd been able to come up with an acceptable reason for their actions, but they didn't.
School was almost like a completely different world, a magical wonderland where the adults were so easy to please, and a child would get in trouble for even calling people names or taking someone else's toy away, much less hitting. Riku loved school. He was too tired that day to do more than lethargically go through the motions, and it was kind of annoying how the teachers kept fussing over him and feeling his forehead as if they thought he was sick, but he still loved being here more than anything.

"I wanted to play with that." Marcie grabbed the toy truck out of Riku's hands. She gave him a defiant look as she leaned to put the truck on the racetrack she and her friends had built out of blocks. Riku simply looked at her, idly identifying the weak points on her body where he should try to incapacitate her if they were ever to fight.

"TEACHEEEEER, MARCIE TOOK RIKU'S TOY!!!" one of the other girls shrieked. It was Jasprina, who was fond of tattling.

"It's okay. She can play with it," Riku said dully, but no one heard him.

"DID NOT!" Marcie yelled, hitting Jasprina on the head with the truck. Jasprina burst into tears and wailed her grievance at the top of her lungs before plowing into Marcie and hitting her. Three feet away, Chase picked that moment to dump an entire bucket full of large beads onto the floor.

By the time Marcie and Jasprina ended up in two separate time-out corners and Chase was halfway through his I-don't-want-to-clean-up-my-mess tantrum, kind-hearted Katrina had given the truck back to Riku, and a minute later, Asher had thoughtlessly taken it away again without even realizing that Riku might still be playing with it. Riku drew his knees up and rested his chin on them, looking forlorn but actually feeling rather content.

"I guess NO ONE BUT RIKU wants their snack today!" one of the exasperated teachers finally bellowed with her hands on her hips. Riku looked up at her, surprised, as his classmates started protesting. "All of you will be getting sad face stickers if you don't turn it around and behave!"
"Nooooo!"

"I want a happy face sticker, I want a HAPPY FACE STICKER!!!"

"THEN CLEAN UP! NOW!!!"

'I thought we're supposed to clean up when the Clean Up Song starts,' Riku thought in confusion, but he dutifully started picking up toys and putting them into their respective bins, anyway. A minute later, one of the other harried-looking teachers asked Lu to start the Clean Up Song, and Riku relaxed. He could never understand why most of the other children were always so whiny and reluctant when it came to this task, since they seemed to love snack time so much, which usually came right afterward.

"Thank you, Riku," one of the teachers said when she saw him righting the books that had been put away upside-down, "but come along now and eat your snack, all right?"

Riku looked around and saw that he was the very last child who was still cleaning up. All the others were already seated and starting to open their snacks. Then he remembered that he'd forgotten to pack a snack for himself that morning, he had been so tired and distracted and desperate to leave the house and get to school. "I have to have water and saltine crackers today," he said. That's what kids were supposed to eat when they didn't bring their own snack.

"Ohhh, did your mama forget to pack you a snack, sweetie?" Riku wondered why they always assumed that his parents did things like that for him. He had two working hands, didn't he? Why did they think he wasn't capable of getting his own food? "Let's go look in the snack bag and see if we can find something you'll like, okay?"

"Okay." Riku had seen plenty of children whine for snack bag choices and be denied. He didn't know why the teachers were often so much more lenient with him, but he was starting to suspect that it was because either he was pretty or he was obedient. Maybe both. If the teachers were more inclined to do what he wanted when he pleased them, he could not for the life of him understand why the other children usually seemed to go out of their way to displease the teachers.

"Ooooohh, look, Riku, here's some animal crackers with icing and sprinkles!! Do they look yummy~? Do you want those?"
They often talked to him like he was a baby instead of four whole years old, but he would definitely put up with it because it felt so nice for someone to want to please him for a change. "Yes." She opened the package for him, even though he knew how to open it himself, and then set it into his hands. "Thank you," he said politely.

"You are such a good boy," she cooed at him, ruffling his hair before moving on to one of the children who had started clamoring for her attention.

'I love school,' he thought.

He still had to get a Christmas tree. After school, he went to the Christmas tree lot and just wandered around for a while, sadly looking at all the stupid huge trees that were too heavy for him to carry. Then he went to various stores, just to look and see if maybe any of them had something that would give him an idea for how to solve this problem.

Small Christmas trees.

Small ones.

Small enough for him to carry!!!

Riku stood there in the middle of the general store, open-mouthed, staring at the rows of boxes with pictures of trees on them, and at the one tree that was on display with its plug plugged in and its lights all glowing.

It was small. Almost as small as him, so he could carry it, or at least drag it!! It wasn't a real tree like in the book, it was fake and made of plastic, but it was still a Christmas tree and it was small. Riku had to figure out how to steal it with no help and without getting caught. He went home and got out his notebook and started to plan.

But before he could steal the small not-heavy Christmas tree, his teachers read more Christmas stories to them at school, and he found out something important about Santa Claus - Santa only gave presents to good boys and girls. He was always watching, he could see you when you're sleeping and he knew when you were awake, so he'd know if you were bad even if you didn't get caught. Riku asked his teacher if stealing was bad, and she said yes it was, so then he got frustrated and upset and decided that Christmas was a horrible holiday and he hated it. He couldn't get a tree unless he was bad, but Santa Claus wouldn't come unless he was good, so it was all stupid and
'I don't want a tree. I hate Santa and I don't want presents. I just want....' He thought about this for a long time, crouching in a corner of the playground and ignoring the happy shrieks of his classmates who were swinging on the swings or chasing each other or climbing on the jungle gym or sliding down the slide. '...I just want to be happy,' Riku thought. But even if he did have a Christmas tree and even if Santa did come to give him presents, he would still never be happy, ever. Riku cried a little, because no one else was close enough to see. He stopped crying and wiped the tears away before the teachers started blowing their whistles for everyone to line up and go back inside.

For some reason, he saved his crafts anyway. Even though Riku always worked hard on his craft projects, there were too many and he couldn't protect them all, so he stopped caring if they got lost or ruined. Only the best, most beautiful ones he would hide; the rest of them he didn't care if his brothers tore them up.

But for the last few days of school, he saved his crafts, the reindeer and the snowman and the snowflake and the ornament and the angel, and he hid them so they would be safe for just a week or two. He couldn't buy presents because he didn't have enough munny, but his teachers said it was okay to make presents. They said it was okay to give his crafts to other people as presents, so....

Ms. Allie had a little Christmas tree on her desk, a very tiny one that Riku could carry with his hands. Maybe she noticed him looking at it a lot, because on the very last day of school before winter break, as she and the other teachers were taking down all the Christmas decorations while they were waiting for the parents to come pick up their children, she saw Riku gazing longingly at the tiny not-heavy-at-all Christmas tree, and she said, "Riku? Would you like to take that tree home with you?"

Riku stared at her, too shocked to even be happy at first. "M...Me?"

"I was planning to get rid of it anyway, but would you like to have it?"

"Y...Y-Yes...!"

He held it tight as he walked home, his heart pounding. He had a Christmas tree. After he had given up, suddenly now there was a tree, he had a tree...!
To be continued....
Lea was starting to feel vaguely guilty about how much he didn't want to visit his best friend these days. 'But really, can you blame me?'

Honestly...it was kind of boring a lot of the time. And the rest of the time, it hurt. Yet Lea still forced himself to keep coming, because it would be even worse if he stopped.

"Mornin', Isa." Lea sat down on the edge of the bed. He'd long since stopped bringing anything, or caring whether the flowers by the bedside were fresh or not. They were yellow carnations today, starting to turn brown around the edges. "How you feeling today?"

There was no response. The shaggy-haired man kept staring straight ahead, silent. The fact that his eyes were open meant nothing; the activity on the nearby brain monitor indicated that he was asleep. 'Good.' Isa didn't talk in his sleep. He only broke Lea's heart when he was awake. "Same old, same old, huh."

There was a long silence. Lea spent most of it looking at Isa's eyes, reassuring himself with their green color, unable to banish the creepy feeling that they'd start being poisoned by amber again if Lea blinked.

"...I miss you, man," Lea finally said. "Every day. I...remember things more strongly now...how fun you used to be to hang out with.... When the kids and I are talking or shopping or hanging out or whatever, I can imagine your voice so clearly. I know what you'd say and how you'd react...I miss
you, Isa." After a long pause, Lea leaned close and whispered, "Come back to me." Slowly, he leaned back again. He wanted to take Isa's hand and squeeze it and hope that the hand would miraculously squeeze back, but he didn't want to risk waking Isa up.

No good. Isa blinked, and the activity level on the monitor shifted. Lea groaned in dismay.

After a pause, Isa exhaled deeply and said, "Still here, huh."

"Yeah," Lea said sadly.

"I keep having...these dreams lately...."

"That you're free, in the real world," Lea said, his voice dull.

"That I'm...free. That...that I'm in the real world...with you."

"If I knew how to wake you up for real, Isa, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

Isa sighed. "You're nothing but stained glass...you look like Lea, but you're not really him. I--Sometimes I...wish...that just once, I could feel like I'm talking to a real person instead of myself. Anyone who's not him."

"I can hear you, Isa," Lea said softly. "Just talk. I'm listening."

Tears began to slip down Isa's face. "I don't know how much longer I can last," he whispered.

"It's over, Isa. It's over. You can rest."

"I can't even...hear him anymore...I think it's been months since I've heard from him."

"It's been two weeks, Isa."
"I don't know what he's planning anymore."

"He's not planning anything."

"I don't know what he's doing."

"He is very busy being dead."

"For all I know...maybe he's finally killed you, Lea...."

"I'm safe, Isa."

"There's only one thing I pray anymore. I pray that my hands aren't the ones that kill you."

"Stop, Isa."

"If...if you're still alive...if you can survive, if maybe I can help you, even just a tiny bit...it'll all have been worth it, Lea."

"Nothing is worth this, Isa."

The tears were no longer passive; Isa's body had started to shudder with little sobs. "I want to die...please, Lea, if you get the chance, just kill me...."

"Shut up, Isa."

"If there's any mercy in these worlds at all, maybe I can drag him down with me."

"Shut up, Isa! He's ALREADY DEAD! Don't let him keep torturing you like this when he's
"Lea," Isa sobbed, "I miss you...I miss you so much...."

Lea was also crying as he took Isa's hand and squeezed it hard and pressed his forehead to his friend's. "I'm right here. I'm right here, wake up, I'm right here with you, just wake up, wake up, wake up...."

...o.o.o.o.o...o.o.o.o.o

Isa was already awake and talking to him when Lea entered the room. "...he would have never known what hit him. But hindsight is 20/20."

"'Sup, Isa."

"Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I could have convinced him to be kind to your Keybearers."

"Would've made our lives so much easier," Lea said as he settled down in a chair by the bed.

"I think they...helped you. They helped you find your heart again. If I'd been able to befriend them...if I hadn't been so afraid of letting him any closer to you than he had to be...."

"Let's not play the If I'd Only game. I'd probably win, anyway."

"What are you doing, Lea?"

"Talking to you."

"If you're still alive, you're probably...not doing the safe and sensible thing."
"Darn right I wasn't, back when Nort was still alive and kicking."

"Of course you're not. Why keep yourself and your loved ones safe when you can be impulsively charging straight into danger instead."

"I'm not impulsive anymore," Lea huffed. "Sometimes."

"I wonder if the children are still alive in some way, the way I am."

"Of course they're alive. More than you are...."

"You never could resist stray puppies."

"Nope."

"I...I was so jealous, but...but I think it's good that you loved them more than me...."

"Isa...."

"You're better off caring more about them than about me."

"Isa, stop."

"Safer."

"Shut up."

"I'm glad I was able to drive you away...I don't care about being lonely, as long as you're safe."
"Then why are you crying, Isa."

"I...I'm glad.... It's good that...that you don't care about me anymore...."

"Shut up, Isa.... I wouldn't freaking be here if I didn't care about you."

"It's...better...this way...."

"Shut up. Just please shut up, Isa...."

O.O.O.O.O

The kids were being kids and had all decided that they wanted to have a mass unbirthday party. (Well, Riku had tried to opt-out, but had been swiftly dragged back into the fiasco.) Somehow, that seemed to mean that Lea was obligated to make *nine* unbirthday cards for the unbirthday girls and boys, and even now, he could not quite figure out how that had happened. He blamed Naminé. And Aqua.

So that was what he was working on during this particular visit, curled up in a chair with three finished cards in a pile beside him, five blank cards in a pile on his other side, and Kairi's card pinned to the clipboard in his hands and suffering from Lea's frequent erasing.

"Sometimes I think this will never end," Isa said from the bed.

"Me too," Lea agreed absently, scribbling a flower.

"I can't tell if I'm still going mad or if I've already been insane for a long time."

"Maybe you'll like Wonderland a lot more now than you did when we were kids."

"Sometimes...I think...maybe I should give up."
"Sometimes I wonder if I should give up, too, but then I remember the promise I made you." Forget this. Lea threw the pencil aside in frustration and picked up the red colored pencil to start filling in the hearts.

"But I can't...as long as I still exist and have no proof of your death...as long as there's a chance I can help you...I can't give up."

"You know what would help me very, very much, is for someone to figure out how I can pull you out of your Dive without killing you."

"But I can't go on, either."

"What's your plan, then?" Lea asked idly, frowning at the bit of color that had strayed too far outside the line. After a moment of hesitation, he started ringing the heart in a sort of halo of color. It looked awful. Too late; he had to just keep going.

"If only...I could see...even if it's through an amber tint, even if I can only look at whatever he's looking at...I need to see. If I could just find a way through.... Maybe if I beg him, he'll let me see long enough for me to watch him doing something terrible. At least I'll know what's going on...."

"Xehanort~" Lea sing-songed, drawing a happy face inside one of the hearts, "iiiiiiiis deeeeeaaaaaad. Dead as a doornail~"

"Lea...."

"I'm here, buddy. Coloring sunshine and rainbows on an unbirthday card for Princess Kairi, but I'm definitely here."

"Lea, help me."

"Tell me whatcha need." Lea idly swung his foot and reached for a light purple shade to do the background.

"Send me something...anything...something to pull me out...."
"We've tried everything we can think of, buddy. No dice." Lea sighed, and finally spared a glance at his friend for almost the first time since he'd entered the room. Isa was still staring at nothing, so Lea returned his attention to the card. "Nothing. Ever. Works."

He tossed Kairi's unfinished card onto the table and pulled a blank one onto the clipboard. He unfolded it so that it was just a sheet of paper again rather than a card, and instead of writing 'Happy Unbirthday, Naminé!' in bubble letters, he started drawing a child with spiky hair. "But I'm bored and frustrated, so I'll tell you a story just for kicks," Lea murmured. "Once upon a time, there was a little boy. His name was Lea, and he wanted to make sure that everyone he met would remember him."

He drew the boy's arms raised in exuberance. "He didn't care if people loved him or hated him, as long as they remembered him. Then, one day, he met another little boy named Isa." He started sketching a second boy. "Isa was uptight and fussy and kinda girly, and you'd think Lea would've hated him. Lea thought he did hate him for a while, but fighting with Isa all the time was so fun that one day, Lea suddenly wondered why he wasn't playing with Isa instead. If they could scare off bullies and one-up the teachers and set stuff on fire when they were enemies, just think of all the awesome stuff they could do if they actually worked together!"

He moved to the other side of the page and started drawing the boys as teenagers, huddled together over a map. "So Lea and Isa became best friends. Sure they still argued all the time, but it was even more fun than before, and you wouldn't believe the sorts of stuff they were able to accomplish together. They even sneaked into the castle! Three times!" The sketches grew more and more simplified as Lea got tired of drawing, and the big palace guard with two boys dangling from his fists were all little more than stick figures.

"They probably shouldn't have done that, though. Because the fourth time they sneaked in, they never came back out again. As human, anyway." He drew stick figures of two young Nobodies. "They weren't dead, though. Nope. They just got new names and powers and stuff, that's all.

"That idiot kid, Lea? His name changed to Axel, which is a very cool name. That's why he doesn't mind too much that some people still call him that even though he's Lea again." Lea chuckled. "He had the fantastically awesome power of fire. On the other hand, that nerd Isa got a dumb name change, and the lame power of the moon." Lea paused. "Except that when you'd go into berserker rages and beat me up when I didn't do what the scumbag in your head wanted, that was very definitely not cool."

Lea sighed and rested his head against the back of the chair, his fingers growing slack on the pencil and clipboard. "So Isa got possessed by a guy who's too horrible to be human...and I lost my best friend...and I've still lost you, Isa, even though Xehanort is freaking gone, I still lost you...and I
really, really miss you...."

After a long time, Isa's voice came softly. "...Is this a dream?"

Lea squeezed his eyes shut. Then he wiped the tears away, picked up Kairi's card, and resumed coloring it. "Sure."

"...Lea?"

"What." He shouldn't have drawn so many flowers, they were a pain to color.

"You look...different...."

"It's a dream, isn't it? I can look however I want. Or however you want. Whatever."

"...True."

Lea worked in silence for a while. He finished Kairi's card, flopped it onto the table with a huge sigh, stared at the pile of unfinished cards for a long time, then slooowly dragged the next one close to him. He was too tired to do Roxas's or Xion's; he wanted theirs to be special. This card could be Van's.

Isa finally said, "It's good to be able to see something better than darkness and stained glass."

"I bet."

"Even if it's just a dream."

"Sure."

"...Lea?"
"'Sup."

"...What should I do?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I should think the answer to that was quite obvious, even to my subconscious self. I want to be free."

"Uh huh." He kind of wanted to draw hearts and flowers just to tick off Van, but Aqua would probably just make him redo the whole card if he tried that.

"...I hope you're not dead, Lea."

"I'm peachy, Isa."

"I wish I could truly believe that. Then maybe I could let myself fade away."

"Please don't start talking like that again," Lea said dully, drawing a puppy that looked rather like a small deer.

"...It's so hard, Lea."

"You think this is easy for me?" Lea snapped. The pencil tip broke as he pressed down on it too hard. He made a frustrated sound and reached for the pencil sharpener. "Coming here every other day for a month, seeing my best friend like this, knowing there's nothing I can do, I can't even avenge you...!"

Lea suddenly threw the clipboard across the room. "Sometimes I wish Xehanort was still alive just so I could TORTURE HIM TO DEATH a few times, and make up for even a fraction of what he's put us through...!" Lea lay in the chair for a while, scowling up at the ceiling through his tears. After a long time, he sighed heavily, dragged himself upright, and started collecting his things.
"Forget this. I'm going home. See you later, Isa."

"L-Lea...!"

Lea stalked over to the bed without really looking, roughly pulled Isa close in a one-armed hug, then headed for the door.

"Lea! Wait, please wait...!"

Lea paused on the threshold, frowning, and turned back. "What?"

"Don't leave me," Isa pleaded.

Lea stared at him. Isa stared back. Lea's bag slipped down his shoulder and plopped to the floor.

Slowly, shaking, Lea stepped back toward the bed. Isa was reaching for him. Lea softly grasped his outstretched hand. "I...Isa?"

"At least stay with me until I have to wake up," Isa begged.

Lea suddenly wondered if he was the one dreaming. He pinched himself. It hurt.

"Lea?"

"Isa. I-- Isa!!" Lea threw his arms around him, bursting into tears as he felt Isa's arms hesitantly return the embrace. "Isa...Isa, you came back...!"

"Please don't be a dream," Isa whimpered brokenly into Lea's shoulder. "Please...don't...be a dream...."

"Isa, you--! Is it really you?! You can see me?! You can hear me?!"
"Lea...Lea...."

"Isaaaaaaa! Aaaaaahhhh! Forget unbirthdays, man; we're having a REAL party on Saturday!"

"Unbirthdays...???

0.0.0

Author's Notes: In case it wasn't clear, Isa was talking to the picture of Lea on his Dive pillar. ^^-;
He thought he was really talking to himself; he had no idea that the real Lea could see and hear
him.

This kiriban took way too long for me to do, I'm so sorry Caxceber...! (Also really sorry that I
wasn't able to write your original request. D: Kingdom Hearts is so hard for me to write new stuff
for nowadays....) Probably would have taken even longer if you hadn't re-asked for it for
Christmas. XD

Today I worked at the job that usually gives me a lot of time to write. It was a weird situation and I
ended up with much less time to write than usual, but I was still able to hand-write the first half of
this fic, and finished the rest on the computer when I got home. Coming up with an idea for a new
Kingdom Hearts story was really hard, but once I finally got a plunny that stayed alive and I figured
out how to start the story, I was kind of shocked at how easily it flowed all the way through. XD

By the way, this is super-random, but if I were to write a modern AU "handsome sweet rich boy +
Cinderella girl" sort of story, do you guys have any suggestions for activities they could do
together to develop their relationship?? Both friendshippey and romantic stuff could work. (I have
the whole story outlined, but the part that needs a bit of fleshing out is the "Their relationship
develops" part in the middle. ^^-; Cute little things or dates or whatever like you'd see in a chick
flick, or that you wish would be in more chick flicks. XD)

Complete: 68/101
Riku finally had a Christmas tree - but Christmas really was still the worst holiday, because there were two whole entire weeks with no school. TWO. That was worse than any of the other holidays, two weeks where he'd be constantly trying to escape and there was no school to go to, he wanted to cry.

Except that his father started taking him to work every day, and Riku walked through the laboratories looking at specimens instead of having to run from his brothers. Most of the specimens were ugly and scary and sometimes tried to break out of their pods to hurt him, but they couldn't, so he was safe, and he'd rather look at them than get chased and hurt by stupid Kadaj and Yazoo and Loz.

One day, Riku was climbing through the ventilation system, and when he finally finally FINALLY managed to unscrew the grate from the inside and climb out, he was so tired and his fingers were so sore that he almost didn't notice how weird it was on the other side.

But it was weird, because somehow he was outside. That couldn't be right, the map he'd looked at said that there should be a big room here, so why was it a dirty alleyway instead--?

A cloud of darkness was materializing nearby. Just when it started to open a pair of eyes and growl, Riku ran.
He made it to a big courtyard with a patch of dead grass in the middle when the thing behind him pounced, and he saw that it had skin and teeth now, but for some reason it didn't hurt when it bit his arm. 'I have to fight...! I have to--?!' But he was too surprised and he didn't have a weapon, and he was confused when the monster didn't hurt him as it bit and clawed at him, and then a big sword swung out of nowhere and the monster dissolved into darkness again.

Riku looked up. The young man with the sword had spiky black hair and glowy eyes like Sephiroth's and a big smile that Riku instantly liked. "You okay, kid?"

"Yes." Riku started to get up, and was surprised and happy when the young soldier grasped his arm and easily swung him to his feet.

The soldier saluted him cheerfully and then walked away. "Almost cleaned up in sector 7," he said into a communicator on his wrist. "Just one more to go, then I'll meet you by the flower shop."

"You said you were already on your way over here, Zack."

"Well, I got a bit distracted~"

"Just hurry up, will you? We've only got eight minutes left."

"I got this, Angeal!" There was a sound like 'bip' as he disconnected, then he strolled down the street, whistling. He suddenly paused and turned around. "Whoa, you're still here?"

Riku, who had been following, stopped and stared up at him.

The soldier grinned. "You have a side-quest for me or something?"

"...Your name is Zack?"

"Yup."

"I'm Riku."
"Well, hey there, Riku! You look kind of familiar."

Riku absently fiddled with a lock of his own hair.

"Ah! That's it, you look like Seph! Like a really tiny, cute version of Seph."

Riku was amazed that anyone would dare to give his father a nickname. "Sephiroth is my father."

"He's your--? Wait, whaaat?!!"

"I won't hurt you unless you hurt me, though," Riku said warily. He was surprised when Zack scooped him up in his arms in order to stare at him up close.

"Wow! You really are-- You're a real kid, aren't you! Not an NPC!"

"NPC is...a 'Non-Play Character'...?"

Zack laughed. "How'd you get in here?"

"I crawled through the vent. Why is this outside and not a room?"

"It is a room." Zack gestured. "This is all a sim. A simulation. Heh, you wandered into the middle of a training mission."

Riku stared around with wide eyes. "I'm sorry...."

"Don't worry." Zack swung him back down to his feet and then took his hand. "You can help me find that last beastie before I have to rendezvous with my partner, okay?"
"Okay, but I don't have a sword...."

"Well, what could you use as a weapon if you needed one in a hurry?"

Riku looked around, then went to pick up a bottle. He was glad that it was already broken, because he could still never break them right so that they would hurt his enemies instead of himself. "Like this?"

Zack laughed. "Hardcore for a little kid like you, but sure!"

"...Can I hold your hand again?"

"You are so cute, are you sure you're Sephiroth's kid...?"

It was a miracle. A Christmas miracle, just like in some of the stories at school: Sephiroth let Zack keep Riku for a few days.

Riku had to sleep in a dormitory with the other SOLDIER recruits, and they were noisy and crude, but he didn't care. He did care a little when, on the first night, one of them crept into Riku's bed and started reaching inside his pants until Riku jabbed a pen into his face. But it was okay because his yelling as he chased Riku woke up the rest of the dorm, and when everyone else realized what was going on, the bad soldier got punched and Riku got to sleep with Zack after that, where he felt safe.

Riku followed Zack everywhere, not just because he felt safe, but because he loved Zack. He'd never met anyone before who smiled so much, and who liked him but was still smart. Riku kept close to Zack during meals and studying and recreation, and even during training and missions; pretty much everywhere except the toilet.

Riku cooked better than the Shinra cooks. The third morning, because some of the other recruits had tasted what Riku had made for himself and Zack for dinner the night before, they made Riku be allowed into the big kitchens, and Riku taught four of the recruits how to make pancakes. One of them already knew how to make pancakes, but he didn't know to make them with fruit the way Riku did; and Zack poured and flipped the batter just right so that the pancakes looked very nice, and not all ugly like the ones Riku poured and tried to flip. They soon decided that Riku should
make the batter and Zack should cook it in good shapes. The recruits loved that breakfast so much that they made a medal to pin on Riku's shirt that said "Best Cook," and Riku got to make dinner and the next day's breakfast for them, too.

Even Zack couldn't believe how good Riku was during their training and missions. Now that Riku wasn't alone and understood what was happening, he was never afraid. He was always quiet and listened to instructions and followed orders, and he never did anything stupid. He kept up with his teammates and was very stealthy during spying missions, and he clung to Zack's back and didn't fall off when they had to run, and was strong enough to hold on all by himself so that Zack could still use both arms. Riku could get into places the others couldn't, and he even earned them some points a few times when they were able to extract targets more quickly than the other teams.

Riku had thought his aim was terrible, but he found that if he was positioned safely at the top of a building and the monster on the ground below was really big and he aimed the gun high over the recruits' heads, he could at least shave off some of the monster's HP from a distance while the recruits used their weapons close-up, and it didn't matter if his aim wasn't good; he still hit the target and didn't hurt any of his allies.

One time when he was hiding alone during a field mission, waiting to be retrieved, a small monster attacked him. He blasted it with materia until he ran out of MP, and he kept fighting even when he was injured, and he tried Dodge Rolling and it worked sometimes so that only about half of the monster's strikes actually hit him, and he shot the monster with a gun until he was out of ammunition, and hitting it with his knife was barely hurting it but it gave him something to distract him from his own pain as the monster started tearing into him. When Zack and his team came back, they were amazed at how little HP the monster had left when they killed it, and even more amazed that Riku wasn't crying and was still lucid and coherent even though he was covered with blood.

"Quick, Riku, drink this!!"

"Thank you, Zack," Riku said politely after the Potion had healed his wounds.

"Aaaaaahhhhh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sooooo sorry, I'll never bring you on a mission again...!"

"No, no, no, I'm okay, I'm sorry Zack, I'm okay," Riku said anxiously, hugging him back. He would so much rather be clawed up by a monster than not get to go with Zack, and it felt good when everyone praised him for doing a good job instead of criticizing all his mistakes and weaknesses.
But then the miracle ended - after work on December 23rd, Sephiroth took Riku back home. Riku kept his face stiff and cold when he had to say goodbye to Zack, and when the other recruits all ruffled his hair and clapped him on the back and told him that his cooking was awesome and that he should come and join them in SOLDIER someday when he was old enough to sign up. When that one recruit Riku hated sneakily rubbed his butt, Riku glared at him so fiercely that the boy cowered as if he was being glared at by Sephiroth himself.

Riku was completely silent on the way home, and even though it was getting dark, he went to the beach. He swam out into the dark ocean until he was completely alone and there was no one to hear him cry and scream at the distant horizon.

_To be continued...._

**Author's Notes:** For the record, that one pedo recruit was a bad egg among a group of generally decent guys, and he didn't get very far at all before Riku fought him off.

The monster in that first training sim didn't hurt Riku because Riku had not been programmed into the exercise. (If he had, he would have felt the pain and taken the HP damage of a real attack, the effects only being canceled when the exercise was completed.)

This chapter had been completely unplanned, and I think it was inspired by my friend Medli. A long time ago, she suggested the idea of Zack babysitting Seph's kids, and I love the idea but haven't gotten a chance to write it properly yet. I was excited to see a place in this fic where I could at least touch on it.

Then, after I wrote this chapter but before I posted it, she kept making me laugh with her reviews on previous chapters, particularly where she talked about Zack first meeting Riku and thinking that he and his brothers are like tiny, cuter versions of Sephiroth. XD XD I swear this girl reads my mind sometimes~ (Ftr, I *do* want to write the Zack-and-Seph's-kids idea properly; this chapter was kind of like a warm-up. ^^)

This chapter was also.... Like, of course all the abuse Riku has suffered has been wrong, no question, and no child should be put through that, no matter how extraordinary they are. But if they _have_ to undergo such ridiculously inappropriate training, it's kind of nice to not see it go to waste......? This was yet another time in this fic where ideas came to me while I was drafting and I was hesitant about it at first (in this case, putting a small child in military training and missions like a combination of _Gundam Wing: Episode Zero_ and _Ender's Game_ ^^;), but yet again, Riku didn't even notice my hesitation because he was already taking on the challenge and doing splendidly, so I just let him keep at it. ^_^;;; (He mostly enjoyed this chapter, but he'll probably be mad at me whenever he finally realizes that I would've gone easier on him in the other ones if he'd dragged his heels more. X'D)
The next day was Christmas Eve. It was Loz's turn to make breakfast, which meant that the boys had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches as usual. Riku ate his slowly, missing Zack and missing Zack and missing Zack very much. He didn't respond to any of Kadaj's chatter or his taunts, even when Kadaj suddenly wrapped him in a headlock.

"I'm talking to you, Riku!!!"

"...Bad boys don't get presents," Riku said dully.

"What?"

It was Christmas Eve, people were supposed to be happy on Christmas Eve, but Riku couldn't be happy when he had no school and no Zack. "On Christmas Eve night, Santa Claus comes and leaves presents for good boys and girls. But if you're bad, if you hurt people like you hurt me all the time, you're naughty and he won't give you anything except coal."

Kadaj stared at him. Then he stared at Yazoo and Loz. "...New mission!" Kadaj suddenly bellowed.

"I've been doing research," Yazoo said immediately. "Come on, I'll show you." The triplets trampled up to his room. Riku picked himself up off the floor, shook himself as if trying to get rid of the feel of his brothers touching him, then left the house to go find something to do.

Outside the church on Pineapple Street, a little choir was standing dressed in robes, all holding books and smiling and singing. Riku stood and watched them for a long time. When the choir finally stopped for a break, most of them went into the church, talking and laughing and drinking from bottles of water. One of the ladies came over to Riku. She was smiling, so he didn't run away. "Hello, sweetie. You're the youngest Crescent, aren't you?"
"Yes," Riku grumbled. Couldn't she tell from his hair?

"What's your favorite Christmas carol?"

"What's a carol?"

"Oh! It's-- Well, it's a Christmas song."

"*Hark the Harold angel sing,*" Riku sang questioningly.

"Yes, like that! *Hark! The herald angels sing,* Glory to the newborn king! You like that one?"

"What are those books you all have?"

She showed him her book, which had music inside. Riku wished that he could read music, but his parents didn't approve because there was so little chance of it ever being useful, so he had to spend his time doing other things instead. "Please read this one to me," he said, pointing to the page she had just turned to.

"This one? Let's see. *Angels we have heard on hi--!*"

"No, don't *sing* it. *Read* it," he said, pointing more insistently at the words on the page rather than the musical notes.

"You mean the lyrics? Well, it goes like this. 'Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains. And the mount--'"

"Oar? Like to row a boat?"

"No, o'er as in, short for 'over.' The angels are sweetly singing over the plains, but when you're singing the lyrics, it sounds better to shorten 'over' to 'o'er.' Instead of," she broke into song mid-sentence, "*sweetly singing over the plains!*"
"Ohhhh." He had just learned something new. Riku liked that, even though it was probably a useless thing to learn.

"'And the mountains in reply,'" the lady continued, "'echoing their joyous strains. Gloria in excelsis Deo!' Though that bit sounds much better when you sing it."

"Gloria in..." He could tell that the phrase was in a language different than the one they were currently speaking. "'Glory to God in the highest'? That's what it means?"

"Yup!"

"Then why don't they just say 'Glory to God in the highest' instead of using a different language?"

Her answer was to sing again. "Glooooooooooo~~~ooooooooo~~~ooooooo~~~oooooooria in excelsis De~o!"

"Whoa!" It sounded so fun that he wanted to sing it, too. "Gloooooooooria. In excelsis De~o."

"Ohhhh, darling, you have a lovely singing voice! Do you want to sing with us when our break's over?"

Afterward, Riku felt better. He went to buy an ice cream bar with munny instead of stealing it, and then he went to the beach and sat on the end of a pier, watching the peacefully endless waves. "...Today is Christmas Eve." He licked the last of the ice cream from the stick. Then he got up and went home to go get his tiny Christmas tree out of its hiding place.

...There was already a Christmas tree in the house. Sort of. The triplets had apparently uprooted the little tree from somewhere. It was now sitting slumped in the middle of the living room, dirt and roots at all, covered very messily with wads of tinsel and wildly blinking Christmas lights, and hung haphazardly with a motley collection of ornaments, most of which still had price tags stuck to them.

Riku went over and touched one of the branches, smiling a little and ignoring the sound of his
mother screaming at his brothers, and Kadaj yelling back as Yazoo kept trying to interrupt with research data and Loz cried.

Riku finally turned around and began to sing. "Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere! Go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born." About halfway through, Sephiroth, who wasn't working that day, came out of his study. By the time Riku finished the verse he remembered, his entire family was staring at him incredulously.

"Today is Christmas Eve," Riku informed them. "Christmas is a human holiday, and there are lots of ways to celebrate it. One is by decorating a Christmas tree like the one Kadaj and Yazoo and Loz brought, and one is by singing Christmas carols like the one I just sang. Tonight, Santa Claus is going to come down our chimney.

"Father, Mother, it doesn't matter how good your security is, he is always watching, and he will get into the house, and he will escape, and no matter what you do, you can't catch him, because he's magic. He's Santa Claus. You can research if you want to, or if you're too tired, I can do the research instead and bring it to you. Tonight is going to be special."

It was fun to watch his family fly into a whirlwind of activity in response to him. Jenova raged that NO ONE could get past their security, Sephiroth was offended by the idea of not being able to do the same research a four-year-old could, and once the two of them had stormed off to make preparations, the triplets fell upon Riku in excitement and approval for a change.

"Way to go, Riku!" Loz cheered, hitting Riku's back in a joyful sort of way. Riku didn't mind.

"You're a genius," Kadaj hissed gleefully into Riku's face, and Yazoo ruffled his hair.

"We should get popcorn and candy canes for the tree, too," Riku said, knowing that his brothers would like the idea of junk food. "But we can't steal it, or Santa will make us have coal."

They split up to earn munny. Riku was alarmed at first when a police officer stopped to watch him, but Officer Carlson merely asked him to help his wife work in their yard for a while, a job for which Riku was paid generously. It was more than enough to buy the decorations, as well as some extra snacks to calm down Kadaj and Loz, who were riled up from having not found any work (thanks to their reputations, no one would hire them).

As Riku had half expected, most of the food never actually made it home.... The four brothers
climbed up on a rooftop and ate all their purchases, lounging together and talking. Riku lay on the
sun-warmed roof with his head pillowed on Loz's chest, feeling Kadaj's arm around him and Yazoo
idly plaiting his hair, listening to the triplets' voices as they discussed how best to capture a
reindeer, and he decided that maybe Christmas wasn't so bad after all.

To be concluded....

Author's Notes: I wanted to thank everyone who reviewed the previous chapter~ I don't think I got
to respond to anyone, because real life has been beating me up; but I did read and very much
appreciate all the reviews! :D I'll try to respond to them eventually...!

I assume that Kingdom Hearts characters are English/Japanese bilingual, and also understand and
can be understood by speakers of different languages (Arabic in Agrabah, Chinese in Land of
Dragons, etc.). So that little 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' translation was just because Riku's a KH
camera, not because he's a Crescent. XD

Officer Carlson is one of my KH OCs; he first showed up in Before Sora.

In my headcanon, Destiny Islands is warm all year long, even during Christmas.
The Next Life: Versus Undistorted - Deep Anxiety (theme 94) [Riku & Repliku]

Versus Undistorted, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl for Cherished Tenshi’s 100 Song Theme Challenge

The Next Life: Deep Anxiety (theme 94) [rough draft]

Christmas 2014 special for sonicdisney (A-Sign-of-Insanity)

Summary: Dawn's hard work pays off when he's accepted into the most elite academy in Radiant Garden. So why is he freaking out so much when Riku asks him how his first day of high school went...?

o.o.o

Riku came home from work that day as tired as usual, though he decided to put off having a bath until later in the evening, when he could truly relax. For now, he just took a quick shower (or as quick as he could manage while dealing with a meter of hair and fighting deeply-instilled instincts to overwash it).

Afterward, he puttered around in the kitchen for a while, snacking a bit as he got things ready for dinner, then went to see if there was still enough cleaning solution left for the next time he wasn't too tired to do some of his share of the housework.

He paused when he noticed a glow coming from Dawn's room. Riku nudged open the door to peek inside. "Dawn?"

"Hi Riku," the fourteen-year-old responded dully, eyes still fixed on his tablet's screen.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" Riku asked, snapping on the light switch beside him.

Dawn, still curled up with ear buds in and his tablet cradled close, mumbled something unintelligible.
"Have you been home all this time?"

"Mmmumbleenmble."

"Stop mumbling, I can't understand a word you're saying."

"YES!" Dawn yelled.

"Can we seriously not have a real conversation unless I take your tablet away?"

Which led to more yelling and what was about to be a Keyblade battle before Riku mentioned something about expecting Dawn to still be hanging out with his friends in Radiant Garden - which was when Dawn unexpectedly shut down again. He dropped his Keyblade (which dissolved into sparkles before hitting the floor), shoved his tablet aside, climbed into bed, and curled into a tight ball beneath the covers.

"...Did something happen at school?" Riku asked warily.

"No!" Dawn yelled, his voice muffled.

"If nothing happened, you wouldn't be hiding in here and picking fights with me."

"I'm not hiding!"

"Dawn," Riku sighed, sitting down on the bed. He didn't move when Dawn complained "Ow" and struggled to shift out of the way. "You were the one who wanted to go to that school - you were looking forward to it. You worked so hard--"

"I know!" Dawn yelled, and Riku was startled to hear tears in his voice.

"...Dawn?" Riku gently shook a lump that he was pretty sure was Dawn's shoulder. "Hey. Talk to
"IT'S AN AWESOME SCHOOL!" Dawn screamed.

"...Okay."

"It's an AWESOME school. For AWESOME people," Dawn snarled.

"Whiiiiiiich is why you made sure your grades were awesome enough for you to be accepted, right?" Riku said warily, still having no clue what the problem was.

"It's the best," Dawn choked out. "I love that school."

"Except for...?"

"I love it."

"Okay," Riku sighed. "I'm going to go make you something to eat." Back when Dawn was still little, Riku had figured out that food often improved his mood, and the same could be said even now, nine years later. Riku went to the kitchen to throw some sandwiches together, and was a little surprised when Dawn soon came to join him.

"Are you making sandwiches?" Dawn asked, almost anxiously.

"Yes."

"Can I help? Can I have one??"

"I'm making them for you, and of course you can help. Please do."

"I love that school," Dawn said as he unscrewed the lid of the peanut butter jar, still with that
anxious note in his voice. "I really do. It's the best school ever."

"You're gonna do great there," Riku said. He was surprised when Dawn slammed the jar back down, pressed both fists against the countertop, and unleashed a wordless yell. "...You want ketchup on that sandwich?" he asked conversationally when Dawn's yell ended.

"Yes," Dawn mumbled.

"Even though it's a peanut butter sandwich?"

"Yes," Dawn said again impatiently, picking up a butter knife.

Riku passed over the ketchup and started layering slices of cold cuts and cheese on the pieces of bread in front of him. "Teenagers have disgusting taste buds."

"Whatever."

"...Are you going to get mad at me if I ask how your first day of high school went?"

"I'm not mad at you!" Dawn yelled.

"You should probably eat that sandwich."

Dawn bit into it savagely. From the noises he was making, Riku could tell that he was fighting back tears. Riku pretended not to notice. "This one's ready too, whenever you want it." He himself had already eaten and didn't want to spoil his appetite for dinner, so he started putting away things from the dish rack to kill time.

Once Dawn had gulped down a few mouthfuls and regained control, he said calmly, "School's great."

"Do you have any classes with Naminé and the others?"
"Y...Yes...."

"That's good. Makes it easier to study together."

"Yeah...."

"If you want."

"Uh huh."

"I mean, you could still study together even if your schedules were completely different."

"Yeah."

Riku gritted his teeth, trying not to let Dawn's typical teenagerness bother him. "Do you like your teachers?"

"Uh huh."

"Do your classes look interesting?"

"...Yup."

"If you're gonna make me do all the work in this entire conversation, should I just stop now?"

"...."

Riku sighed, then set a hand on Dawn's shoulder and looked him in the eyes. "Dawn, I'm proud of you for working so hard to accomplish your goal. I'm proud of you for recognizing your own value
and doing what it took to get the kind of education you deserve. I already know you're going to do well, I am **always** here to help you if you need it, and-- Why are you crying?!

"I'm not crying!" Dawn shrieked, scrubbing at his eyes.

"Dawn, you do realize that I actually *want* you to be happy, right? And that it kind of bothers me that I can't seem to do anything but upset you?"

"Why do you have to be proud of me?!" Dawn cried. "Just because I did one thing right?!

Riku stared at him. "Do you *not* want me to be proud of you or something?"

Dawn started to answer, didn't actually say anything, and gave him an agonized look.

"I think you just...need to calm down, Dawn. Nothing's ever nearly as big a deal as you think it is. "*Which is something I really, really, really hope you'll grow out of eventually.*"

"I...I just...!"

"Do you want to go to a different school or something?"

"*What?!?!*

"I'm just blindly throwing out suggestions here, Dawn!"

"You think I can't make it at that school?! You think I can't keep it up and I'll flunk out?!"

"I think you need to eat more of that sandwich."

Three sandwiches and a long, brooding silence later, Dawn found Riku again and hugged him and told him in a low, dull voice, "I'm your brother, Riku."
"Yeah," Riku said, patting his back and hoping this would be the end of it.

"I'm a Crescent."

"Um...that is our family name, yes."

"I can do this."

"Of course you can. Not because you're a Crescent, but bec--"

"Riku."

"What?"

"I promise I'll make you proud of me. If I don't...th-then you'll never have to see me again."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Riku snapped, alarmed.

Before Dawn had a chance to answer, there was a loud knock on the front door, and then whoever it was barged in before waiting for a response. "Hey, Dawn you loser," Kazé called, "where've you been all day?"

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT, IDIOT?" Dawn shouted, rushing to fling his arms around Kazé in what would have been a friendly gesture if it wasn't so violent, "WE JUST SAW EACH OTHER HALF AN HOUR AGO." He was dividing frantic looks between Kazé and Riku.

Riku frowned as he approached. "Why did--?"

"Half an hour?" Kazé said in confusion.
"I had a really great time hanging out with you guys at McDuck's after school, huh?" Dawn said loudly to Naminé, who stared at him with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth. "I was just telling Riku all about the first day of school."

Kazé's eyes widened too. Then he said, "Riiiiight. Our first day of school. Together."

"Awesome, huh?" Dawn said quickly. "Peterson's class looks like it'll be a sinch."

"Uh, right. Yeah, and Naminé really got a kick out of you doing a face plant on the stairs at lunch," Kazé said with a grin.

"I did not--!" Dawn started to exclaim, then, with a frantic look at Riku, amended, "Not, um, where she could see...right, Naminé, you didn't see that...?"

"I didn't see that," Naminé said, in a very cautious sort of way.

Kazé, with his arm around Dawn, was now carrying on the strange conversation with relish. "And Taft really chewed you out when you said that Corona was the capital of the Land of Dragons, did you tell Riku about that yet?"

"Obviously I know that Corona's the capital of Rapunzel's Tower," Dawn said through gritted teeth. "I was just tired, but I'll ace that class whenever that guy gets around to teaching us actual lessons."

"Professor Taft is a woman," Naminé said in confusion.

Both boys shot her expressive looks. "HA HA, Naminé," Kazé said, "you're so cute. But Taft is ugly enough for an idiot like Dawn to mistake her for a dude, so...."

Naminé looked like she was trying very hard to stay silent.

"Dawn," Riku said.

"I really like the Academy," Dawn said quickly. "I'm gonna have a great time there."
"Just like today," Kazé added. "We had a blast hitting on those hot rich girls in the science lab, huh?"

"Y-You were the one hitting on them!" Dawn squeaked, shooting a frantic glance at Naminé. "I wasn't interested, Naminé, I swear!"

"You were in the science lab?" Naminé said in bewilderment.

"Dawn," Riku said again.

Kazé talked over him. "Duh! You just didn't notice because you come in the period after we do."

"Yeah," Dawn agreed immediately.

"But your schedule--"

"I had my schedule changed!!! At the last second!!"

"Dawn, you skipped school today, didn't you," Riku said.

"I didn't! Kazé saw me there, right?!"

"He was there," Kazé said confidently. "Aaaaalllll day."

"Naminé," Riku said, "are you going to stand there and lie to my face, too?"

For a moment, the girl looked completely torn. Dawn's lips were moving in silent pleas, and Kazé was staring at her so intensely that his eyes were starting to change color.
At last, Naminé fell back on her secret weapon and burst into tears.

"Naminé!"

"Naminé!"

Both boys were instantly at her side. "Naminé, don't cry!"

"It's okay, you don't have to say anything!"

"Just stop crying, okay? Please please please please stop crying, I'll do anything you want, Naminé, what do you want? Tell me, I'll do it, I swear I'll do it!"

"Let's go get some ice cream, okay?"

Supporting her tenderly between them, the boys started to escort her out.

"Dawn," Riku called, "you stay."

"Can't," Dawn said instantly, "gotta take care of Naminé."

"Kazé is perfectly capable of keeping her company on his own."

"No," Kazé insisted, "Dawn has to come with us to make sure I don't steal his girl."

"Yeah," Dawn said frantically, "I can't trust this jerk around Naminé!"

Riku rolled his eyes. "Kazé, don't even try to pretend you're not head over heels in love with Xion."
"I can be in love with Xion and still steal Dawn's girl just for the fun of it," Kazé said loftily.

"You can't steal me from Dawn if I'm not his girlfriend," Naminé said dolefully.

Dawn's face went bright red. "I...uh...Naminé, will you, uh--"

"Seriously?" Riku said. "After two years, you're finally working up the nerve to ask her out - JUST so you won't have to admit to me that you played hooky today?"

"I didn't play hooky!" Dawn cried.

"Dawn," Naminé whispered. "Please don't...." The tears shimmering in her big blue eyes were genuine this time.

Dawn, looking like a cornered animal, shot frantic glances between her and Riku - then fled.

"Coward," Kazé remarked. He turned to Riku and started explain, "He got freaked out during orientation this morning and ran off--"

Riku was already hurrying after his young replica. When Dawn realized that he was being chased, he opened a dark corridor. Riku swore and managed to leap after him in time.

When they emerged in Agrabah, Dawn immediately opened another corridor and this time was able to escape before Riku could reach it - but Riku hadn't endured a lifetime of training and adventures for nothing. Zeroing in on the Jenova cells in his replica's body, he tracked Dawn through darkness and worlds and more darkness and more worlds until, when they'd tumbled into Beast's Castle for the second time, Riku hurled his Keyblade and trapped Dawn under a crystalline dome that was usually used as a shield against magical attacks.

Dawn frantically pounded at the barrier, and was just about to swing his Keyblade at it when Riku caught up and pounced, dismissing the shield. It dissolved into harmless shards around the grappling pair, and then Riku managed to get Dawn pinned against the stone wall. "Stop running!"

"Don't be mad at me!" Dawn cried, a dark corridor starting to open up behind him. Riku wrapped
him in a restraining hold before he could sink into it, and Dawn sobbed as the corridor faded away. "Let me go!"

"First tell me what sort of mess I have to make you help clean up."

"I didn't do anything!" Dawn yelled, failing to kick off the walls because Riku hauled him away in time.

"Then why are you freaking out?"

"Don't!"

"Don't what?"

"Riku, don't...!"

Riku decided to start with the worst and work his way down. "Did you kill someone?"

"No!" Dawn cried, shocked.

"Did you revive Xehanort?"

"What?!?!"

"Did you make my father angry?" To his surprise and alarm, Dawn went limp and white-faced. Riku shakily let go, his heart pounding. "Okay...okay, Dawn, don't worry, we can do this, Sora's beaten him before, and we can get Cloud to help, w-we'll, we can--"

"Riku, are you scared?" Dawn asked in amazement.

"I'm, I'm not-- I-- Dawn, I swear I'll protect you, that's...pretty much what I've spent the last nine
"He'll be that mad at me?" Dawn whispered, horrified.

Riku set his hands on Dawn's shoulders and said firmly, "I am not going to let anything happen to you, Dawn."

"It's my fault...if you get hurt, it'll be my fault...."

"What did you even do, Dawn?" Sephiroth tended to take little notice of Dawn, and if there had been some complaint, Riku would have expected his father to have come to see him about it already.

"I...I haven't...not yet...but...."

Riku stared. "Okay. Dawn?"

"Yes?" Dawn said apprehensively.

"Can you please just tell me what in the multiverse is going on here?"

"I...."

"Start with this morning. The last time I saw you, you were heading to the Garden with Kazé and Naminé. Did it happen after that?"

For a moment, Dawn just stood staring at his feet. Finally he said, in a mutter that Riku had to lean close to hear, "It was fine until orientation. I...I thought I could--" He suddenly raised his face and said despairingly, tears shining in his eyes, "I thought I could do it, Riku!"

"Ssshh, calm down. You were at orientation. It happened then?"
"They...they said...they said if our average ever falls below 80%...we get kicked out. Expelled."

There was a long silence. Riku slowly transitioned from waiting to hear the rest of the explanation to processing the fact that there was no more. He reached up very slowly and deliberately to massage his own temples. "So. Let me get this straight," he said at last.

Dawn, for whom the silence had almost grown unbearable, cringed at the sound of his guardian's voice.

"You skipped school. Picked fights with me. Lied. Made me chase you across the multiverse. Assume Sephiroth's going to come after us. Because you think you MIGHT POSSIBLY not be able to make decent grades at school???

"I suck at everything," Dawn sobbed. "I can't be good no matter how hard I try, I can't make good grades unless I study my butt off, you're always so busy but you help me anyway but without you and Namine I'd fail, it was so hard to get into the Academy, how can I keep it up for FOUR MORE YEARS?!?!"

As he angsted, Riku ambled over to a pot, smashed it, gathered up the released HP orbs, and was now sitting on a crate, eating the orbs and closing his eyes in order to better focus on the rush of health and happiness that accompanied each bite.

"I can't do it," Dawn wailed brokenly, coming to throw himself at Riku's feet, prop his arms on Riku's knees, and bury his face in them. Riku could now catch only muffled scraps of his laments. "Mumbleumble never happens mumble, nrghhcan't ever eembleumble!" He suddenly lifted his head to gesture angrily and yell, "Naminé's gonna do fine because she's Naminé, and the others don't care if they flunk out, but I--!" He dove back into his arms and lapsed into semi-coherency again. "Kreechm omble hard mumble...!!"

Riku had run out of HP orbs. When the high from the last one died down, he took hold of Dawn's head and lifted his face free. "Shut up."

Dawn immediately went quiet.

"Try, Dawn. Just try. If you make it, that would be wonderful. If you fail, that's okay. It's not a big deal. I'm upset with you for causing trouble instead of just telling me the problem, but as far as the Academy goes, I won't mind if you flunk out spectacularly."
"It's so expensive," Dawn whispered. "All that munny, I saw the tuition receipts in your desk, it'll all go to waste--!"

"I don't care, Dawn!" Riku hugged his little brother tightly. After a surprised moment, Dawn slowly returned the embrace and cried for a while. "It's okay," Riku whispered.

When Dawn could finally speak again, he gulped out, "But...I'm a C-Crescent...we're supposed to be better than everyone else - you're better than everyone else, you're perfect just like them, I'm a copy of you so why am I always, always failing--?!

"Dawn!"

Dawn seemed to shrink apprehensively.

"Have I ever told you any of that crap?! You didn't get that from me, did you?!

"It's obvious--!"

"After all these years of insisting you're your own person, why do you suddenly want to be a Crescent so badly?! I DON'T WANT you to be perfect, Dawn!"

"But I can be, if you just--!"

"No one is perfect, Dawn! Not me, not Sephiroth, NO ONE!"

"You've never lost a fight--"

"Do you have any idea what my childhood was like? My family abused me almost every single day of my life because they were trying to make me perfect! Do you think I wanted that for you?! Why do you think I nearly killed myself trying to get free from them?! I swore that you would never have to go through what I did, that you would never have to be perfect, Dawn!!"
Dawn stared at him.

"All I wanted," Riku said, trying hard to keep speaking instead of giving in to tears, "was to be happy. I just want you to be happy, Dawn. Can't you at least give me that much? I don't care about the grades, I don't care about--" He lost the fight, unable to continue without crying.

After a moment, Dawn hugged him again. "I can't even give you that much," Dawn whispered.

"Then...I'm the one who failed, not you...."

"No, Riku," Dawn said desperately. "No, I...it's my fault, I can't even...."

After a long time, Riku sighed and gently stroked a hand through Dawn's hair as if he was a little boy again. "Dawn...you don't have to be happy. I mean, don't feel pressured to be happy, that's not- - I just.... Just do your best. That's all I want, Dawn; just try. If you fail, it's okay, I'll still be proud of you for trying."

Dawn stared at him, too choked up to speak.

"I promise," Riku said softly.

After a moment, Dawn climbed shakily to his feet and said, "I'm going to ace all my classes."

"You're going to do your best," Riku said, rising as well and putting an arm around his shoulders. "I'm going to be proud of you because you're going to give it your best shot."

"It's okay if Naminé makes better grades than me...it's okay if, if stupid Kazé makes better grades than me...."

"I'm sure Naminé will still like you anyway."

Dawn's face colored.
"I'll still like you, anyway."

"...This is just another battle," Dawn whispered. "I'm going to fight hard, and I'm going to win."

"You're going to fight hard, and I'll be there for you no matter what happens."

"...Riku?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd rather fight a giant Heartless than go to school...."

"Well, do your best at school and someday you'll be able to get a job fighting Heartless every day."

"Just like you."

"Sure."

"Is collecting synthesis materials more fun than taking over the worlds?"

"YES, Dawn. Seriously, have you been letting my mother try to brainwash you or something?"

"It wasn't brainwashing, we were just talking...!"

0.o.0

Author's Notes: In my headcanon, Riku's gotten over his resentment about Crescent hair by now and has let his grow almost as long as his dad's, though he also tries not to obsess over it the way he was raised to. XD
Kazé and Dawn now get along much better than they did when they were little. I have a story idea for how they became better friends, I just need to fine-tune the outline and find some time to actually write it.

If you're not familiar with my work - I usually don't write stuff in order; I'm sure there will eventually be more stories in this universe where the kids are still little. This particular story just happens to take place later in the timeline. Also, I'd recommend that you check my fanfiction indexes on WordPress if you want to read my other stories about Riku's family and/or the "Next Life" stories that crossover with How to Train Your Dragon.

Complete: 13/100
Treasure of my Heart: Holiday, part 7 (final)

Treasure of my Heart, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl for Inmate XIV's Sibling Challenge

Holiday (theme 21) - Part 7 [rough draft]

When they got home, Jenova was creating a force field around their property, and Sephiroth was having conversations with people on two different communication devices.

Yazoo found a Christmas movie on TV, which he and Riku watched as Kadaj and Loz set up Santa traps before coming to join them. Then Riku set up his tiny Christmas tree next to the bigger one, and he put his family's presents under it. They weren't wrapped, so he didn't mind much when his brothers claimed theirs early, Kadaj and Loz fighting over the reindeer craft as Yazoo calmly picked up the angel.

"That one is supposed to be Father's," Riku said. "Because he's the One-Winged Angel."

"It's mine now," Yazoo said coolly.

"...Okay." Riku picked up the plastic ornament he had decorated instead, and carried it to his father.

"I don't care," Sephiroth said icily into the comm. "I expect it to arrive here long before midnight."

"Father," Riku said, holding up his gift, "Merry Christmas."

With one hand, Sephiroth absently took the gift and laid it aside, then grasped Riku's shoulder and turned him around and pushed him back toward the living room. "If you lack the imagination for sufficiently motivational threats, perhaps I can give you some ideas," he growled to whomever he was talking to. Riku shrugged and went to rejoin his brothers.

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Riku brushed his teeth and went to bed at about ten o'clock. The rest of his family were determined
to stay awake, probably to catch Santa Claus or something, but Riku knew that Santa was too magic to be caught, and he didn't come when you were awake, anyway. Riku lay under the covers and watched the clock and finally drifted to sleep.

He woke up at about 2:00 in the morning, because people were shouting and the force field outside his window was glowing and buzzing. Riku rushed downstairs, ducked under a flailing lock of his mother's hair, and saw her standing on the back porch shouting up at Sephiroth, who was somewhere in the sky. The triplets were clustered around the gifts and stockings that had appeared under the two Christmas trees.

"This one is for him, too!" Loz was exclaiming. "Are they all for him?!"

Yazoo methodically went through the tags. "All three of the boxes are Riku's," he confirmed. "From Santa Claus."

"The coal is for us!" Loz cried. The stockings with the triplets' names on them were all stuffed to the brim with what looked like black rocks. Kadaj seized Riku's stocking and upended it, spilling a mixture of candy and coal and small toys across the floor.

'I was kind of bad this year,' Riku thought uneasily, 'but I was mostly good...better than them, at least....' He gulped when all three of his brothers raised their heads and gave him murderous looks. "You can have them," Riku said quickly, "you can have the candy, and the toys, I--"

Yazoo drew his weapon, but before he could even take a step, Kadaj seized a Fire materia and blasted all of Riku's gifts with it. "I hate you!" he screamed. "I hate Santa, I hate Christmas, I hate you!!"

Sephiroth and Jenova crossed through the house, conversing rapidly, marching straight through the flames as if they didn't even notice that the living room was on fire.

Riku turned in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" Kadaj demanded.

Riku felt rage rip through him, so strongly that he felt it might tear him apart. He slammed his fist against the cabinet he was passing - all the drawers and cabinets on that side of the kitchen burst
open, spewing half their contents. Barely noticing, Riku walked out of the house and through the force field and down the street.

After a while, he realized that he wasn't wearing shoes.

His fury was dying, leaving grief in its wake. Tears trickled down his face as he wandered through the quiet streets, seeing the cheerful decorations and lights on all the houses and windows, silently raging at them before lapsing back into misery.

Finally, when his socks had become unsalvageable, he paused and looked around. He was standing outside one of the stupid cheerful Christmas houses, and for a second, he gritted his teeth and considered ripping down all those lights and knocking down those figures in the yard. But then his shoulders slumped and the anger drained out of him again, and it took a lot of effort to climb up to the roof. He curled up, looking at the stars, thinking that he would rather live on a ball of gas burning billions of miles away than here on this horrible island.

He heard a window open directly below him. It took a long time, as if the person trying to swing it open was particularly clumsy or uncoordinated. There was a pause. Then a hopeful, very young voice. "Santa?"

"..."

"...Santa?" the child called again.

Riku sighed. Then he crawled to the edge of the roof and called down, "Santa Claus is a jerk."

"Santa?!"

"I'm not Santa!" Riku shouted.

"Rudolph. Hi!!"

Riku frowned. Then he climbed down to the windowsill and tumbled into the room.
A little boy, smaller than him, was staring at him with an expression caught between delight and confusion. "Santa's elf?"

"I'm not an elf," Riku said in irritation. "I'm Riku."

"Riku."
The boy beamed at him. "I'm Sora!"

"...Sora?"

"You're my friend." The boy hugged him.

Riku stared. "We're...we're not friends. We just met."

"Play tin soldier and ballina." Sora trotted over to the overflowing toy box across the room and pulled out two figurines. He trotted the pink-clad doll across the floor and furniture. "Oh nooo, Tin Soldier, help, help!" He left her on a chair, then hurried over to the other figurine. "Ballina, come back!"

"...She's a ballerina. Not a 'ballina.'"

"Come back~" Sora trotted the soldier after the ballerina. Then he ran and grabbed a crocodile toy and stuck the ballerina in its mouth. "Help, help, Tin Soldier!" He handed the soldier figurine to Riku and smiled.

Riku stared at it. "...You want the soldier to go rescue the ballerina?"

"Heeeeeeelp," Sora called softly, dancing the crocodile and its meal backward.

Riku looked around, then plucked a pencil off the table and held it to the soldier's hand to use as a weapon. "I'm destroying all your HP, beastie."
"Help~ Tin Soldier~!"

They played until Sora got tired. He rubbed his eyes a lot, then finally climbed onto his bed and, after a moment, looked at Riku expectantly and patted the mattress beside him. Riku stared back. Sora climbed back off the bed, trotted across to Riku, took Riku's hand, dragged him over to the bed, and pushed. Riku climbed onto the bed. Sora scrambled up after him and lay down and snuggled against him.

Riku stared down at him. After a minute, he reached out to touch one of the messy brown spikes of Sora's hair. It was coarse and tousled from having not been combed after a recent bath. It was dark and not silky at all.

Riku loved it. "Good night, Sora," he whispered.

"New friend Riku," Sora murmured back sleepily. Riku carefully lay down and pressed his back against Sora's. He could tell that Sora was asleep within minutes. He lay awake for a long time, and decided that a lot of Christmas was horrible but some of it was still pretty good.

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Ftr, Sora had recently watched Fantasia 2000. XD He was referring to the "Steadfast Tin Soldier" segment of that film.

This fic was darker and not nearly as festive as I'd hoped my Christmas contribution would be this year, but it was the best I could do... ^^; I still have a little time to try to finish more stories (I think coloring those drawings in time are out of the question XD), but I'm also going to be busy with family stuff, so we'll see. In case I'm not able to post anything else, Merry Christmas, everyone! :D

I figure that Santa Claus usually doesn't bother visiting places where all the occupants would always get coal, which is why he hadn't tried to get into the Crescent house in previous years.

There will eventually be a one-shot sequel to this story for the "Hesitant" theme of Sapphire Eyes (which means it's told from Sora's mother's POV, though drafting it is making it think it would probably work better in third person perspective...I dunno...). It's about Sapphique waking up on Christmas morning to find this strange half-alien child in the house with her son. XD I'd started writing it a few days after this one, but also failed to finish it in time for Christmas 2013.

And thanks to Medli, I now want to write yet another sequel focusing on Riku's relationships with
Zack and with Sora's family. XD I don't know yet how long it would be, how much time it would cover, or if I'll be able to attach it to a challenge theme or not.

I've now written two versions of Sora & Riku's meeting. In *Before Sora*, their mothers were friends before they were born (and the triplets kiss up to adults to hide how bad they are); but in this story, the boys become friends on Christmas Eve when Riku is four and Sora is three (and everyone already knows that the triplets are even worse hooligans than Ventus). I haven't decided which version will be my "official" headcanon yet.

...The Crescent boys practically knocked me over with ideas for how they spent Halloween, so I might eventually write that fic, too. Not sure yet.

Complete: 6/100
It was a little like an adventure.

Isa and his mother stopped by early in the morning to pick up Lea, and they all dutifully went to the university for Isa's "Geek Contest," as Lea put it.

Honestly, Lea spent most of the time playing video games or dozing in his seat, jerking awake every time Mrs. Tsukino cheered. She did that whenever Isa's team scored a point, so Lea would whoop and cheer as loud as he could, then go back to sleep without bothering to figure out what Isa's team had done to score.

The final time he woke up, Isa's mother was on her feet and the entire audience wouldn't stop cheering, so Lea looked at the stage. Isa's team were going crazy yelling and hugging each other (not Isa, of course, but he was being enthusiastically glomped by several of the others), and the other team was all mopey, so Lea realized that his best friend's team had won. "GO ISAAAA!!" Lea bellowed. "YOU'RE THE BEST! AWESOME! GOOD JOB, DUDE! ISA ROCKS! WHOO!"

When they finally made their way through the crowd down to where the contestants were milling around with their families, Mrs. Tsukino squealed and hugged Isa and told him how happy and proud she was of him. Isa, cool and calm as always, barely said anything in response, but Lea knew he was happy because of the smug little smile on his face and the way he held his head high.

Lea poked the gold medal hanging around Isa's neck. "I knew you'd win."
"Of course I was going to win."

"Think your dad will be happy?" Lea said knowingly.

Isa raised an eyebrow (Lea envied him the ability to do this at age twelve) and said, "He won't be angry, at any rate."

"Your father will be delighted," Mrs. Tsukino insisted, hugging him again. "All of us are so proud of you, Saa-chan."

"Mother, please...at least not in public..." Isa said in a pained voice.

"Come on, Saa-chan," Lea said, sticking his tongue out teasingly when Isa glared at him, "let's make tracks! We gotta get to your Tiny Bit Less Geeky Contest now."

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Tsukino gasped. "Hurry, boys. I don't think we'll even have time for lunch, but I have some snacks in my purse. We can eat them on the way, and I promise we'll have a wonderful dinner afterward to celebrate!"

"With ice cream~" Lea declared, pumping his fist.

"I have to win the competition before we can celebrate," Isa said, and made a face when his mother hugged him yet again and kissed him.

"We're celebrating even if you place dead last," she said warmly. "Come along, love."

This was where the adventure part came in, because they technically weren't even supposed to be at the music competition, and Isa's father didn't know about it. It gave an exciting feel even to little things like Isa's number assignment being pinned to his shirt, and Lea and Mrs. Tsukino finding seats in the auditorium.

Lea video gamed his way through a lot of the competition again, but he kept getting distracted this
time because some of the performances actually caught his interest. He was both shocked and delighted when one group of students played music from one of his favorite games.

Isa, competing as a solo vocalist, was recognizably the best of his age group. He even gave all the older contestants a run for their munny (in Mrs. Tsukino's opinion), or at least all the older contestants except the group who'd played the main theme of *Professor Layton and the Curious Village* (in Lea's opinion).

In the end, Isa came away with not just a second gold medal, but a brochure from the very interested choirmaster at the Academy. The head judge even declared, as he was awarding the prize, that Isa would have won first place overall if it hadn't been against the rules for a contestant to place outside their age group. Lea and Mrs. Tsukino cheered wildly, not noticing the jealousy-fueled expressions on the faces of many of the other parents and contestants, and they had a great time with Isa when they went out to eat afterward.

The next day at school, Isa was preoccupied and alone when he suddenly found a large, meaty hand gripping his shirt and shoving him against the wall. Startled, he registered the fact that a giant high schooler had cornered him, and that there was no one nearby to help. Hovering behind the guy was one of Isa's opponents from the previous morning's competition, who was glaring at Isa darkly.

"You the punk who cheated my brother out of a medal?" the thug demanded.

"No," Isa said coolly, partially because he hadn't cheated, and partially because he wasn't an idiot.

"It is him," the smaller boy snapped. "Make him give me my medal, Niisan. He got my medal and Irina's, it isn't fair!"

'How pathetic,' Isa thought in disgust.

"Fork them over," the older brother growled.

"...I don't bring my medals to school with me." 'Idiots."

The older boy blinked, then looked at his younger brother. The boy snarled at Isa, "You bring them tomorrow, they're ours. If you don't bring them, my big brother will beat you to a pulp, you hear
me?"

"I hear you."

"Give him a little taste of what'll happen if he doesn't do what we say, Niisan."

Isa weathered the blow without a sound and then watched, forcing his expression to stay impassive, as the younger boy dumped out all the contents of Isa's schoolbag and kicked them around.

"You don't deserve to have those medals," the boy said in a high voice. "You're a freak, and you cheated so they're not yours anyway, I should have won the Academic Decathlon and my brother's girlfriend should have won Young Melodies, not you!"

"I'm sorry that you're upset. 'Because it's really annoying to have to deal with.'"

"Just-- Just bring the medals tomorrow! Loser!"

When they were gone, Isa slowly climbed to his feet and started dragging his things together. He found himself shaking, partly from adrenaline and partly from outrage and partly from knowing that he was now late to class and his father would be angry when he found out about his son missing class.

When Isa had all his things together, he trudged to the nearest bathroom to try to straighten himself up, then finally made it to class but could barely concentrate on the lecture.

At lunch, Lea broke off in mid-greeting and yelled, "Whoa! What happened to you?!"

"I fell," Isa mumbled.

"You fell? That doesn't look like you fell, it looks like you got hit."

"I'm going to hit you if we keep talking about this."
"Hah, I'd like to see you try."

Isa was almost upset enough to attempt it, but he managed to hold onto his temper, and was eventually successful in distracting Lea onto a safer topic of conversation.

The next morning, Isa got up earlier than usual, readied himself for school, then picked up the Decathlon medal and gazed at it for a long time. 'It's just a piece of metal on a ribbon. There's nothing inherent about this object that makes it valuable. I know that I won that competition fairly, and the knowledge of that is enough reason for pride. I don't need this. It's worthless. And Father's probably not going to notice it's gone, so I won't even get in trouble for 'losing' it.' Still, his throat felt tight as he slipped the medal into his pocket.

Then he went to Lea's house early, greeted the surprised Mrs. Hayes, and went into his still-sleeping best friend's room. "Your room is disgusting, Lea. Do you ever clean?" Isa started rummaging through various piles.

"Mmmmmmmnnnnffggghhh...Izzz...Isaaa...?"

"Where's my medal?"

"Whaa?" Lea said sleepily.

"My medal, stupid. The one you were supposed to hold onto for safekeeping. Doesn't look like you can keep anything safe in here."

"Medal...lllll...." Lea yawned hugely.

When he had finally gotten out of bed, Lea dug a box out from the depths of his closet, picked the cheap lock on it because he couldn't find the key, then proudly removed the prize Isa had won at the music competition. "Ta daa!"

"Thank you." Isa took the medal and stuck it in his pocket along with the other one.
"You want it back?"

"It's my medal, I can do whatever I want with it." Isa didn't like how harsh his voice sounded, since it was not Lea he wanted to vent his resentment on.

"Yeah, duh. I just thought the whole point was that you didn't want to get in trouble if your dad found out you did the singing contest."

"My father is not going to find out. Get ready for school, we have to leave in fifteen minutes."

"Yeah, so I could have slept for ten more minutes! What is wrong with you?"

Isa rolled his eyes. "I'll be in the kitchen. If you're late, I'm leaving without you."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

At school, Isa stayed alert and tried to always be near large groups of people. Yet inevitably, he once more found himself cornered alone and pinned to the wall by somebody much stronger than him. His face remained expressionless, but his heart sank.

"You brought the medals?" the high school thug demanded.

"You better have them," his little brother said. "You'd better!"

"...They're in my pockets," Isa muttered. He kept his head held high as his medals were stolen from him, and nothing in his expression betrayed the venomous thoughts he was thinking as he watched the two brothers gleefully congratulate each other and stroll away with their loot. 'I hate you. Someday, I am going to make you pay.' Isa made his way to class, was not late, and took excellent notes, yet once more was unable to remember much from the lecture.

He met Lea for lunch as usual, and managed to banter enough to seem normal for a while. Then he blinked and abruptly realized that Lea was staring from him, and that he had been spacing out, because he couldn't remember what Lea had been talking about. "Sorry. What was the last thing you said?" He made himself take another bite of his meal.
"...Isa, what's wrong?"

"Nothing except your brain."

"You've been.... Seriously, are you okay?"

"Yes, Lea, I'm just tired. What were you saying again, about the 'hottie' in your science class?"

Lea studied him for a while without speaking.

"Stop staring at me like that, you're giving the creeps."

"...What'd you need your medal for this morning?"

"Maybe I grew some balls and don't care anymore if my father finds out about the music competition," Isa mumbled.

"Do you still have it?"

"What?" Isa asked, playing dumb even as dread started to tighten his chest. Lea was the only one besides his mother who could see through him whenever he tried to put on an act.

"Your medal, dummy. I wanna look at it."

"You don't have to look at it. I won first place."

"I just wanna see it!"

"Well, maybe I don't want to show it to you! I'm allowed to keep my own belongings private, Lea!"
"Why wouldn't you show it to me?!!"

"It's none of your business!"

A teacher on lunch duty paused by their table and said in a warning tone, "Boys, keep your voices down."

"I will when he shows me his medal."

"Just leave me alone!" Isa shouted. "You're so irritating!" He got up and tried to storm away, but the effect of his dramatic exit was rather hampered by the fact that it took longer than he expected to pack his barely-touched meal back into his lunch bag. He realized belatedly that he should have just left it behind.

Lea kept pestering him the entire time. "What's the matter with you? It's just a medal, Isa. I'm not gonna hurt it, I just want to look at it! Come on, Isa! Why the heck are you mad at me? Just tell me what--"

"Are you so stupid that you don't know what 'Leave me alone' means? It means get out of my way, I don't want to talk to you or look at you or listen to you, you annoying little person!" Lunch safely stowed, Isa was finally able to storm away properly.

Lea followed right on his heels, leaving his own half-finished lunch behind without a second glance. "I bet you don't even have the medal anymore. What happened? Did your dad find out and make you throw it away? Did--?"

They were behind the gym now, and Isa whirled around to yell at him, "Leave me ALONE, Lea!"

Lea hit him. Isa hit back. They fought, and Lea would have won - except that as he knelt there gripping the front of Isa's sweater with his other fist raised to punch Isa in the face, while Isa cringed away in anticipation of the blow, Lea suddenly remembered how much trouble Isa would be in at home if he was caught fighting at school. Lea lowered his fist. "...If you don't tell me what's wrong, I'll give you a black eye, right where your dad can see."
Defeated, Isa very grudgingly let Lea pry the truth out of him.

"They TOOK them?!"

"It doesn't matter, Lea," Isa muttered.

"They took your medals?!?!"

"They're just pieces of metal. I don't care. We both know I won fairly."

"Those PUNKS!" Lea sprang to his feet and marched away.

"Lea?!" Just then, the bell rang, and Isa was torn between going after his friend and making it to class so he wouldn't get in trouble. With a little cry of frustration, he rushed to his classroom, swearing to take a 'restroom break' as soon as possible.

Students were not allowed to leave their rooms during the first and last ten minutes of class. Even after ten minutes, the teacher was in the middle of an explanation, and Isa had to wait until she'd finished giving instructions for the assignment. By the time he finally had the chance to get out and look for Lea, Lea was getting his butt kicked, especially since he kept jumping up to keep swinging at his older and much bigger opponent rather than recognizing the undeniable fact that he was outmatched.

"Lea!" Isa rushed forward and seized his friend's arm.

"I'M NOT LETTING YOU GO 'TIL YOU GIVE ISA BACK HIS MEDALS!" Lea shouted, and swung at the older boy again. He was knocked to the ground in response.

"Try again, toothpick," the boy taunted. Then he looked at Isa and said contemptuously, "You're so lame." He raised his hand to hit Isa.

Isa burst into tears. "I know, I am," he sobbed, even as he gripped Lea's arms to keep the furious boy from retaliating. "Don't hit me, I'll leave you alone...!"
The older boy laughed and grabbed Isa's head to shove him away. Isa managed to regain his footing without falling over while still keeping hold of Lea.

"LET GO OF ME, ISA! STOP CRYING, YOU'RE NOT LAME!"

'Shut up, idiot.' "Let's just go, Lea," Isa said with a pathetic sniffle. It was hard work trying to force Lea away from the confrontation. "They can have the medals, it's okay, they deserved to win more than me, anyway."

"ISA WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!"

As soon as Isa had managed to drag Lea far enough away, he stopped making sobbing noises and straightened the shoulders he'd been hunching and shoved Lea against the wall. Lea stared at him. "Are you stupid?" Isa hissed.

"Is--"

"That is not a fight you can win, Lea! What were you planning to do, keep swinging at him until he knocked you unconscious?!"

"You...?" Looking completely confused, Lea reached for the tear still glimmering on Isa's face.

Isa impatiently wiped it away. "You give them what they want so they'll stop hurting you. You figure out how to retaliate on your own level, not theirs."

"Were you-- Were you faking it?!"

"I told you, I don't care about the medals," Isa said sulkily. 'Not as much as I care about you, anyway.' "Did it ever occur to you to try to get the older brother kicked off his team or break up with his girlfriend rather than just failing to punch him? Or to get to the younger brother through his teachers or even the Decathlon's judging panel?"
"Can we...even do that?"

Isa grinned. "Honestly, Lea, sometimes it seems like you have no faith in me."

Lea grinned back. "You do all the planning. I'll take care of the dirty work."

"Of course. Why else would I still keep you around?"

"Why else would I keep you around." Lea shoved him playfully.

Isa laughed and went along with the horseplay for a bit, then took hold of Lea's arm and steered him away. "Come on, let's clean you up, then we both need to get back to class."

"Aw, come on, who needs class? I like hanging out with you better, anyway...."

o.o.o

Author's Notes: Apparently the age range for when a boy's voice breaks is about 10-15 years old, so I think the timing is all right for Isa's puberty not affecting his performance in this fic.

I am not a gamer at all, so it was difficult trying to find a video game theme that would suit this story. X'D I finally decided on Professor Layton and the Curious Village, but I've never played it and only listened to the theme once. ^^;

I originally had a reason for Isa winning two competitions, but then as I was drafting, I realized it hadn't been necessary. Oh well. *sweatdrop*

Complete: 6/100
Saïx was almost never disturbed in his room by anyone but Axel, and Axel had not bothered to disturb him since replacing him with the Keybearers, so the sound of three people walking unbidden into his room was unexpected enough to make Saïx pause.

"Yo, Saïx!"

"What do you want," Saïx said in a monotone. He could sense the wretched Key brats invading his territory even though he wasn't actually looking at them, and it was giving him a sensation he would once have called a 'feeling.' Distaste, resentment, etc. It made him think uncharitable thoughts.

"You got the new fandom stats, right?"

Ugh. "Yes. I'll report on them at tomorrow's meeting. Go away."

"Sai, you can't expect me to just stand by and let you guys traumatize Roxas and Xion for life."

'You can't 'traumatize' a soulless puppet and a boy with half a brain.'

"Tell meeee, and then I'll explain to the kids, okay?"
'They're not 'kids.' They're greedy, demanding, heartless wretches who waste your time, make you lose your edge, and swell your head.' Saïx sighed deeply. "Only because it is not a matter of great importance." ‘And I know you'll be insufferable otherwise.' He reached for the report. "You kissing, caressing, groping, or making out with Roxas, approximately 77,525 pictures and 7,800 pieces of writing. You sexually assaulting--"

"WHOA! Whoawhoawhoa let me read it first, don't just blurt it out!"

"What's groping?" one of the Keybearers asked.

"And sexually assaulting?"

"Flaming pants, just give me a minute...." Axel flipped through the report. "Heh, looks like the AkuSai numbers have been creeping up a bit since Dream Drop Distance...."

"It's still nowhere close to that thrice-damned XemSai total," Saïx muttered resentfully, "though any number above zero for either pairing is too much."

"I'm very nicely and considerately not mentioning the Saïx-puppy count," Axel drawled, and laughed as Saïx's eyes glowed sinisterly at the mere mention of it. "Hmm, RokuNami and RokuShi still at each other's throats, holy cow it's weird seeing Roxas look sexy-- Huh, interesting, Sora/Xion seems to be on the rise.... What the heck, Saïx/Jasmine? Where did that come from?"

"Don't ask me. I have no idea."

"Ha ha ha ha ha! I love crack. Though...huh, I bet it could work...."

"Are you finished yet?" Saïx snapped.

"Oooh, SaiShi."

"SHUT UP."
"Barely any of it's even in the pedo column!"

"Shut up."

"I am so serious, you two could totally get along if you just--"

"You wanted to know what sexual assault was?" Saïx said, technically to the Keybearers but really to Axel.

"Okay, fine, I'll shut up! Geez, so touchy, it's only fandom...."

"What's fandom?" Roxas asked, looking impatient by now.

"Honestly," Saïx told him, "you don't want to know."

".o.o.o"

**Author's Notes:** It fits the theme because somewhere in there are fanworks of all of them making out with each other?? *shudder* Don't bother nit-picking about the statistics; I wanted to spend as little time as possible coming up with the numbers, so I was intentionally very sloppy with them.

I wrote this story a long time ago, but it kind of made me sick, so I wrote a different version for the challenge theme. *sweatdrop*
"That looks gross," Roxas commented as they watched the movie.

"That's because you're a kid," Axel chuckled uncertainly.

"What are they doing, anyway?" Xion asked.

"Uh...they call it 'making out.'"

Saïx came into the Grey Area. Upon seeing Axel and the Keybearers wasting time, he opened his mouth to tell them to go to bed so they'd be refreshed for tomorrow's missions, but then he forgot to speak when he heard what they were talking about.

"Making out is fun?" Xion happened to be exclaiming incredulously.

Saïx was momentarily paralyzed by the creepy mental image of the faceless replica making out with anyone.

"Well, yeah, if you're making out with someone you like."

"So...it'd be fun if we did 'making out' with you?"
"Get to bed," Saïx ordered, "and stop showing them such things, Axel."

Roxas glared and pouted, "I bet no one would have fun making out with you."

"And vice versa," Saïx agreed coolly, scooping up the remote and snapping off the TV.

"Not even if it was a certain dusky princess from an exotic desert world?" Axel teased.

"Go to BED."

0.0.0

Author's Notes: Does anyone have any ideas for a canon-based fanfic about Naminé & Xion?? I have to write one for somebody as a raffle prize, but s/he doesn't have any ideas for me, and I'm drawing a complete blank. -.-;

Anyway, I wrote this "Making Out" vignette months and months and months ago (before HTTYD killed my KH muse, lol), but have only just now gotten around to typing it. I've gotten a bit better about working on my real life lately, and some of that involves typing my huge backlog of handwritten drafts and notes. I still have 38 notebooks (of various sizes and stages of completion) left to type....

Complete: 12/30
Riku knew what birthday parties were, because he'd seen them in books. However, he'd never seen one in real life, so he was happy that he was invited to Sora's fourth birthday party.

It didn't seem like a celebrating sort of day, though. The sky was dark even though it was afternoon, the wind kept whipping Riku's hair into his face, and it smelled like rain. Riku knew that something was wrong. He must have been too young to remember the last time this happened, but the vague remnants of that memory made him associate these conditions with danger.

At Sora's house, Mr. and Mrs. King were rushing around, packing. Sora was toddling after them, picking up things they dropped and tucking them securely into the bags and suitcases.

"What happened to your birthday party?" Riku asked.

"Riku~!" Sora bounded over to him and hugged him. "I am four years old today!"

"It's your birthday," Riku agreed. "Is this your birthday party?" He didn't think it was, but he couldn't figure out what else could be happening.

"My birthday party is later," Sora confided in him. The little boy pointed at a dark window. "Hurricane coming first!"
Riku took a moment to translate this. "A hurricane." He felt a little stab of dismay that his parents might make him go out and fight it or something, then relief when he remembered that he was safe here with Sora's family and that maybe, if they were running away, they would let him come with them.

"Riku!" Mrs. King rushed to him. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry, we have to postpone the party-- Do your parents know about the hurricane?"

"Probably."

"Oh goodness, they're probably wondering where you are!"

"No...probably not...." Even if they did spare a thought for him, they probably wouldn't care much. "Can I come with you?"

Sapphique hovered indecisively for a moment.

"I can call them if you want."

"Oh-- Yes, I-- I suppose-- Oh, Riku!" She suddenly scooped him up and hugged him tightly. He leaned his head against hers, enjoying the sensation of being hugged. Then she plopped him down in front of the phone and rushed away again. Riku took the phone out of its cradle and started carefully dialing numbers.

"Are you calling somebody?" Sora asked.

Riku didn't want to lie. "Your mother wants me to call my parents." He didn't press the last number hard enough for the phone to register the input. He imagined the sound of a phone ringing and being picked up and spoken into. "Hello, Father," he said, pretending that Sephiroth really had picked up the phone. "Mrs. King wanted me to call you. I'm with their family, and she didn't want you to worry about me." He almost forgot to pause and wait, as if his father was responding. "Okay," he finally said. "I'll give you my report later." He placed the phone back in its cradle and looked at Mrs. King, but she seemed too stressed out to have noticed him.
It seemed rather a waste of a deception, but now at least he could honestly say that he had talked to his father on the phone if she remembered to ask him later. He just wouldn't specify that his parents hadn't actually heard or responded to his words.

"Riku's gonna eva-koo-ate with us?" Sora half-asked, half-cheered.

"I'm coming with you."

"Yay, Riku!"

Riku helped the Kings finish their preparations, then they all piled into the car. As they were making their way down the road, Riku asked, "Are we going to a different world?"

"Oh! No, dear, that's just in stories. There aren't other worlds in real life, at least none that we know about; but it's a fun idea to think about, isn't it?"

Riku stared. He had been to another world before, the same one where his father had been born and now worked almost every day. Riku's mother had originated from an entirely different world as well.

"Eva-koo-ate!" Sora cheered. "Daddy, drive faster!"

"It's dangerous, son," Mr. King said, squinting at the heavily pouring rain outside. "These windshield wipers are barely helping, I can't see--"

There was a sudden lurch, prompting Sapphique and Sora to shriek, and Riku to stiffen in alarm. Kal made a noise that sounded like it had been going to be a curse before he managed to censor himself in front of the children. "It's a tree, it's a tree, fell in the road I didn't see it--" The man put the car in park and climbed out; Riku followed without really thinking about it. Sapphique called after him in alarm, then sharply ordered Sora to stay in his seat.

Riku was immediately soaked through by the downpour. He stood beside Sora's father, both of them looking at the fallen tree trunk outlined in the car's headlights. Kal crouched down and made a mumbling not-curse again as he inspected the tire that had taken the brunt of the impact. "That branch took out the tire."
"We can't drive over the tree," Riku guessed. "We can't go around. Even if there was no tree, the tire is messed up, the car won't work right anymore?"

"Gah!"

Riku looked up at Kal, noting with mild interest the man's deep frustration and anxiety. "Do you have a plan?"

"I've got a spare tire in the trunk, but it doesn't do any good if I can't get the car past this tree...." Kal looked down at Riku thoughtfully. "You have any ideas, buddy?"

"...I don't think we can use the car anymore," Riku finally said.

"I don't think so, either, unless I can find someone in this...mess...to help...."

Riku didn't like the idea of Sora's father heading off alone in the rain, leaving them helpless behind. "Maybe we should walk. All of us together," he clarified.

"We might have to. There's no rain slicker for you, though. I'd lend you mine, but it's way too big for you."

"It's okay, I don't need a...rain slicker." Riku didn't quite know what that was, but wanted to be reassuring.

The four of them were finally able to set off, the King family in their rain slickers and Riku wrapped in a blanket, the adults carrying the most essential of their supplies. Sora's parents carried the boys too at first, but Riku preferred to walk, and Sora insisted on walking as well when he saw that Riku was. However, he struggled so much in the mud and rain that his father finally picked him back up, and the boy was too tired by then to protest again. Riku was able to keep up decently well, though Sapphique insisted on gripping his hand as if she was afraid she'd lose him otherwise.

They trudged on in the relentless downpour, until Sora was slumped half-asleep in exhaustion and his parents were flagging. Riku was physically miserable, soaked with water and mud, shivering a little with cold, and annoyed that the rain dulled his senses so much, but he still felt rather serene.
anyway. He was used to hardship, and it was actually rather nice that his companions in this struggle were allies rather than opposition.

After a while, he stopped and looked back. Sapphique had slumped to her knees, and Kal was swaying where he stood, stooped over under Sora's weight on his back, head hanging. Riku picked his way back over to them. "You're too tired to keep going?" he asked.

"You're pretty amazing, kid," Kal said, his voice barely audible through the rain.

"I'm supposed to be," Riku answered absently, contemplating his dilemma. "Maybe you can rest here, and I'll bring back help." It was problematic that he didn't know how to find them, though; they didn't even have any Jenova DNA for him to attempt to track through the blinding rain.

"I can't let you go without us...!"

"I guess we can rest here together."

There was not much choice. Sora's parents slumped together with the boys sheltered between them, Sapphique weeping softly. Sora curled up against her as if unconscious. Riku sat quietly, wondering if he was going to have to fight the hurricane after all. He couldn't think of any powers that would be useful for that, though, and he didn't have any materia. He didn't think that even his parents would be able to do much against this storm except march (or probably float) through it with their heads held high, as beautiful as ever. Riku lifted his chin in defiance of the weather and combed his fingers through his hair.

He heard something. Riku frowned, then crawled out from between Sora's parents and listened hard. He wasn't sure what it was he'd sensed, but there was something different in the distance, something that wasn't the numbingly ceaseless cadence of rainfall.

"Riku, come here," Kal said wearily, reaching out to tug him back, but Riku shook him off.

"I'm going to find them and bring them here. Maybe they can help." Riku dropped the blanket, because it was more a hindrance than a shield against the rain, and set off alone.

It was dark and wet everywhere, his sense of sight was useless in this relentless rain, so he closed his eyes and focused hard on his sense of hearing. There....
He tried to pursue the differentness, but it was elusive. No matter how hard he pushed or how fast he ran or how many times he got up after falling, he couldn't catch the differentness. "Come HERE!" he yelled in frustration. He didn't like the way the rain seemed to swallow up his voice, or the way his ears seemed filled with cotton so that he could barely hear himself. "COME HERE!" he bellowed. "I AM A SON OF JENOV A THE DESTROYER OF WORLDS AND SEPHIROTH THE MIGHT AND TERROR OF SOLDIER. OB EY ME." It didn't obey very well, and even when it did, he nearly got killed. But it was worth it, because he found the differentness and was able to bring it back to the family who was depending on him.

O.o.o.o.o

Officer Hami Carlson gasped and braked hard to avoid hitting the tiny yet rather awe-inspiring figure. It took him a minute to recognize the figure as a child, much less Riku Crescent specifically. The boy was glowing, floating slightly above the ground, looking like...well, like a tiny version of his parents.

"Riku!" Carlson stumbled out of the car, gritting his teeth against the rain as he slipped and stumbled toward the child. Riku's alien glow had faded and he could now be mistaken for nothing other than a soaked and bedraggled young boy, but his head was still raised imperiously as he watched the man approaching. "Riku, you're all alone in this storm?! Hurry, get in the car!"

"We have to get Sora and his mother and father."

"They're out here, too?!"

Neither of them could track the Kings in the rain. Riku yelled in frustration and made Carlson stop the car, then stomped back into the rain and then just stood still for a while, eyes closed, listening. 'Sora, where are you....' Frowning a little, he tried it again, this time as the same sort of silent call he used to speak mentally to his father, rather than as a frustrated personal thought. "Sora, where you? Show me. Give me a path to you."

It wasn't working. Riku kept trying, finally starting to edge away from the method he used to talk to his father. Instead of trying to call to Sora's DNA, he tried focusing on Sora himself, first his looks and then his smile and then just the warm, inviting, eager Soraness of him. "Sora...." 

Riku blinked at the loss of background noise. It seemed odd to be surrounded by complete silence rather than the unceasing drumbeat of rain. The darkness was no longer wet and blinding; instead,
it was filled with the bright, colorful glow of stained glass. Riku looked down at his feet, absently noting that the stained glass was what he was standing on, like a pillar in the dark.

"Riku~!" Sora came trotting down a stained glass path and bounded over to him. "I thought I was asleep, but I found you!"

"No, not yet. I'm still looking for you. Tell me where you are, Sora."

"Huh?"

They talked for a long time, Sora mostly chattering and Riku focusing hard on him. When the silver-haired boy finally opened his eyes, he found himself back in the oppressive rain, Carlson leaping out of the car behind him, Sapphique crawling toward him to throw her arms around him and sob.

"Found you," Riku said, pleased and relieved. He was pretty sure he'd been tracking Sora, but it was nice to know that it had worked for real and wasn't just in his head.

Sora was deeply unconscious, but after he'd been settled in the back seat of Carlson's car, Riku snuggled right into him and watched him sleep for a while. "Found you," he murmured again.

"Riku," Sora whispered contentedly in his sleep.

When they both woke up again, they found themselves in a crowded refugee shelter, with Sora's parents fast asleep on uncomfortable-looking cots to either side of them. Sora happily hugged his friend, and Riku patted him, pleased that they were together.

"You saved us, Riku!"

"I wish I could fight the hurricane for real instead of just walking through it."

"We're not stuck in the rain anymore~!"
"Oh yeah, yesterday was your birthday," Riku suddenly remembered. "I brought you a present, but I think it's still at your house."

"I'm gonna have a fun birthday party when we go back home, Riku! You'll come, right?"

"I'll come every time you have a birthday party."

"Yay!" Sora scrambled to his feet and took Riku's hand when his friend stood up as well. "Come on, Riku!" He trotted off, Riku obliged to follow. "Hello!" Sora said brightly to the woman sitting on the cot next to them. "Yesterday was my birthday! I am three years old!"

"Four," Riku corrected. "You get a year older when you have a birthday."

"I am four years old! I'm gonna have a party!"

"Oh...Happy Birthday," the woman said, sounding a little bewildered.

"Thank you!" Sora trotted on to the next cot. "Hi! My name is Sora, yesterday was my birthday!" he announced to the man who was sleeping there.

"He can't hear you when he's asleep," Riku pointed out.

"Night night, sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite!" They moved on to the next cot. "Hi! My name is Sora, I am four years old now...!"

0.0.0

Author's Notes: I've never lived near the sea and was too tired to do more than brief research, so feel free to correct me if I got anything wrong about hurricanes and civilian responses to them....

My main fandom has shifted to "How to Train Your Dragon" and it's hard to think of KH fic ideas now; also, I've been living on my own for a little over a month now and having a really difficult time with the management at this apartment. I'm also in the process of trying to get a full-time job
(I've already had a promising interview), so I've had a lot on my plate.

However, it's been over two weeks since I've written/posted anything, and I noticed that it was my friend Medli's birthday and I know she likes (platonic) SoRiku, so I wanted to write a vignette for her. I figured that it should be birthday-themed, but for some reason I couldn't think of a plot other than Sora's party getting postponed due to a bad storm. ^^; I started writing it after dinner, but wasn't able to finish it in one sitting and was really tired, so I attempted to go to bed. But I couldn't sleep because of "lady problems" and I can't turn my air conditioner on because I found it leaking today when I got home, so my apartment is now uncomfortably hot. I was so miserable that I finally just got back out of bed and started writing again in between eating. The eating helped with the cramps, and the writing helped improve my mood.

Even though I've pretty much moved on from Kingdom Hearts (I still hope to finish my old KH WIPs eventually...), I still enjoy writing Riku as a little kid. :)

Complete: 7/100
Although Naminé now resided in Kairi's heart, she was still connected to Sora's. It wasn't difficult for her to follow the invisible chain binding her to him and emerge in his Dive.

She had friends there. She loved all of them and was happy to see any of them on her visits; this particular time, she ended up on Xion's pillar.

The dark-haired girl was sprawled on her stomach, ankles crossed, drawing something. When Xion saw Naminé emerge from the portal of light, she jumped to her feet and ran to hug her. "Naminé!"

"Hello, Xion."

"I'm so glad to see you! What do you think of my picture?" Xion showed it to her, a sketch of herself and Roxas feeding a small dog in Twilight Town.

"Aw, I really like it." Naminé looked around at the silent darkness. "Do you want to go somewhere, Xion?"
The other girl grinned. "You mean one of your memory-worlds?"

"Yes." Naminé, at her friends' insistence, had stopped apologizing for being unable to bring them to any real worlds.

"No, it's okay, it sounds really fun! Can we go to the beach again?" Xion loved Destiny Islands best, perhaps because it held so many important memories for so many people she cared about, or perhaps because it was about as different from the dark, dreary World That Never Was as a world could get.

"Of course." Naminé opened her sketchbook and began to draw.

Moments later, they found themselves on a sunny shore, with sand beneath their feet and endless waves stretching off into the distance. Grinning, Xion shed her coat and pulled off her boots. "Let's go swim, Naminé!"

Afterward, they rested on the warm sand with sea-salt ice cream bars in their hands, Naminé sitting comfortably with her legs folded beside her, Xion sprawled on her stomach. "I remember the first time I had sea-salt ice cream," Xion mused. "It was after one of my first missions in the Organization. Roxas told me that I had done a good job and deserved a reward. So he bought us ice cream and took me up to the clock tower, and we sat there watching the sunset and eating the most delicious thing in the world."

"The first afternoon of many," Naminé remarked.

"Yeah. Me and Roxas and Axel...I really miss Axel...."

"I miss him, too. When I was at Castle Oblivion, he was kind to me, in his own way." Naminé smiled. "He's the one who gave me my first ice cream bar."

"Axel did, huh?" Xion laughed. "We're all always connected in funny ways, aren't we."

"More like complicated," Naminé murmured. "Earlier today, the three of them were procrastinating on schoolwork and tried to sort out the connections between Sora and Kairi and the rest of us, but even Riku couldn't figure it out. She smiled a little. "I'm not sure about some of it, either. I don't know if Sora is more like my father or my brother or just a friend...."
"Does it matter?"

"Well, I'm not going to date him or anything, so I suppose not." Naminé took another lick of her ice cream bar.

"Naminé," Xion asked after a moment, "what's your favorite memory?"

"Hmm.... Well, there were some times with Riku that are the most pleasant to think about, when he'd teach me things or we'd just keep each other company. But the most...important is when...." Her lips curved in a sad little smile as she gazed out into the distance. "...When Sora told me that he was happy about meeting me, even after he found out that all his memories about me were lies."

"Sora's really something, isn't he," Xion murmured affectionately. "I used to kind of hate him, back when I was...you know, turning into him.... But then I met him for real, and I understood. He really is going to save us, isn't he."

Naminé gazed down at the picture she'd been idly doodling. "Yes."

Xion considered for a moment. Then she asked, a little mischievously, "Can you show me some of his memories?"

"Er...Sora's memories?"

They giggled, then Naminé flipped to a blank page and began sketching. Three figures appeared on the beach nearby, Sora and Riku and Kairi as small children, shadows that acted out a memory from the past without noticing the two girls watching them.

"Nooo, Kairi, don't listen to him! I can get a paopu for you, I promise!" Little Sora then proceeded to try to climb a tree, failed, and cried when he got hurt. Little Riku scolded him even as he washed the blood from the cut with gentle hands, and little Kairi comforted him. The children finally wandered away together, fading into the sunny distance.

"We're never going to have memories like that, are we," Xion said softly. "Memories of being small like that...."
"We have memories of learning," Naminé mused. "Growing up on the inside, even if we were never that young on the outside."

"Sometimes I wish that I'd never had to grow up, that I could have just stayed naive and stupid forever. But then...I dunno...at the same time, I'm glad I know what the world and people are really like, even if it's painful. It's like...the things I care about are more valuable to me, now that I can see how special they really are."

"Tell me about some of your memories in the Organization," Naminé said encouragingly. She quickly added, "About Axel and Roxas, I mean. I know it was a terrible place, but I also know that you had good days, right?"

Xion smiled. "I'll share some of my memories with you, if you share some of yours with me, all right?"

"All right," Naminé agreed. Like Xion, her life hadn't been exactly happy, but also like Xion, she did have some bright moments to warm her.

The two girls sat on the beach for a long time, enjoying each other's company. Someday they would be able to see each other with more than just the eyes of the heart, but for now, it was enough that they had forged a connection, that they could hear each other's voices, that they could share a seemingly impossible friendship and be at peace.

o.o.o

Author's Notes: ...This was difficult to write ___. The request was for a canon-based fic about Naminé & Xion, but I could not think of any ideas; this was the best I could come up with. Still, it's better than the picture that I attempted to draw as a substitute! I apologize for taking so very long to give you your raffle prize, Fermons; I hope you like it all right!

Complete: 8/100

Even half-asleep, Sapphique had the feeling that something was wrong, and when she finally realized what it was, she sat up in bed with a gasp. It was nearly 6:30 on Christmas morning - and Sora hadn't come to wake her up yet.

Ven had always dragged his parents out of bed for Christmas so early that they'd finally had to set a rule that he couldn't wake them before 5:00. But Sora...was it simply that he was a different sort of child? Or that he was still too young to know the significance of December 25th?

Or was something wrong?

Sapphique flew out of bed and down the hall. She could tell from that the living room was still dark except for the Christmas tree's glow, so she swerved into Sora's room first.

The sight brought her up short. Sora lay curled up in bed (alive?? He was alive, right?!?!) , but he wasn't alone. A second small figure, maybe four years old, was curled up beside him. The child had silvery hair that nearly seemed to glow in the darkness, and he (she?) sat up abruptly at the woman's entrance. They stared at each other for a minute.

"Who are you?" Sapphique finally whispered. There was no response. She flicked on the light, and the tiny intruder was revealed in more detail. It was a boy (probably) in what looked like
expensive-looking pajamas, though the hems near his ankles were dirty, and his feet were bare. She saw a pair of even dirtier socks discarded on the floor, as if he'd walked here with no shoes. He had beautiful aquamarine eyes that were now fixed intently on her, and she saw the tension in his body, as if he was poised for flight. "How did you get in here?" she asked.

"...He said I could," the child finally spoke in a low voice.

"He...Sora?"

"...."

She raised her voice a little, now trying to rouse her son. "Sora. Sora, wake up." He stirred a little and mumbled in sleep, which relieved her. The boy was still alive, and hopefully unhurt. She went over to the bed, noticing how the strange boy quickly slipped to the floor and started to edge away. "Hey," she said sternly, "stay here. I need to talk to you." He sucked in a breath and dashed out the door. She sighed and stooped down, gathering her own child close to her chest. "Sora...Sora, wake up, sweetheart."

"Mama," he murmured, his fingers curling into her T-shirt.

"Sora. Sora. Come on, baby, wake up."

His sleepy blue eyes finally cracked open. He smiled when he saw his mother, looking so precious that she couldn't help smiling back. Then he blinked, sat up straighter, and asked, "Where's Riku?"

"Riku?"

He twisted in her arms, staring around the room. "Riku? Riku?!"

"Riku...you mean, that boy?"

"Mama! Where's Riku?!" Now looking distressed, Sora started trying to wriggle out of her arms. She set him on his feet, and he immediately began trotting for the door.
"Sora! Come back!"

"Riku's gone! I have to find Riku!"

"Sora!" She followed him out into the hall.

Sora was practically running now - he halted in the living room, looked around again, then cried in a loud voice, "Riku! Riku, where are you?!"

The front door was wide open. Sapphique hurried to close it - and jumped back with a startled cry when she saw the small figure standing on the porch, just behind the door. They both backed up, staring fearfully at each other.

Sora popped up by his mother's legs. "Riku!" he cried happily.

"...I have to go," the boy muttered.

"Riku!" Sora ran straight at him.

"Sora!" his mother cried.

Sora was already hugging him. "Come back, Riku! Open presents for Christmas!"

"I have to go."

"Rikuuuu!" Sora stared at him in dismay, still holding onto him tightly.

Sapphique swallowed. "Riku? Where are your parents?"
"Why are you...wandering around outside at night, with no shoes? It's cold."

His voice was shaky when he finally answered. "Do you...do you like Christmas?"

Sapphique stared at him, at this strange, beautiful, terrified boy who sounded so desperate.

"On Christmas we open PRESENTS!" Sora declared.

They were both surprised when Riku sank down into a crouch, hugging his knees tightly. "Those presents were for me...and they burned them. They hate me. They hate me so much. I wish Santa had stayed and helped me fight, but he just left some stupid boxes, I don't even know what was in them, and he left me, I'm always all by myself, and I can't do it anymore and I HATE THEM."

There was a long silence. Then Sapphique bent down and tried to pull Riku into her arms. He resisted her at first, but when she said, "Come inside, love, I'll get you something to eat," he sagged against her and cried into her shoulder. She had no idea who this boy was, yet already she was feeling protective and maternal... Sometimes she wished she'd been able to have more children of her own, but with the way so many others seemed to appear on her doorstep, it took the bitterness out of that longing.

"Mama, what's wrong with Riku?" Sora asked in concern as they went into the house.

"He'll be all right, sweetheart. He just needs some friends to love him right now." She hooked her foot around the edge of the door to close it.

"I'm his friend, Mama!" Sora cried instantly. "I told him, we're friends now and he can have Christmas with us, right?"

"That's right." She stroked the Riku's hair soothingly, surprised and amazed at how soft and silky it felt. "Riku, if you don't have anywhere to go for Christmas, you'll stay with us for today, right?"

He dragged himself back upright and miserably wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "They'll
look for me," he mumbled, "and they'll find me. I'm tired of them hurting me. I can fight them a lot, but not all the time - it's so hard, because I'm alone, and I'm too little, and I hate it."

"...Who's 'they'?” she asked.

"Kadaj and them...my brothers...."

A chill went down her spine. Kadaj, one of those troublemaking triplets.... Riku was a Crescent? Even as she recoiled from the idea, it made sense. His hair alone was proof enough.

Yet no matter how strange and dangerous that family might be, that didn't negate the fact that the child she was holding in her arms was obviously unhappy and even more obviously needed help. "They...they're your family? Did you say they hurt you, Riku?"

Looking uncomfortable, he started struggling to get down.

"Please don't run away, Riku. We want to help you."

"...If I stay here, they'll find me. They'll wreck everything."

'Is he really a Crescent?’ She could never have imagined that anyone in that family would be worried about another person. Riku had been nervous and wary, but hadn't yet been rude or destructive. It was strange, seeing a Crescent behave with common decency.

"We'll handle that if it happens. You just relax and try to enjoy Christmas, all right?"

Her husband, Kal, came shuffling into the living room, yawning and tousled. "What's going on? Did everyone start Christmas without me?"

Riku started to back away, but Sapphique took his hand and tugged him close to her side. "Honey, this is Riku. He's a friend of Sora's, and he's going to spend Christmas with us. Is that all right?"

"Uh...well, sure." Kal looked surprised and a little confused, but he smiled at Riku amiably
enough. "Hello, Riku."

"H...Hello."

All of them were startled when the phone rang. Sapphique frowned, then went to answer it.

"Sapphique?"

"Hami?" He and his wife were invited to the Kings' home for a Christmas brunch, so she had been expecting him to call at some point, but not this early. She also had not expected him to sound so tense and worried when he did call.

"There's been-- Have you noticed anything in your neighborhood yet? Any sort of disturbance?"

"Well...." She wasn't sure if Riku's appearance had anything to do with what was upsetting him.

"Sapphique, the Crescents are on the move, we've already gotten a few reports, and I-- Are you all right? Sora and Kal, is everyone--?"

"We're all right, um, for now. But...." She glanced at little Riku, who was looking at her anxiously. "M-Maybe you'd better come."

"I'm already on my way." He hung up abruptly.

Sapphique put the phone down, now staring at the little boy. "Riku, sweetie...when you said your family will find you...what did--?"

Riku's face fell, and the sight of his sadness made her heart ache. "I have to go." He turned away.

"Riku, wait!" Sora and his mother cried, almost in unison.
"What's going on?" Kal asked.

"Riku, listen to me!" Sapphique knelt and grabbed his arm, trying to stop him from walking out the door. "Are we in danger?"

"Yes."

It made her cold, how easily he said it, as if it was obvious. She was immediately terrified for her family, but-- "Riku, surely you're not planning to go back to them if they'll hurt you?! All by yourself?!"

He gave her a strange look. "Of course. If I go home, they'll leave you all alone."

"Riku...!"

There was a sound of a car hurriedly pulling up to the house. Riku's eyes darted around, and he seized an umbrella from the stand by the door, gripping it like a weapon, the awkward weight of it making it sway in his tiny hands. Sapphique tugged aside the curtains and exhaled in relief. "It's Hami...."

"Mr. Carlson~~!" Sora cheered happily.

"Who is it?" Riku said tightly. "Is it my family?"

"No, it's--" Sapphique opened the door for Hami as he hurried up the porch steps.

"Is everything all right so far?" he demanded.

"Yes, I--"

Hami's eyes flew to Riku, and the two of them stared at each other for a second.
"...Hello there," Hami said, his voice very measured.

"Hello," Riku said tightly, still gripping his 'weapon.'

"...What're you planning on doing with that umbrella?" Hami drawled conversationally, though his stance was still tense.

"Hami, he's frightened," Sapphique said. "He said his family is coming for him, and--"

Hami glanced sharply at her. "He's alone?"

"Yes, he and Sora were playing together earlier--"

"Playing?!" Hami looked at the boy in surprise.

"Mr. Carlson~!" Sora bounded out and happily attached himself to Hami's leg.

"Hey there, Sora," Hami said, picking up the little boy to hug him even as he still looked at Riku in surprise. "You...made a new friend, huh?"

"Yeah! That's Riku! We're friends and we played Tin Soldier and Ballina."

"Ballerina," Riku corrected softly.

Hami's eyes suddenly widened. "You came here to play with Sora," he realized, "and now your family's coming to get you back."

Riku cocked his head warily. "Yeah. I have to go let them find me before they come here."

"Ohhh, kiddo...." Now with compassion in his eyes, Hami reached down to ruffle the boy's hair, but Riku flinched away before he could touch him. Still with Sora in his arms, Hami crouched
down and said, his voice now soft and genuinely friendly, "So you're Riku, huh?"

Riku swallowed and said nothing.

"Heh. We knew about you, running around with those troublesome brothers of yours. We've picked them up a few times, but you're such a sly little fox, you've never been caught."

Riku's lips quirked in a brief grin.

"Are you afraid that I'm here to arrest you?"

"Are you?" Riku said warily.

"No. Not unless we catch you breaking the law, but you're not breaking the law right now, are you?"

Riku's eyes flickered away for a moment.

"Riku's my friend," Sora told Hami chattily.

"Riku, it seems like your family's causing trouble on the way here. I think you might be trying to protect your new friend, and that's good - but the thing is, I want you to be safe, too. And I don't think you'll be safe if you're with your family."

"I'll be fine," Riku mumbled.

"Are you still sad, Riku?" Sora asked.

Hami reached out and laid a very gentle hand on Riku's shoulder. "Let's say we go somewhere safe and figure out how we can help you, okay?"
Riku gave him a strange look. "Nowhere is safe. Mother's cells are inside me, so they can always find me. I'm supposed to be able to find them, too - I can't yet, except that one time I found Loz, but when I'm bigger I'll be able to do it."

There was a distant crashing sound.

"Get inside," Hami suddenly ordered. He pushed Sora into his mother's arms and tried to herd the Kings backward, away from the door.

"The Crescents are coming here?" Kal said in alarm. "This kid, he's a Crescent...?!"

"Riku needs our help," his wife said fiercely to him.

"All right, all right," Kal said soothingly, trying to squeeze her shoulders in a comforting gesture even as they all still stumbled toward the back door.

It was too late. The house shook as it was hit by an invisible force, and every single one of the front windows cracked or shattered. Silver-haired invaders were entering as if they had every right to do so - the man who was so rarely seen but the most feared, the woman who couldn't be human, and the three whooping boys scrambling in through broken windows, heedless of the shards. Hami stepped in front of the Kings, his hand on his gun.

Riku walked out to meet them, astonishingly calm. His voice was as scathing as an adult's. "I can't believe you all came chasing after me."

"We didn't say you could leave, Riku," the boy Kadaj said gleefully, all three of them pouncing at that small figure like dogs about to tear into prey. Just before they reached him, long strands of hair shot out like tentacles and seized Riku in a sickeningly inhuman display. Sapphique already had Sora's face pressed against her, trying to shield him from the sight of violence. She struggled to cover his ears as well as he asked, "What's happening, Mama???

That impossible hair whipped upward, slamming Riku's tiny body against the ceiling-- Sapphique nearly choked with horror, and then astonishment when she realized that Riku had thrown back his feet and hands in time and was now bracing himself against the ceiling. His expression looked more annoyed than frightened.
"Do I need to beat the arrogance out of you?" Jenova hissed. "What has ever made you think that you can cut yourself off from us when you are obviously required?"

"You never told me to stay," Riku snapped. Any, any other child his age would be incoherent with terror, how was he even capable of defiance...?! "You've told me over and over and over again that I'm weak and useless, so I thought you'd be happy to get rid of me for a while."

"We wanted you, Riku!" Kadaj shouted up at him.

Riku started to speak but ended up saying nothing, simply glaring at Kadaj with an overwhelming expression of rage.

"Why did you come here?" Sephiroth asked. His voice, quiet as it was, sent chills down the spine of each human.

For the first time, a flicker of fear finally crossed Riku's face, but it was gone again in the next instant. "I didn't come here," he said, sounding almost bored. "I was just walking, and it looked interesting, so I came to investigate."

'A four-year-old knows a word like 'investigate'...?' Sapphique thought.

"Hmph. Better you having to dirty yourself with human filth than me," Jenova snapped - and her hair loosened. Sapphique nearly screamed as Riku started plummeting to the floor, but Hami managed to catch him in time. Riku stared at him, looking very surprised.

"Mama, I can't see," Sora complained.

"Ssshh, baby, ssshhh...!"

"Give him back!" the triplets were insisting, tugging at Hami as they tried to get to Riku. "He's ours, give him back!"

"Not yet," Riku told them. "He's a police officer, he's gonna arrest me."
The boys stared at Hami, who was dressed in ordinary clothes, but when Hami pulled aside his jacket to show them the badge on his belt, all three of them backed away, looking upset and frustrated.

"Hmph. So you don't have the No Arrests advantage anymore," Yazoo said with a scowl.

"Yeah, you suck, Riku," Kadaj declared, pouting like a child trying to pretend he was getting his way when he obviously wasn't.

"You be nice to Riku," Loz ordered Hami. "Don't handcuff him too tight, and don't lock him up with any stupid humans. If you treat him bad, we'll come to get you."

"Riku will be taken care of," Hami said evenly.

The three boys looked uncertainly at their parents. There was a long silence, during which Riku and his father looked very intently at each other, Jenova eyeing both of them with a frown as if she suspected something was happening but wasn't sure what.

Then Sephiroth nodded to Riku as if they had been talking, and walked away.

"You're leaving?!" Jenova yelled after him.

"I have no more use for Riku at this time," Sephiroth called without slowing down or looking back.

The triplets were fidgeting toward the door as if they were about to leave, too. "Come back as soon as they let you out! We wanna play!"

"I'm mad at you," Riku growled. "You burned all my presents. I'll play with you if you make me a new present - that WASN'T STOLEN. Then I'll play with you. But if you guys are too weak to give me a not-stolen present, then I don't want to waste my time playing with you!"

The three boys exchanged wide-eyed looks, then suddenly ran off, yelling in excitement.
Jenova glared at the humans. "That creature is mine. Get your filthy hands off of him."

Hami started to say something, but Riku put a hand over his mouth, then tilted his head thoughtfully and pushed. Hami jerked his head away and stared at him. "Oh, look, I got licked by a human," Riku remarked.

"Wh-- I didn't--?!

Riku squirmed until Hami let him down, and began making his way toward his mother. "And I slept in one of their beds, so their germs are all over me now, and from when I walked here barefoot through all those gross human streets, but if you really want me to come with you, Mother, I will." He reached out toward the woman, who actually skipped backward, staring at him in horror.

"Don't touch me!"

"But I'm tired and weak, Mother. I think you might have to carry me," Riku said, trying to lean on her.

"Get away from me! Filthy creature!"

"Yeah, it's really gross. I don't wanna stay here and work, but I have to. Unless you want to do it instead."

"You stay away from me," she hissed. "Stay AWAY."

"When can I come back?" Riku asked piteously.

"When you're not FILTHY anymore!" She stormed away.

Hami came slowly up beside Riku, the two of them watching the Crescents retreat. Sapphique's arms loosened around her child, and she could feel herself trembling. Kal was staring, wide-eyed
and astonished. Sora looked around at the mess and asked in surprise, "What happened? Why was everybody yelling??"

"I...It's okay now, baby...it's okay...."

Riku finally turned back to the others and said, "I'm sorry about all the windows. I can't fix them."

"Riku," Sapphique said faintly, but couldn't manage anymore. That was his family?! He was used to that?! All of that was so normal to him that he wasn't frightened, that he's learned how to resist it, that he's forced to show such bravery...?!

"This is crazy," Kal said. "Hami, we can't let him go back to that family." Sapphique gave her husband a grateful look.

Hami sat down heavily in the closest chair. "We can't keep him out of that house."

"What?!!"

"We tried.... With the older brothers, we tried to save them, but those parents...they're not human. They...." Hami raised his head and gave the family a heart rending look. "There's nothing we can do, except look after them as best we can when our paths cross."

Riku approached him, staring. "You tried to take my brothers away from my parents?"

"Yes, Riku," Hami said sadly. "We tried, a few years ago, but we failed. I'm sorry. We...we're too weak to help you."

Riku touched his knees, gazing at him in wonder. "You're weak," he whispered, sounding strangely happy. He even started to smile. "I'm weak, too. If we're both weak, then we can...help each other." His smile faded. "Right?" he asked, looking hopeful and afraid. When Hami put his arms around him, Riku stiffened, then finally relaxed into the hug without returning it.

"I'll do my best, Riku," Hami whispered. "I couldn't save your brothers, and I couldn't save...I couldn't save Ven...." Tears stung Sapphique's eyes. Hami let go and gazed earnestly at Riku. "But
I'll do my best. I promise to never give up trying." He took out a card and gave it to Riku, who held it with both hands and studied it curiously. "Can you read those numbers, Riku?"

Everyone was a little surprised when Riku read out the digits almost as well as a much older child.

"Right.... That's my phone number, Riku. Any time you need my help, if you can dial that number, I'll come find you. I want to help you, Riku."

"...Thank you," Riku finally whispered, carefully tucking the card into the front pocket of his nightshirt as if it was a treasure.

Since Hami was already at the Kings' house anyway, he called his wife to come over and then helped Sapphique and Kal (and Riku, who joined in without being asked; then Sora, who happily wanted to be involved despite everyone's worried orders to keep away from the dangerous shards) clean up all the broken glass. Then everyone's attention seemed to automatically turn to the tree, and Sapphique's eyes widened when she realized that most of the gifts were for Sora, whereas obviously none were for Riku.

"Preseeeents!" Sora cheered, and dove into the pile of gifts before she could stop him. He ripped off the wrapping paper of the first package as Riku watched curiously.

"Sora, honey--"

"YAAAAYYY!!" Sora cheered, holding aloft the action figure. He dropped it and started to grab for another box, then paused and looked at Riku. He tilted his head. "Riku's turn!"

The older boy looked a little alarmed. "What?"

Sapphique was too mortified to say anything, so Kal said awkwardly, "Uhh...maybe we should save the rest of the presents for later...?"

Sora held out the gift to Riku. "Riku's turn!"

Riku took the box and looked at it. "That's your name, not mine."


"You can read?" Mrs. Carlson said, surprised and interested.

Riku carefully sounded out Sora's name on the label, then looked up at the adults as if anxious to know whether he'd gotten it right or not.

"That's meeeee!" Sora cheered.

"This is your box, Sora," Riku said, handing it back.

Sora grabbed another box. "Riku's turn!"

"This is yours, too."

They might have gone through the entire pile like that if Sapphique hadn't said frantically, "Who wants breakfast?! How about we eat some breakfast first, then we can open presents later!"

"I'm not hungry, Mama!" Sora protested in dismay.

Riku was studying her. "You don't want Sora to open his presents?"

"I...I...."

"Riku," Hami said gently, "this is Sora's house, so it makes sense that all of the gifts would be for Sora, doesn't it?"

"Duh."

"Riku's turn!" Sora insisted.
"No, Sora," Riku said, "all of them are your turn. Open it."

Sora stared at him. He looked down at his gift. He carefully set it aside and picked up another gift and held it out to his new friend and said tentatively, "Riku's turn?"

"No. Not my turn. It's never my turn. All of these are for you; none of them are for me. See? Look, this is your name, not mine. Your name starts with an S in English and a So in Japanese. My name starts with an R and a Ri. It's different."

Sora pouted. Then he picked up his new action figure and pounded it on the gift label of the present Riku had shown him. "Pwch pwch pwch pwwccchhhh! Dead," he announced. Then beaming, he pushed the present back at Riku. My name is gone! RIKU'S TURN!

"...Okay." Riku opened it, to the adults' relief, tearing uncertainly.

"Riku got a sword!" Sora cheered.


"It's a toy, Riku," Hami clarified, looking a little pained that Riku did not seem to be joking. "It's not meant to be a real weapon or hurt anyone." Riku eyed him as if he didn't understand the concept at all, which broke Sapphique's heart yet again.

The boys soon got the hang of it, opening all of Sora's presents together and dividing up the loot between them. The adults helped to free the presents from their packaging, and the children were soon chasing each other around the room, sending shredded wrapping paper flying as they wielded toy weapons and made enthusiastic sound effects.

Riku spent the whole day and another night with the King family, more happy than he had ever been in his life. Unfortunately, he knew he would have to go home soon to avoid rousing his own family's suspicions, and was very quiet by the time breakfast was over.

"Honey," Sapphique said, brushing imaginary dirt from his clothes and smoothing non-existent tangles from his hair, "you can stay with us, you know. For as long as you like."
"No, I can't. I have to leave, but I want to come back." Riku looked at her longingly. "Sometimes. Maybe. When I need to hide for a while. Can I hide here?"

"Yes, darling, yes, of course!"

"Okay. Thank you." He stiffened as she hugged him when he wasn't expecting it, but then relaxed a minute later. When she finally pulled away, he turned to Sora to say goodbye, and was surprised to be hugged by him as well.

"Bye, Riku!"

"Bye."

"Come back and play!"

"I will." Riku started to walk out the door.

"RIKU!"

Riku glanced back inquiringly.

"Riku's presents!" Sora said urgently, hopping up and down as he pointed at the toys strewn everywhere.

"Oh!" his mother exclaimed. "Yes, Riku, please take some toys with you."

Riku fidgeted, hesitant. "No," he finally decided. "Kadaj and them will break them." He smiled. "Keep them here, Sora. We'll play with them every time I come see you."

"Play with Riku!"
Riku smiled again, then turned and walked away. He missed his new not-family already, and hoped they really would be waiting for him like they promised whenever he needed them.

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Author's Notes: One year ago in December 2014, I posted Treasure of my Heart: Holiday. I'd hoped to be able to finish the sequel soon, but it took a lot longer than I anticipated; sorry...! I finally finished it, though! 8D

This was originally going to be an installment in my Sapphire Eyes challenge series, but Sapphique's POV wasn't working, and she wasn't really as much of a main character as she probably was supposed to be. I ended up re-assigning this story to a different challenge.

Complete: 14/100
Summary: After a bad day at work for both of them, Riku decides to teach Naminé how to dance. This would be easier if he knew how to dance himself.

A/N: Takes place between KH1 and KH2.
"Me! Me, it's just me!" She cried, struggling to her feet.

"Are you...on the floor?!"

"I...yes, I fell, and I...."

He was frowning as he slowly dismissed his weapon. "Are you ok--?" Then he shook his head fiercely. "Never mind, I don't care." He dropped to his knees and groped around on the floor, muttering under his breath. Naminé nudged a package into his hand, which he squeezed hard as he stood up. He paused, then gritted his teeth and whirled away. She sank back to sit to the floor again and watched dully as Riku slammed around the kitchen, spilling and dropping things in his carelessness as he started preparing dinner.

After a few minutes, though, he paused. He crossed his arms on the counter and leaned until his head rested on them for a long time. Then he drew in a deep breath, straightened, and turned around. "I'm sorry, Naminé. I had a frustrating day, and I shouldn't be taking it out on you."

Which, for some mysterious reason, made Naminé burst into tears again.

Riku crossed the kitchen, cursed when he banged into a chair, and knelt to put his arms around her.

"I'm sorry, Riku," she wailed, "I'm sorry, I'm just going to go to bed, I, I...."

"Sshh. It's okay. I'm sorry," he murmured, and after a minute, she finally relaxed and leaned against him. He held her until her sobs had faded to little sniffles. "I kind of feel like crying a little bit, too," he said wryly. "My day was...not so great."

"I got in trouble," she whispered.

"Don't listen to DiZ," Riku said immediately. "He's bitter and biased and doesn't care how hard you work or how impossible his expectations are."
"Sora's never going to wake up, and it's all my fault," Naminé said despairingly.

Riku's arms tightened for a moment. "Don't say that. Sora is going to wake up. Since he's not able to annoy us into always being hopeful, we have to do that for him until he wakes up again, okay?"

"It was a really bad day, Riku," Naminé said bleakly.

Riku stood and held out his hand to help her up. "We'll feel better after we've eaten. And then we're going to find something to cheer ourselves up; we are not going to go to bed early and stew over how much we suck."

"How much we...?"

"Uh - it's slang. I meant, how much we're failing."

"We're sucking," she said experimentally.

"Um... It's more like, 'This thing is bad, so it sucks.'"

"DIZ SUCKS!" Naminé suddenly yelled, then clapped her hands over her own mouth in horror, hoping that the old man wasn't skulking around somewhere near enough to hear her.

Riku burst into laughter. "Look, you've made me feel better already." Naminé managed a wobbly smile.

After they ate, Riku led the way to the dusty foyer, and Naminé helped him move the center table over to the side. "Now there's plenty of room for dancing."

"Dancing?" she said shyly. She kind of knew what that was, but she had never done it before. "You'll teach me?"

"Of course. I, uh...actually don't really know how to dance myself, but I probably know more than you do, so...." He held out his arms, and she went willingly into them, squeezing him in an
embrace. He laughed. "I meant, come close so I can--" He had unzipped his coat and was digging through the numerous pockets of the clothes he wore underneath. He finally extracted a pair of odd-looking items attached by a long, thin cord. He placed the incomplete circle around her neck. "These are headphones. I don't have any speakers or anything, so I figured we could just turn the volume all the way up and have these around your neck instead of over your ears, so that both of us can hear it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Naminé said amiably.

Riku smiled and fiddled with the little box at the other end of the string. Naminé jumped when music suddenly burst out of the ends of the circlet. "What is it?!"

"It's okay, this is just my music player." Riku fiddled some more, and the music changed, then again, and again, very rapidly until it settled on the sound of a woman singing a slow, wistful tune. "Okay." Riku tucked the little box into one of his pockets, leaving his coat unzipped. "Okay, so...hold my hand, and I think you put your other hand...here? And I put my hand on your waist, and...."

Naminé obediently followed his directions, then waited, feeling that light, happy emotion she always got when Riku was nice to her and taught her things, as Riku surveyed their positions.

"I think this is right. Okay, now...just follow my lead, um...and it's, like counting to three...."

"Three?"

"One, two, three," Riku murmured, shifting her gently. "No, relax, just kind of sway along with me. One, two, three; one, two, three...."

It felt strange and kind of awkward, and Naminé stumbled once or twice. After a minute, Riku stopped altogether. "I think I'm doing it wrong."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize; I'm doing it wrong. I could have sworn.... But it doesn't match the music, does it."
Naminé simply stood there in his arms, not understanding, but not really caring as long as Riku was holding her and only bemused rather than upset or angry.

"Okay...okay, let's forget the counting, and just try to move along with the music." His arms tensed around her, and she tried to keep up with him as they both stumbled around. The song trailed off, then guitar chords suddenly burst out of the 'headphones,' along with a man's voice enthusiastically yelling. Naminé found herself hopping a little, since the movement seemed more suitable to this much faster-paced song.

Riku groaned. "Wow, I'm even worse at dancing than I thought."

Naminé stopped hopping. "Are we not supposed to jump?"

"Ummmm...I mean, I guess we can?"

Naminé smiled and hopped again, but then stopped when Riku didn't join in. "Do you not want to?"

"No, I mean...I mean, my parents would probably kill me if they saw me making such an idiot of myself, but--" His mouth tightened. "They're not here. No one's here to see me look stupid except you." His hand on her waist stroked briefly up and then back into place. "You never judge me. It doesn't bother you when I'm not perfect."

"I don't think you're an idiot."

Riku suddenly started hopping. Delighted, Naminé hopped along with him. They jumped more and more intently in time to the music, as the singer screeched happily from around Naminé's neck. Then Riku burst into laughter. "This is ridiculous!" He took out the music player again to fiddle with it some more, and the song abruptly changed into garbled switching again. "We both need help. So let's pick a song that will tell us what to do." The music settled.

As the beat echoed up from the headphones, Riku gently pushed at Naminé until the two of them were standing side-by-side instead of facing each other. "Okay, so, what'll happen is the guy will sing the instructions, and we just do what he says."
"This is something new: the Casper Slide, part 2," said the headphones.

"Oh!" Naminé squeaked in surprise, hearing spoken words instead of singing. "Hello, um--!"

"It's a recording, Naminé. He can't hear you."

"Everybody, clap your hands!"

"Clap your hands, Naminé," Riku said, demonstrating.

"Clap, clap, clap your hands!"

To Naminé's delight and Riku's relief, the song really did kindly spell out instructions. "One hop this time!"

"Just one!"

Naminé stopped hopping with a giggle.

"Cha Cha real smooth."

They both looked at each other. "What does that mean?"

"I...can't remember...I was too busy laughing at whatever ridiculous thing Sora was doing to pay attention to what Kairi was doing."

The next time the song instructed them to 'Cha Cha,' Naminé said, "It kind of sounds like...this." She curled her fingers and poked at the air.

"I bet it involves shaking your butt, too. I get the impression that you can't go wrong with dancing if you shake your butt." Riku did so, poking at the air at the same time the way Naminé had. He
looked so funny that Naminé had to laugh before she imitated him. Then they had to catch up with the song, which had cheerfully kept plowing ahead.

The song seemed to end too soon, and in response to Naminé’s wistful look, Riku offered, "We could play the same song again."

"Ooh!"

So they danced to it all over again, and this time, when the song ended and moved on to the next, Naminé was more confident and Riku was less self-conscious. They made up their own dance moves without bothering to care what they looked like, and were both laughing so hard by the end that when they finally called it a night and went to bed, neither of them remembered why they had been so upset just a couple of hours earlier.

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Author’s Notes: Thanks for reading! Please review~!

The main song in this fic was "Cha Cha Slide" by DJ Casper.

I finally finished a story! 8D Although I've been writing off and on all this time, I hadn't been able to post anything in nearly eight weeks. And I finally posted something for Kingdom Hearts again, wooooowww! Thank Medli45. :) Although I've been trying to write some new KH stuff, and I've had a little bit of inspiration lately, she's the one who won one of my prizes for the KHplatonicLove raffle (which gave me more incentive to get this written quickly), and suggested some cute ideas for me to write. The RikuNami one made my fingers itch to type the most. RikuNami is adorable, and Riku himself is also my best hope of KH inspiration these days for some reason.
Summary: About a year after Xehanort's ultimate defeat, Riku's friends throw him a birthday party.

A/N: Since it's been a year since the end of a theoretical KH3, Riku had time to grow out his hair again. :p

In this fic, Dawn (Repliku) is the same apparent age as Riku.

"Happy birthday to you...happy birthday to you...."

The voice was so soft, and the hands in his hair were so gentle, that Riku awakened very slowly.

"Happy birthday, dear Riku...."

"Naminé?" Riku murmured drowsily. His girlfriend sat on the edge of his bed, glowing in the early morning sunlight. She met his smile with a beautiful one of her own as she finished both the song and the braid she'd been weaving into a lock of his hair.

"Happy birthday to you~"

"Thanks, Nami," he murmured. She lay down to cuddle against him, and he held her for a long moment, feeling extremely content.
Then she popped back up with another brilliant smile and said, "Come see your birthday surprise, Riku!"

"Now?"

"Now! Come, come." Taking his hand, she tugged him out of bed, and he shuffled obligingly after her to the door of his room, which she threw open.

"SURPRIIIIISE!!!!"

"Gah!" Ordinarily, Riku would have been pleased to see so many of his friends, but being ambushed by all them first thing in the morning was a bit much. Realizing that his Keyblade was in his hand, he hastily dismissed it.

"Rikuuuuu!" Sora and Kairi swooped on him, hugging him and laughing.

"Happy birthday, Riku!" Sora cried.

"Er, thanks.... Did it have to be a surprise party? Or first thing in the morning?"

"Lea wasn't too happy about it, either," Kairi laughed as she casually plaited a second braid into Riku's hair. Riku glanced around the room until he spotted the former Number VIII, who was slumped at the table with his face buried in his arms as if he wanted desperately to go back to bed.

"Hey-- Oof!" Riku rocked back as Pluto leaped on him and started enthusiastically licking his face. "Yes, yes, I'm happy to see you, too...." Riku looked back at the others. "Hey," he tried again, "I really need to change into some real clothes, so...a little privacy, please...?"

The girls obliged, but Sora, Dawn, and Pluto all followed Riku into his room. As Riku shut the door, Sora threw himself onto the bed, Pluto started busily sniffing around, and Dawn poked through the various things scattered on Riku's dresser.
"Whose idea was it to make it a surprise?" Riku asked, moving over to the closet.

"Did you know that all the ex-Nobodies have never had a surprise party before?!" Sora said.

"So you decided to volunteer mine?" Riku said dryly as he hiked on a pair of jeans.

"We've never had any birthday parties at all," Dawn huffed. "But I don't want to share a birthday with YOU, so my birthday is next weekend, not this weekend!"

"I see." Riku tossed the shirt he'd slept in toward the laundry hamper. "But you weren't created anywhere near my birthday, were you? So your...'existence day' wouldn't even be the same as my birthday to begin with." He started pulling a clean shirt over his head.

Dawn's face lit up. "YEAH! That's right!" Then his face fell. "But...we've already started planning my party...."

Riku smiled a little in exasperated affection as he wrestled his arm through a sleeve. "You can have two birthday parties, it's not a big deal."

"YES!" Dawn declared immediately, "I will have two parties!! Because I'm better than you; you only have one!"

"Who put the braids in your hair, Riku?" Sora asked.

Riku held up the end of one braid and regarded it. "Well, you watched Kairi making this one. Naminé did the other one when she woke me up."

"I'll make one, too!"

"...Do you even know how to braid?"

"Uh...no," Sora said sheepishly.
"You don't know how to BRAID?!” Dawn shrieked.

"Teach me, Dawn!" Sora invited.

Riku widened his eyes in mild alarm. "No, wait--"

"Hah! I know something you don't," Dawn said, but then proceeded to manhandle Riku over to sit on the bed so he could impart his knowledge to Sora. "You take a lock of hair and separate it into three sections like this...."

"Why do you have to practice on me?" Riku complained. Pluto came over to him and barked for attention.

Riku ended up doing a five-minute facepalm with one hand and petting Pluto with the other as Dawn instructed Sora, who worked with determination until he had produced something that could loosely be defined as a braid. "Look, Riku! I can braid now!"

"Sort of," Riku mumbled.

The door cracked open, and Tidus stuck his head in. "Everyone's wondering what the holdup is!"

"Save me," Riku said in a monotone. Pluto barked happily and frolicked over to the newcomer.

"Look, Tidus, I made a braid!!"

When Riku came back out, he was greeted by the rest of the guests. Xion, delighted by the trend, added yet another braid to Riku's hair and instructed Roxas on how to do the same. Riku was too distracted to stop them because so many people were coming up to talk to him, including King Mickey's entourage from Disney Castle and Zack from Gaea. "I can't believe you guys came all this way!"

"Wouldn't miss it," Zack said fondly, clapping Riku on the shoulder. "It's been way too long since I
last saw you!"

"We'd never miss a party," Donald said. Goofy laughed and clapped Riku on the other shoulder, Mickey shook his hand, and Minnie and Daisy started pointing out the birthday cake waiting on the counter and the heap of gifts piled on a chair.

"Come here, Mr. Barbie Doll," Selphie giggled, tugging Riku closer to her so that she could make her own contribution to the growing mass of plaits swinging from Riku's head.

"What is this, Randomly Braid Riku's Hair Day?!" Riku exclaimed.

He was so preoccupied with the festivities that he didn't get a chance to fix his hair until that afternoon, when the party had wound down and the few remaining people were cleaning up. Riku was loading the dishwasher, but Kairi soon bustled him out of the way, saying that the Birthday Boy shouldn't have to work on his special day. Before Riku could protest much, Naminé started tugging him over to a chair with a comb in her hand. "I'm sorry," she said, looking slightly rueful, "I just did it without thinking. I didn't realize it would annoy you...."

Riku realized what she was talking about when she started undoing the braids in his hair. "You were totally fine, Naminé, don't worry about it. All the other braids were overkill, though; so thanks for this...."

"You have such pretty hair~"

"I grew it out again just for you."

"Hey!" Sora bounced over to them. "Did you like your party, Riku?"

"Other than you guys springing it on me at seven in the morning, yeah. It was really fun."

"There were sooooooo many other people I wanted to invite, but Kairi and Axel said--"

He yelped when a washcloth hit him in the face. "Hey!" Kairi called, "Don't leave me all by myself to clean!"
"Oops! Sorry, Kairi!" Sora scampered back to join her.

When Naminé had undone all but the first braid, Riku reached to stop her. "You can leave that one in," he murmured.

It was the one Naminé had plaited. She smiled and leaned to kiss the bridge of his nose. "Okay."

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Author's Notes: Just a little vignette! Today was one of those days where I got a last-minute story idea on a really busy day, so I wouldn't have had time to finish it tonight if it was longer. X'D Hope you like it, Medli! I know you like Riku and RikuNami and SoRiku, so I tried to think of a birthday-themed story with those. Happy birthday, hon! *hugs*

Because of...certain issues, I wanted Naminé to sing Riku the traditional Japanese birthday song instead of the American one - but when I looked it up, I found that Japan DOESN'T HAVE a traditional birthday song, they literally just use the American song without even translating it. X'D

The "100 Things Learned" challenge has a repeating theme (both #59 and #73 are "Closeness"), so instead of writing two stories for the same theme, I made up a substitute theme, which worked out pretty well because I couldn't find any other theme to assign this fic to....

I don't know which people are interested in which of my fanfics, but just in case - I'm writing for three fandoms now, not just one. I'm miraculously still working on Carried Off (as well as various random HTTYD one-shots), my Kingdom Hearts muse has been reviving slightly, and I still like writing for Voltron whenever I get a chance, so...basically, don't give up on me, HTTYD readers! X'D I won't abandon you the way I did the KH fandom for so long, I still love and am inspired for HTTYD!
Summary: Riku agrees to star in a recruitment ad for the Shinra Company.

(Hey WarriorKing, if you're reading this, I got your message; sorry I didn't get a chance to reply! I'll write kid-Xemnas again if I get any ideas for him, but I don't have any at the moment; sorry...!)

The only reason Riku didn't immediately delete the e-mail in disgust was because he'd been stressing out about his younger brother's college tuition for months now. He was pretty sure he had enough saved up to get Dawn through the first year, and Dawn, to his own great excitement and Riku's pride, had managed to score a small grant that was worth several hundred munny.

But Radiant Garden University was ridiculously expensive, and Riku made enough munny now to disqualify Dawn from financial aid, and he really didn't want to have to take out any loans further down the road if he could avoid it, and Dawn worked so desperately hard to make good grades that Riku didn't want him to have the added stress of a job, so...the offer on his computer screen was very tempting. Since Sephiroth had apparently refused to do a recruitment ad for his employer, the Shinra Company had decided to turn to its next best option for an extremely attractive Jenova-enhanced warrior: Riku, Sephiroth's least insane son.

Riku gritted his teeth and closed the e-mail without either deleting or responding to it. He needed time to consider before making any decisions.
Five days later, Riku, feeling dead inside, was in a prep room allowing a team of makeup artists and stylists to have their way with him.

After being changed in and out of outfits like a Barbie doll and having cosmetics applied and listening to everyone making unrestrained comments about his body, he was beyond caring when he noticed a woman surreptitiously taking pictures of his hair. He knew enough to understand that, depending on what sort of fan the woman was, those photos were either going to be plastered all over social media within minutes, or hoarded by Riku's fan club on Gaea (an offshoot of his father's) and auctioned off to the highest bidders.

It didn't help Riku's mood that Dawn was present, being fawned over and looking like he was having the time of his life. "Can I be in the commercial, too?"

"Maybe!" one of the producers said brightly. "If we'd known about you before now, we'd have--"

"Dawn will not be involved in this production," Riku said in an icy tone. He sounded enough like his father in that moment that there was a brief hush.

It was broken by Dawn's whine. "Why not?"

"Because if one of us is going to be selling our soul here," Riku snapped, "it will be me. End of discussion."

"Why do you get to have all the fun?" Dawn pouted, but soon subsided.

Once they'd finally settled on an outfit, someone picked up one of Riku's forearms and started wrapping bandages around it. "The point of these," the stylist explained, even though Riku hadn't asked and didn't care, "is to contrast the formal outfit and indicate that Shinra agents in the upper level are expected to look professional and continue performing potentially dangerous fieldwork...." Riku had tuned him out by that point.

When Riku was finally on set, the director prompted him to produce his wing. "I...I can't...it's not the easiest thing in the world to just pop in and out...." Riku tried, but nothing happened.

"Any day now, Riku," the director said. "As soon as you're ready, we can start."
"Just give me a minute." Frustrated, Riku took off his suit jacket, hesitated, then started unbuttoning his shirt as well.

"Riku--"

"I'll put it back on, just wait." Then he tried to ignore the person on the sidelines who whistled appreciatively and remarked that they ought to just film him shirtless.

Riku, with his shirt now dangling around his waist and hoping that his wing would feel more inclined to materialize from an unrestricted back, tried again, but this situation was so unlike all the other times he'd sprouted his wing that his deliberate efforts seemed to be making things worse instead of better. "Can't we just do the commercial without the wing?"

"We need to portray ELITE! This is why we're paying you, Riku, because no one else can pull off the Sephiroth Effect like you can."

Riku gritted his teeth, but before he could think of a reply or try again, Dawn called out, "Are you trying to go One-Winged Angel?"

"I've never done it on purpose before," Riku called back in frustration.

"You probably need to fight someone!"

"I'm not gonna fight someone in the middle of a studio--"

Too late; Dawn had summoned his Keyblade and was rushing at him, forcing Riku to defend himself. They went leaping and lunging all over the room, inevitably knocking things over and prompting screams from the production crew as they went. "What are you doing, Dawn?!"

"Helping you!"

"This is not helping!"
"Wing! Wing! Wing! Wing!" Dawn chanted as he bashed away at his brother.

It actually did help, eventually. When Riku let himself give in to the battle emotions rather than trying to resist them, power blossomed within him, and then he stood panting in the middle of the chaotic room with a single white, slightly trembling wing rising up from his back.

"RUINED!" the stylists were screaming. "Get him back into hair and makeup, get him back into hair and makeup...!"

So it was back to being a Barbie doll, except that Riku couldn't physically fit into the prep room now. All the stylists had to swarm around fixing him where he stood, awkwardly trying to work around the giant feathery mass that tended to flex and flare unless Riku firmly concentrated on making it stay still.

By this time, Zack and a few of his men had shown up, which would have pleased Riku in any other situation, but at the moment, he felt mortified to be seen like this by someone he respected so much.

"Ooohh! Mistook you for your dad for a minute," Zack teased, raising his phone.

"I need the money," Riku mumbled, his face burning. He felt too shy to ask Zack to stop taking pictures or filming or whatever he was doing.

"For Dawn, huh?" Zack said sympathetically. Riku looked at him in surprise, and Zack smiled. "Of course it's for Dawn. He's about to start college, isn't he? And nothing but the best for you Crescent boys, which means Radiant Garden University, which means more munny than you probably have."

"I'm not sending him there because he's a Crescent. He wanted to go because.... Well, he wanted to go, and I want to support him."

There was a delighted cry. "Uncle Zaaaack!"

"Daaaaawn!" Zack and Dawn distracted each other with a happy conversation until Riku had been
bundled back on set. Then they shut up and watched eagerly as Riku tried to choke out his lines without sounding like an awkward idiot.

"Hold the gun higher," the director instructed. "Look right into the camera, look *right into the camera*, Riku."

"*I am* looking into the camera!"

He did lots of different poses with lots of different weapons and props, occasionally submitting to more wardrobe and hairstyle changes, including having extensions added to his already super-long hair. "That's good," the director said as Riku sat in what he hoped was a casually elegant pose, trying to keep his wing gracefully arched, "except don't smile, you're a soldier, you're supposed to intimidate-- Well don't look like you're going to kill us! We're trying to recruit people, not scare them off."

Then, later, after Riku had changed into some kind of uniform and was now trying another battle stance, "What the-- You look like you've never held a katana before!"

"I'm a Keyblade Master, not a samurai."

Then in yet another outfit, "What do you mean, you can't float?!"

"I don't actually use this thing to fly with, you know."

"It's a wing!"

"It's ONE wing. By itself."

"Sephiroth flies with one wing."

"My father flies on sheer aura or something, not the laws of physics; the wing is just for show."

Riku got that 'signing away his soul' feeling every time he said the word 'Shinra' into the camera,
and the fact that Zack and Dawn were watching made him want to die of shame. Just when he was debating whether to put his foot down and refuse to do any more takes, he suddenly felt like he'd been plunged into a vat of pure horror when he saw Sephiroth stalk into the room, hung about with weapons and looking like he'd just returned from a mission.

The production crew instantly flew into an uproar, and Zack's men all snapped to attention and saluted (Zack himself, although also acknowledging a superior officer, did not lose the amused sparkle in his eyes). "What is going on here?" Sephiroth demanded.

"Er...recruitment ad," the director stammered. "The one you said you wouldn't...? Ah, but if you've changed your mind, we would love to have your participation...!"

Sephiroth no longer seemed to be listening; his eyes were burning holes into Riku. Riku felt like he wanted the floor to swallow him, until he caught sight of Dawn trying to look nonchalant and hide behind Zack at the same time. 'I'm doing this for Dawn,' Riku remembered. He squared his shoulders and met Sephiroth's look squarely. "Hello, Father."

"How did you get mixed up in this nonsense?"

"I wouldn't have had to do it if you'd bothered to respond to Dawn's graduation invitation with tuition munny. Which is what normal wealthy people do when their grandchildren graduate." 'And was also the only reason I sent you an invitation in the first place.'

Sephiroth blinked slowly.

"Riku's doing this to earn munny to send your grandson to the best school in the multiverse," Zack translated cheerfully.

Sephiroth turned to the director. The mere act of shifting his body was so ominous that a few of the crew whimpered, three of them fled the room, and one of them fainted. "You are taking advantage of my son's superior genes to lure more people into the company's service."

"Th...That's...that's correct, s-sir."

"They'll get done faster if you help," Zack called. "You were their first choice, after all."
"And I suppose," Sephiroth said frostily, still to the director, "you want the usual display of Jenovian sublimity."

"I-If...it's not too much trouble...sir."

Sephiroth abruptly drew a normal-sized sword from his waist and tossed it toward Riku without looking. Riku managed to catch it without fumbling, though he thought furiously, 'Yes, that's right, Father, just THROW A NAKED SWORD AT YOUR SON, nothing dangerous or weird about that...!' 

Sephiroth himself was now brandishing Masamune. "You have one chance," was all the warning he gave the director before he gathered himself, bellowed out a war cry, and unleashed his power.

Riku felt it slam into him. He was rising, his clothes flapping in the sudden wind, his wing almost fully outstretched, his long hair whipping about him with wild grace, his eyes glowing so hard they hurt. His body was arranging itself into a graceful warrior pose; he felt so full of power at the moment that he wondered if he really could kill someone with just a touch or a look.

He sensed Sephiroth beside him in the same state, most likely overshadowing him; he heard a cry - Dawn, too, was caught in the storm of power, floating and glowing with a single wing unfurling from his back. Zack had taken cover behind a pile of equipment, peeking out just enough to reveal that his own eyes were glowing as well. He was anchoring himself with one hand and clutching his phone steadily against the equipment pile with the other.

Riku was overwhelmed and confused and full of amazingness, able to think of almost nothing except POSING AS IF THE WORLD WAS COMING TO AN END, as if he was bringing it to an end--

Then it was over. He collapsed to his hands and knees, gasping, feeling ordinary again and drained, his hair draped over him in sweaty clumps that was as close to tangled as Jenovian hair could get. His clothes were frayed and his wing had dissolved into a haphazard pile of feathers, a few people were slipping on them....

The room was trashed. People were crying or calling out in fear, though fortunately no one, as far as Riku could tell, seemed to be seriously hurt. Sephiroth alone stood unscathed among the debris. He simply sheathed Masamune, retrieved his other sword from Riku, and paused in front of the gasping director to say, "I trust that will suffice?" before stalking magnificently out of the room.
Even though Riku still felt shaky and exhausted, he forced himself to his feet and staggered over to his little brother, who was whimpering in Zack's arms. Zack looked up and smiled. "He's okay, just a little shaken."

"Dawn?" Riku said urgently.

Dawn, his eyes still glowing faintly, flopped out of Zack's arms and into Riku's. "He's scary, he's so scary, I felt like I was killing the world, aaaahhh...!"

Now that someone else was looking after Dawn, Zack started reviewing the video footage he'd captured on his phone. "Look at this idiot," he said affectionately as Sephiroth's image blazed on the tiny screen. "He could have just written you a check, but nope, he just had to go Full Glory on us and make a mess. It's like wrecking stuff is in his DNA or something."

"It is not," Riku huffed, "because then it would be in my DNA, and I don't go around destroying things as my default solution." He tried not to think about the fact that Dawn, who was essentially his clone, had taken after the rest of the family more than Riku in this respect.

The director recovered his wits enough to start wailing, "It's ruined, the ENTIRE THING is ruined, why did he have to fry every single camera...!"

Zack winked at Riku and then went over to join the growing huddle of dismayed crew members. "Not every camera. I got some nice footage."

The director gasped and nearly swiped the phone out of Zack's hand, but the SOLDIER waved it out of reach. "Nope. First I'm gonna be taking donations for Dawn's college fund, and then I'll let you have the footage."

"Wha--But we're already-- This is extortion!"

"Riku," Dawn said, ignoring all the shouting in the background, "you looked really cool."

Riku smiled a little. "Thanks."
"Did you see my wing, Riku?!"

"I did."

"My wing! I have a wing, too!"

"It makes sense that you would."

"That's the first time it came out! I want to do it again, Riku. Fight me so it will come out again!"

"Dawn, you can't even stand up yet...."

Author's Notes: So Medli45 drew this picture: http://medli45.deviantart.com/art/A-Riku-633748918 and as I wondered about possible backstories behind it, this fic practically wrote itself in my head. XD

Since Dawn is a clone of Riku (a much younger clone in this "Next Life" AU), his role in the Crescent family is a little complicated. Genetically, Dawn is Riku's identical twin and has the same biological relationships to the other Crescents that Riku does, and Riku is legally Dawn's adoptive father; but in practice, Seph & Jen are more like Dawn's grandparents, Riku is his older brother + father figure, and the triplets are his uncles.
Riku was crying.

Part of him was angry at his mother and how terribly unfair she was being, but that fury was rapidly turning to self-disgust. "I can't do it!" He could never do what she wanted him to do. No matter how desperately hard he tried, even after he'd been locked in that horrible pod for so long, immersed in the Mako that was supposed to unlock his 'true potential,' he still couldn't do things that his mother thought should come easily to her children. There was something wrong with him.

"I can't do anything..." He couldn't win fights, he couldn't make a weapon materialize out of nowhere, he couldn't even do things as simple as float or make his hair glow. He was the most weak, stupid, and useless of his mother's children, and he could never make his parents proud of him. His father took little notice of him; his mother berated him harshly and locked him inside terrifying dark places and sometimes struck him. Her words were so painful, he could never get them out of his head.

'You're so human it sickens me! Even if you're useless, at the very least, you can look the part of a worthy specimen, but you can't even do that much! Look!' Riku shuddered at the remembered feel of her tentacles of hair lashing around him, sliding over his skin, pulling at his body as if he was a doll to be played with. 'Always cut up and bruised like you can't win a fight to save your life,
always smelling foul; and look, these blemishes that make you look like someone threw mud in your face, they're EMBEDDED IN YOUR SKIN."

"Mother, it hurts, please stop--"

"They won't come out! No matter what you do to them, they won't come out, and you're so stupid you can't even figure out how to hide them!"

"Please!"

Then she'd flung him to the floor and called him a disgusting human and left him there, and he'd crawled to the closest shelter so that no one would catch him crying.

'She's right.... I'll never be worthy.' He felt aching and exhausted from crying so much. He dragged himself out of the closet and went to the bathroom and glared at his reflection through tear-blurred eyes. An ordinary person would have seen a very pretty, if deeply unhappy and somewhat battered-looking child, with silky silver hair that never tangled; white, even teeth; beautiful skin between the bruises; and a light dusting of freckles across his cheeks, as was common on the sunny islands.

What Riku saw was a monster, a creature light-years away from the perfection his parents always expected of him. His hair, though not quite tangled, was in disarray; his eyes were red, his face streaked with tears and snot; and there were the freckles his mother hated, each one of them looking like a blot of failure to him. And he did smell. He must have sweated since he last bathed, maybe when he'd been playing outside before his mother found him.

'I hate myself.' He slapped his hand against his reflection and screamed, wanting to erase the sight of every failure through sheer force of will.

Riku felt the sudden heat of magic. He cried out at the sensation of burning pinpricks on his face, and then he stared at the mirror in shock: his freckles were gone.

"Wh...What...?!" In his astonishment, he let go of whatever he hadn't realized he'd been holding onto, and the freckles reappeared.

Riku stared. Then he leaned close to the mirror, narrowed his eyes in concentration, and willed away his freckles again. They faded obediently. "I...I did it. I did it!!" He didn't know why hiding
his freckles was easier than any of the other magic he'd tried, but he didn't care. He practiced for a while, then he bathed thoroughly and dressed in clothes that hid most of his injuries and carefully arranged his hair. Then, feeling breathless with hope and fear, he went to find his mother.

Jenova was lying on the couch, staring into a vast hologram of the galaxy, her fingers dancing across stars and planets. Riku side-stepped a stray floating lock of her hair and approached her. "Mother?"

"What?" she growled.

He hesitated, but forced himself to keep going. "I...cleaned myself up." He kept checking, over and over and over again, to make sure his blemish-concealing magic was still in place.

Jenova threw him a disdainful glance. Then she frowned, and a lock of hair wrapped around his jaw to pull him closer. She inspected his face closely for a minute, and he didn't dare to even breathe. Finally, she pushed him away and turned back to her work. "Hmph. Good. Keep it up."

Riku fled, overjoyed at the precious scrap of praise. He spent the rest of the day practicing, determined to banish his freckles forever.

Many years later....

Although Riku was obviously calmer about it, he felt almost as excited to go to the beach as Dawn was. It had been an exhausting week of work for both of them, and they were both ready for a break.

Riku didn't bother to tell Dawn to calm down after he had doused them both in sunblock. The little boy hopped around him, screeching happily, as Riku packed a bag with some things and shut the front door and turned his Keyblade into a glider. Then he did have to tell the child to calm down. "Dawn, I don't want you to fall off. Put your arms around me and hold tight, okay?"

"WE'RE GOING TO THE BEEEEEAAACH!"
"Yes, we are most definitely going to the beach." Off they went. Sora, Kairi, and Lea were already waiting for them; as soon as Dawn laid eyes on his friends, he leaped off the glider and nearly barreled straight into them. The children screamed gleefully at each other for a moment, then took off for the water en masse.

"Oops," Lea said. "I'd better go with them. Roxas! Xion! Wait up!" He rushed to join the children, and was soon playing with them in the waves.

"Aaaahhhh." Riku shed everything but his swimsuit, lay down on one of the towels Kairi had set out under a beach umbrella, and blissfully fell asleep surrounded by the warm sun, the sound of the wind and waves, the laughter of the islanders as they enjoyed the beautiful day, and the knowledge that someone else was looking after Dawn for a while.

"Oh, poor baby, he came all this way just to take a nap," Kairi laughed. She smiled affectionately as she smoothed a lock of hair out of Riku's face.

"We're at the beach, how can he be tired?!" Sora exclaimed.

"I don't think he realized he was so tired until he got a chance to rest."

Riku woke up a little later, feeling refreshed. When he'd been younger, he would have wanted to spend the entire day out in the water, running over the sand, playing, chasing the horizon.... He would do all that today, but...later. At this moment, he felt content to simply sit talking and eating with his best friends, watch Dawn play, and let Sora build a sandcastle on his foot.

"Ah! It moved!"

"Sorry."

"Uh oh...trouble, I think...."

Riku looked back out at the kids and sighed. Aqua and the others had shown up with Kazé while he'd slept. The kids had done all right for a while, but now Kazé and Roxas were screaming and struggling in their respective guardians' arms, Dawn and Naminé were crying, and Xion was wisely grabbing the boys' Keyblades out of their hands so that the weapons would disappear.
"Dawn," Riku called. The little boy turned to him. All Riku had to do was hold out his arms, and then Dawn was running to fling himself into Riku's embrace, sobbing.

"I hate them! I hate them I hate them I hate--!"

Riku popped an ice cream bar into Dawn's mouth. The little boy lay back against Riku and closed his eyes, sucking forlornly at the ice cream, finally quiet. Riku stroked his hair, which, while not tangled, was sticky with sweat and sand. Riku wistfully wished that he'd been allowed to sweat without getting yelled at when he was Dawn's age.

"Aw," Kairi noticed, "look, Dawn has freckles from all the sun." Sora poked at Dawn's cheeks. The little boy batted the hand away without opening his eyes. Kairi peered closer at Dawn's face, then looked up at Riku's. "Huh. But you don't."

"What?"

"It's funny - you guys are genetic twins, but he has freckles and you don't."

Riku stared at her.

"What's wrong, Riku?"

"...Normal people have freckles." It sounded so obvious when Riku said it out loud, but for some reason, he hadn't realized it until this moment. "It's normal to have freckles. Humans have freckles."

"Riku?"

Riku closed his eyes. When he was a child, he'd gotten so used to it that he did it now as automatically as he breathed. He couldn't find the suppression magic for a minute, and when he did, it was difficult to let go. At last, he managed to unclench it, and his freckles were revealed for the first time in over thirteen years.
Kairi gasped. "Oh, Riku, that's so cool! How did you do that?"

"You look like there's glitter on your face," Sora laughed.

"Glitter?"

Dawn was frowning up at him now. "Your face is all shiny. You look like the SOLDIERs."

"Huh?!" Alarmed and self-conscious, Riku hid his freckles again. He waited until that evening, after they'd gone home and Dawn was in bed, before he closed himself in the bathroom and studied his freckles in the mirror.

They did glow a bit, and it was similar to the 'Mako eyes' of Zack and the others. 'I've been pressuring my freckles for so long...did they get infused with the Mako I was using to hide them?' He hid his sparkling face in his hands. "Great. Way to be a freak again, Riku."

Over the next week or so, Riku couldn't make up his mind about whether to keep hiding his freckles or let them be free. He kept trying it both ways, feeling differently about it from day to day and even hour to hour. He hoped that the Mako effect would fade with time and make him look more normal, but...so far, no good....

The next time he saw his father, he defiantly revealed his freckles, just to see what would happen. He was not a little boy anymore. He didn't have to fulfill his parents' demands or take their abuse anymore. He was secure in his identity and he knew his own value, so his parents' opinions were now worth nothing except to indicate whether or not they'd grown.

Sephiroth stopped in mid-sentence and just looked at him for a while. Riku gazed calmly back. Finally, his father said, sounding slightly surprised, "They don't look too terrible."

"They don't look bad at all, Father," Riku said. 'Weird, yes, but not disgusting like Mother kept calling them.' "This is me. This is how I am naturally, and there's nothing wrong with it."

Sephiroth tilted his head slightly.
"Did you forget that I have freckles?!" Riku realized. 'Or did you never even notice?!

"...Genetics," Sephiroth murmured, sounding almost like he was talking to himself. He raised his hand, in which a glassy, mirror-like sheet of magic materialized. Then he dropped whatever glamour had been hiding what Riku had never realized existed before now.

Of course, it was Sephiroth. Ordinary people had brown spots; Riku looked like someone had sprinkled a pinch of fairy dust across his cheeks; the One-Winged Angel, as if not to be outdone, had Mako-infused freckles that made his face glow like the horizon at daybreak.

After studying his reflection for a moment, Sephiroth dismissed the mirror-magic, and his freckles faded out of sight again. "I will consider it," he said, then resumed whatever he'd been talking about before the revelation of his son's freckles had distracted him.

'Freaks,' Riku thought wearily. 'My whole family, every single one of us.'

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Author's Notes: I was thinking about my friend Medli45 the other day - specifically, about an interesting element of her art. I'm not a fan of freckles in general (I don't mind them; just not a fan), yet I LOVE the way Medli does freckles. She can make them look good on any character, regardless of whether the character is canonically freckled or not. (Like Spock! Spock! How do you give a Vulcan freckles, yet still make him look freaking cute instead of odd?! I think that was what decided me. XD) Medli's Kairi, for example, is heavily freckled; so I was thinking about a freckled Sora, and then a freckled Riku, and then this one-shot wrote itself in my head.

I don't think that Riku with freckles will be part of my main headcanon, but after such a long creative dry spell (I haven't posted any writing in over two months X'D), I was so happy to get a postable working fic idea that I HAD to write it. XD
Battle Stance: Sweetstack (theme 44) {Vanitas, Ven, Aqua, & Terra}

*Battle Stance*, a Kingdom Hearts fanfic series by Raberba girl for RoseOfADifferentColor's Armory Challenge

Sweetstack (theme 44) [rough draft]

Summary: Post-canon, the BBS trio and Kazé (Vanitas) celebrate Valentine's Day.

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Kazé was not a morning person. The idiot should have already figured it out, the way Ven always rose with the sun and often conked out right after dinner, and the way Kazé might sleep well into the afternoon but could then function in top form all night.

But noooo. Master Needs A Punch In The Face Eraqus always insisted on dragging Kazé out of bed at the crack of dawn with the rest of them, even when Kazé was so out of it that he could never remember what he was fed for breakfast or how exactly he'd gotten to wherever they were training that day. Kazé was *this close* to kidnapping Ven and escaping to Destiny Islands, or Dwarf Woodlands - or anywhere, really, where he'd get to *sleep in*. Today. He'd do it today, probably. ...Later, when he was conscious.

Sweet. Sooo sweet, his mouth full of it.... Just as Ven had gotten addicted to salty foods after their split, as if questing for a hint of what he'd lost, Kazé could never get enough sweets to fill the figurative hole in his chest. He blinked up at the ceiling, noticing it for the first time. As well as the face smiling at him.

"Nnh...?" He knew her. He just couldn't remember her name. Too sleepy.

"Happy Valentine's Day, love." She stooped down lower and kissed his forehead.

"A...qua...?"

"I'll leave the rest here on the table," she said.
'Rest of what?  Who?  What is in my mouth?  I want more!'

He woke up again encased in ice. A stab of fury shot through him, since he knew it was Eraqus trying to wake him up; but his second thought was that he still had the lingering aftertaste of whatever Aqua had put in his mouth earlier, and he almost, almost, almost remembered what it was.

"For the last time, Kazé!  Out of bed!"

"Goonedogerdai," Kazé said. He'd meant to say "You never told me the first time!" but was still half-asleep and couldn't remember how to make words sound coherent.

A Keyblade slammed on top of the ice block, shattering it, and causing a fair bit of pain as well.

'I'm going to kill you today,' Kazé fumed.

"Get UP."

Kazé would have struck out at him if he hadn't known that Eraqus would not hesitate to beat him to a pulp. The man had tolerated him ever since the other three apprentices had dragged him to the Land of Departure and requested that he become their companion, but there was still no love lost between Master Eraqus and the young man who'd once been known as Vanitas. "Aqua," was all Kazé managed to say aloud.

"She's been out training for two hours. For the last time, Kazé, get up."

Kazé rolled over onto the floor. He struggled artfully until Eraqus went away, then he went still again without ever actually getting up. 'My head hurts....'

He was just about to fall asleep again when he remembered. Sweet. There was more. Wasn't there? Table, Aqua had said. On the table.

Kazé rolled onto his back and then gazed at the top of the bedside table above him. Soooo far. He couldn't get up. He just wanted to lie here until the sun set, and maybe, at some point, Aqua would
be very kind and merciful and would get whatever it was and feed him some more of it before then.

'Chocolate!!' he finally remembered. 'There is freaking chocolate up there!' An idea occurred to him. "Gravity!"

The pink and red basket lifted into the air. It drifted for a minute, spinning around and around slowly. Then the spell wore off, and the basket and its contents dropped back down, the basket bouncing off Kazé's chest and the chocolates scattering on top of and around him like edible hail.

"Heh." Vanitas picked up the closest one and popped it into his mouth. He closed his eyes and savored it. 'Chooooocolaaaaate...soooooo sweet...and good...like Ven. ...I need Ven. NOW.'

Sugar rushes always made him want his light half more than usual. Kazé fought to get to his feet, staggered out of the room without bothering to change out of his pajamas, then paused in the hallway and wondered where to go. Usually, someone would drag him around and he'd regain full consciousness on the training field, but apparently he'd been left behind today. "Veeeeeen," he whined. He finally dropped his Keyblade to the ground, silently ordering it to transform into something that looked like an armored boat, then lay in it lethargically as he piloted it out of the castle and around the countryside. "Veeeeeen...Aquaaaa...Terraaaaa...."

There they were, training together on the mountaintop. Kazé steered the Glider downwards and let it shift back into a Keyblade so he could collapse on the grass. Then he just lay there, still too tired to get up.

"Kazé!" They gathered around him, Aqua kneeling gracefully, Ven crouching on his other side, Terra peering down at him.

"Sweet," Kazé said plaintively.

"Did you like your Valentine chocolate?" Aqua asked with a smile.

"What the heck is Valentine," Kazé mumbled. He finally found Ven's hand and held it, and felt a little better.

"It's a holiday," Terra explained. "The way it's done here, girls give guys chocolate every year on
February 14th. Aqua made some for all of us.

"I left the rest in my room," Kazé realized. "Aaaarrggghhh." He was too tired to get back on the Glider and go back for more. "I hate mornings. Hate hate hate hate hate."

"Poor baby," Aqua said, affectionately stroking his bangs away from his forehead.

"Not a baby," Kazé mumbled.

"I wish I could like normal chocolate again," Ven said wistfully. "It was really good, wasn't it."

"I wanna sleeeeep." Kazé remembered. "Ven. When I'm awake. We're going. Woodlands."

"Huh?"

The trio soon went back to training, and Kazé lay in the warm sun until the fatigue started to clear from his mind and he was able to get up. He summoned his Keyblade to his hand and examined it for a moment. Then he looked back up, grinning, and rushed in to attack Terra when the man wasn't expecting it.

"Aaahh!"

"HA HA! Got you!"

"Not fair, Van!" Ven yelled, rushing to Terra's defense.

"Guess it's you and me, then," Aqua said with a twinkle in her eye, landing at Kazé's side. He grinned at her, and the rest of the morning was spent in an exhilarating two-against-two battle.

They ate lunch on the mountaintop, too, and Kazé took the opportunity to fetch the rest of his Valentine treats. He ate them one by one, unable to stop himself from making appreciative noises and exclamations.
"I'm glad you like it," Aqua said, ruffling his hair.

"I didn't know you could make *salty chocolate,*" Ven said, equally happy as he worked his way through his own Valentine basket. Terra, savoring his own chocolate gifts, had his eyes closed in bliss.

"I had to improvise a bit, but yes," Aqua said. "I wonder if anyone else will like them, though...."

Almost a month later, Ven pulled Kazé aside after dinner and asked in a murmur, "Have you figured out what you're going to give Aqua yet?"

"Huh?"

"You know, for White Day."

Kazé stared at him pointedly until it finally dawned on Ven that his other half had no idea what White Day was.

"March 14th. You know how girls give boys chocolate on Valentine's Day? White Day is the opposite. We have to pay her back, you know."

Kazé felt rather betrayed that the chocolate had not been a free gift after all.

"I mean, it doesn't have to be chocolate, but we have to give her *something."

"What if I don't want to?" Kazé challenged.

"Well, sure, feel free to be a jerk - but come on, Kazé, it's Aqua. I *know* you want to make her happy."

"She wouldn't have given me candy if the holiday hadn't made her," Kazé mumbled.
Ven gently touched his fist to the side of his brother's head. "Hey. She didn't have to give you chocolate on Valentine's Day. She included you because she loves you just as much as she loves the rest of us."

Kazé thought about this for a while, and felt a little better, though he did still grumble, "She'd better love me more than Eraqus."

"Come on, Kazé, focus. What do we do for her White Day gift?"

Neither of them could think of anything original, so they decided to just give Aqua chocolate. Ven said that it ought to be handmade and looked up a recipe, then they had to wait until Aqua would be out for a while so they could use the kitchen without her knowing.

"Kazé! Stop eating the chocolate, it's for Aqua!"

"She won't notice if just a little bit goes missing!"

"That was more than a little bit!" Ven pulled the rest of it away from Kazé, did his best to keep cutting the chocolate into even pieces, went to go look for something to drizzle over them, and came back to find even more missing. "STOP EATING THEM."

Kazé's mouth was so full that his protest was unintelligible.

By the end of it all, Ven stared down at the three small squares of chocolate that were left and said, "This is not enough. You idiot, we can't give this puny amount to Aqua!"

"They were really good," Kazé grumbled. "Not as good as hers, but...really good."

Ven slapped him upside the head, prompting a Keyblade fight in the kitchen that destroyed the pitiful remainder of their gift.

Kazé went to bed that night angry at his brother but much angrier at himself. He apparently had no
self-control when it came to sweets, and now that the taste in his mouth was gone, all that was left
was the bitterness of realizing that he didn't love Aqua as much as she loved him, that he couldn't
resist temptation for just one day.

He lay in bed, watching Unversed ooze out of him in response to his dark thoughts. 'How come I
can never make happy Unversed?' he thought resentfully.

Well...that wasn't quite true. He did have a few happy ones.

'Aqua...I care about her...I want to do something nice for her....' After some concentration, he
finally managed to produce some Prize Pods. He took hold of one and hugged it to his chest like a
stuffed animal. 'If I can just....'

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The next day, Aqua came into the kitchen around noon to find the twins hard at work. "What are
you boys up to?"

"Get out, get out!" Kazé yelled. "It's not ready yet!"

"We'll show you when it's done, Aqua," Ven said quickly, pushing her back out the door.

"Hmmm," she said with a smile, "well, then, do you mind making me some lunch while you're at
it?"

"Yeah, we'll do that, just don't come in until we say you can!"

Aqua was out training with Terra by the time the younger boys finally showed up with an ice chest
and beaming smiles. Aqua smiled back and lowered her Keyblade, which had taken the form of the
Keychain Terra had given her for White Day. "What's up, you two?"

"We have something for you, Aqua~"
"We made it."

She dismissed her Keyblade so she could pat them both on the head. "Good job!"

"You don't even know what it is yet, you don't know if we did a good job or not!" Kazé protested.

"It's the thought that counts."

"Don't talk like it sucks when you haven't even tried it, either!"

The twins' gift turned out to be ice cream, a new flavor that they had concocted out of the ingredients from Kazé's Prize Pods.

"Oh, my goodness!" Aqua exclaimed after taking the first bite. "This is really good!"

"Don't sound so surprised!"

The four of them spent the next hour or so very pleasantly, working their way through the batch of ice cream as they talked and laughed together. Kazé looked around at them, cradling his share of the treat in his hands and thinking that a year ago, he would have never dreamed that he'd experience such a warm feeling in his chest. He felt like he belonged with these people, that they truly wanted him here and enjoyed his company, and such a feeling was not something he took for granted.

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Author's Notes: Though I wrote most of this more than three years ago (it was meant to be for Valentine's Day 2014), the solution with the ice cream might have been subconsciously influenced by Taliax's Cast a Shadow (I read the ninth chapter last night, where Aqua introduces ice cream to Vanitas, who produces Prize Pods to make more because they have nothing else to eat).

I've been going through old files, looking at partial drafts that I want to finish up and get posted.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!