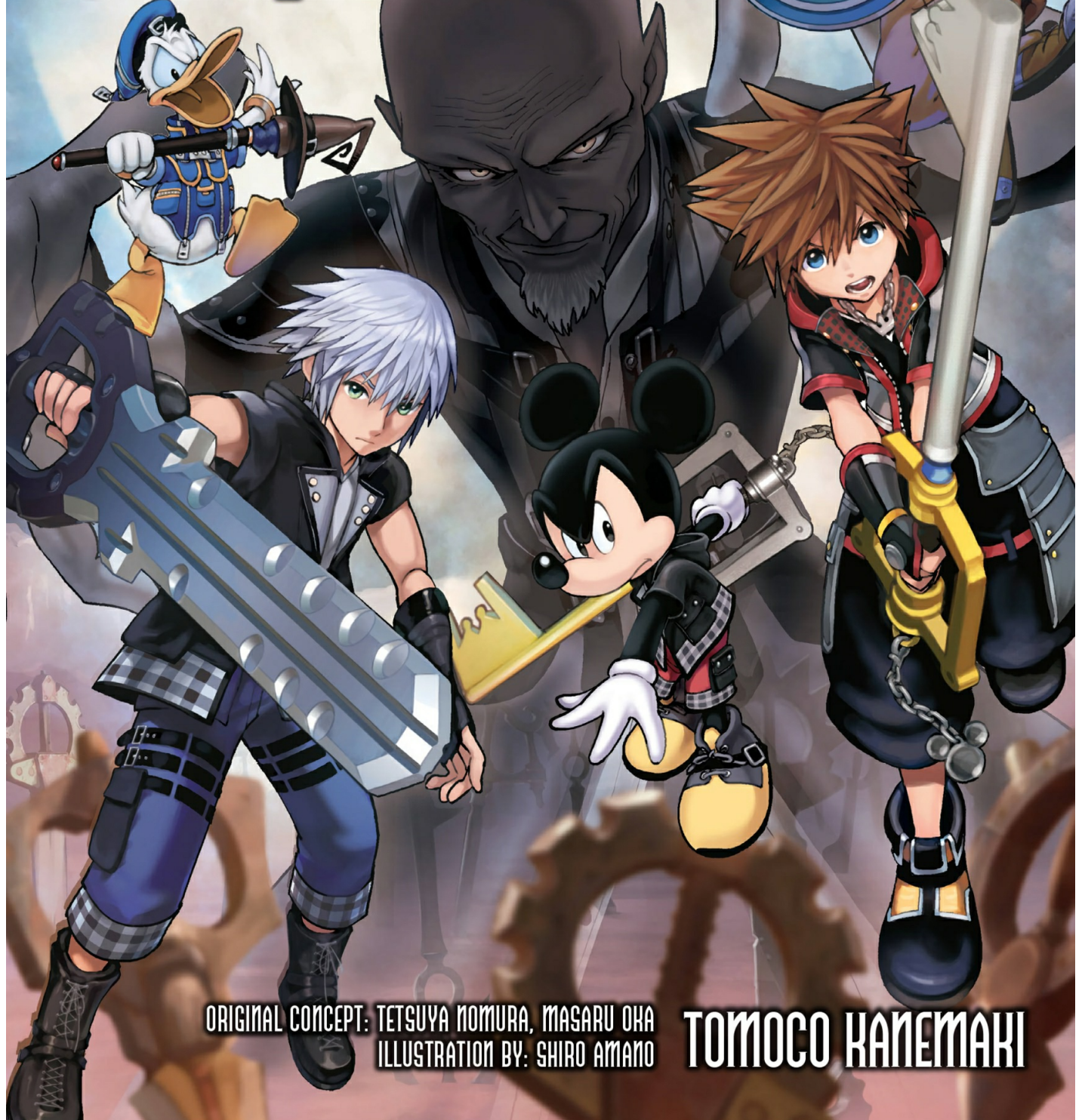


Disney SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS

THE NOVEL

3 Remind Me Again



ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMURA, MASARU OHA
ILLUSTRATION BY: SHIRO AMANO

TOMOCO KANEMAKI

Disney SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS

THE NOVEL





Disney SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS

THE NOVEL

Vol. 3

Remind Me Again

Tomoco Kanemaki

Original Concept

Tetsuya Nomura

Masaru Oka

Illustrations

Shiro Amano



NEW YORK

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KINGDOM HEARTS III: THE NOVEL, VOL. 3: REMIND ME AGAIN

TOMOCO KANEMAKI,

ILLUSTRATIONS: SHIRO AMANO,

ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMURA, MASARU OKA Translation by Luke Baker

Cover art by Shiro Amano

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NEW SEVEN HEARTS

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Coda

Years ago, when Sora was still a small boy, the Keyblade Master Eraqus was training three pupils in the Land of Departure. After learning of a brewing disaster, Terra, Ventus, and Aqua set off on a journey across the worlds. The trio eventually found the source of the threat, Master Xehanort, and ultimately thwarted his dark ambitions in a great battle. Unfortunately, the cost was high, and all three of them went missing without a trace.

Even worse, this battle was merely the opening act of Xehanort's grand scheme.

Approximately ten years later, Sora was building a raft with his friends Riku and Kairi on the Destiny Islands, dreaming of worlds beyond their own. One stormy night, darkness fell over the islands, and the fourteen-year-old Sora found himself in Traverse Town, where he would begin his journey to save the World. With a Keyblade in hand and two new friends, Donald and Goofy, at his side, Sora sealed the Keyholes to many worlds to protect them from the darkness. Eventually, he fought and defeated Ansem, the mastermind behind it all.

But the battle didn't end there for Sora, as he and his friends fought Organization XIII more than once, first in Castle Oblivion and then again a year later. With a little help along the way from the king, Riku, and the other warriors of light, Sora vanquished the Heartless and Nobodies, thus bringing the plans of the Organization to a halt. After finally striking down Xemnas, it appeared that an end to the turmoil was finally at hand.

Peace had returned to the World—until Sora received a letter from the king.

The letter was a summons to Sora and Riku from the great sorcerer Yen Sid, informing them that the World was once again in peril. Master Xehanort had returned, and their previous battles had been little more than steps along the way to his ultimate goal. In order to put a stop to Xehanort's machinations, Sora and Riku undertook the Mark of Mastery exam in the hopes of becoming Keyblade Masters themselves. The two were sent into the past, visiting the worlds trapped in slumber, where they could learn both the proper way to wield their Keyblades and the power of waking. However, Master Xehanort's plot had accounted for this, too. Thanks to his newly formed "true" Organization XIII,

Sora was plunged into a dark abyss. Riku saved him in the nick of time, but Sora was still stripped of all the strength and abilities he had gained in his adventures.

Master Xehanort's true goal is now clear: to obtain the χ -Blade at any cost. To stop him, the king and Riku set off in search of Aqua, one of the missing warriors of light. Meanwhile, Sora continues his own journey to recover his lost power and save the World alongside Donald and Goofy, traveling from Olympus all the way to Arendelle.

CHARACTERS



Donald Duck

The court magician of Disney Castle and constant travel companion of Sora and Goofy.



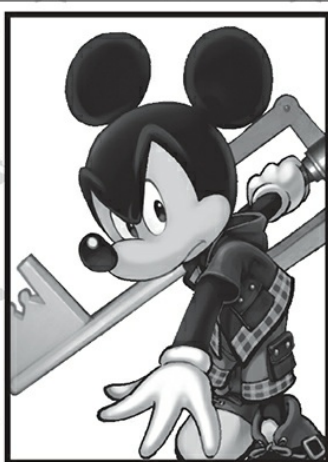
Sora

The hero of this story. He is on a mission with Donald and Goofy to restore his lost power of waking and save the World.



Goofy

The gentle captain of the Royal Knights at Disney Castle. His friendship with Sora and Donald runs deep, and he remains at their side all through their adventures.



**Mickey
(The King)**

The king of Disney Castle and a Keyblade Master on the side of light. His bond with Riku grows as the two of them traverse the realm of darkness in search of Aqua.



Riku

A childhood friend of Sora and Kairi, he became a Keyblade Master after undergoing the Mark of Mastery exam. On a journey to find Aqua alongside the king.

CHARACTERS



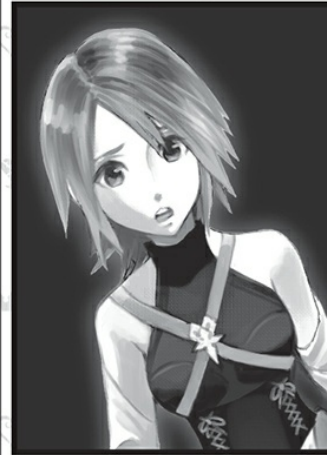
Kairi

Sora and Riku's friend since childhood. One of the New Seven Hearts, she also fights at the front lines with a Keyblade as a guardian of light. Currently undergoing training in the Secret Forest with Axel.



Axel (Lea)

A Keyblade wielder who was formerly number 8 in Organization XIII. Currently training with Kairi in the Secret Forest so he can rescue Roxas. Though he has returned to his human identity of Lea, he still holds on to the name of Axel as a link to his best friends.



Aqua

A Keyblade Master who once fought Master Xehanort alongside Terra and Ventus. Now lost in the realm of darkness, she holds the key to bringing back her two friends.



Ventus

A fellow Keyblade wielder and friend of Terra and Aqua, he faced down Master Xehanort approximately ten years before Sora's journey began. His heart slumbers within Sora, and his body's location is known only to Aqua.



Terra

A Keyblade wielder who battled Master Xehanort beside Aqua and Ventus, only to disappear without a trace afterward.



Ienzo

Formerly known as Zexion, number 6 in Organization XIII, this young scientist has now allied himself with Sora and his friends.



Yen Sid

The great sorcerer who dwells in the Mysterious Tower. Mickey's teacher, and also a source of guidance for Sora and the other guardians of light.



Chip & Dale

Two chipmunks in the employ of Disney Castle. Whether it's designing the Gummi Ship or inventing communicators like the Gummiphone, this duo plays a vital supporting role to Sora and his companions.



Jiminy Cricket

A dapper cricket and constant companion of Sora and his friends. He records all of their deeds in meticulous detail in his journal.

CHARACTERS

The Real Organization XIII

The group of thirteen Seekers of Darkness assembled by Master Xehanort who are needed to reforge the X-Blade. Young Xehanort and Ansem, Xemnas, Vanitas, and Dark Riku are somehow still alive as members, despite having been defeated once before. At present, the identities of only twelve of those in the Organization are known.



Master Xehanort

The Seeker of Darkness who leads the real Organization XIII. Consumed by interest in the X-Blade and Keyblade War, he has spent his entire life dedicated to bringing about their recurrence.

Young Xehanort

A member of the Organization who takes the shape of Master Xehanort in his youth. His plan to make Sora the thirteenth vessel failed, so he now plots in secret to make up for this misstep.

Ansem

The foe Sora defeated during his first adventure has returned through mysterious means. When Xehanort became a Heartless after rebelling against his mentor, Ansem the Wise, he used the darkness in Riku's heart to take possession of his body, allowing him to take this form.

Xemnas

Former leader of Organization XIII, and the Nobody of Ansem the Wise's pupil Xehanort.

Saïx

Formerly number 7 in Organization XIII. Best friends with Lea (Axel) since back when he was a human known as Isa. When he and Lea became students of Ansem the Wise, they had a secret ulterior motive...

Vanitas

A being of pure darkness, drawn from the darkness in Ventus's heart by Master Xehanort. He's after Ventus, who is sleeping within Sora's heart.

Xigbar

Once number 2 in Organization XIII, he was a collaborator of Master Xehanort's even back when he was human. He has ordered Luxord and the others to find the mysterious black box.

Larxene

Once number 12 in Organization XIII, she spoke to Sora of the New Seven Hearts in Arendelle. Colluded with Marluxia to betray the Organization at one point.

Marluxia

Former number 11 in the Organization and ruler of Castle Oblivion. Conspired with Larxene at one point to seize control of the Organization.

Demyx

At one time number 9 in Organization XIII. He fills more of a placeholder role in the real version of the Organization and seems entirely unmotivated regarding its goals, making him truly unpredictable.

Luxord

The former number 10 of the old Organization. Currently tasked with finding the black box.

Dark Riku

A member of the real Organization XIII who bears the appearance of Riku when he was around the age of fifteen.

Vexen

Formerly number 4 in the old Organization XIII. Appears to have joined the Organization's real incarnation in anticipation of something.

CHARACTERS



Maleficent

A wicked fairy skilled in wielding the powers of darkness. Along with her henchman Pete, she has been a frequent thorn in Sora's side. She is now traveling the World in search of the black box.



Pete

An old acquaintance of the king, and Maleficent's constant partner in crime. Harbors a fierce sense of rivalry toward Mickey for some reason, yet always ends up losing. Currently hunting for the black box on orders from Maleficent.

Riku Replica

A doppelganger of Riku created by Vexen. Thought to have disappeared into the darkness after losing a duel with the true Riku.

Ansem the Wise

The onetime ruler of Radiant Garden and foremost researcher into the nature of hearts. Took the name "DiZ" and swore vengeance after losing everything to his apprentice Xehanort, only to vanish after aiding Sora and his friends. He would then later meet Aqua on the Dark Margin.

Roxas

The Nobody of Sora, he was close friends with Axel and the others during his time as number 13 of Organization XIII. He dwells within Sora's heart, waiting for the time of his return.

Naminé

The Nobody of Kairi, she possesses the ability to manipulate the memories of Sora and those connected to him. At one time used by Marluxia and the others in Castle Oblivion, she was eventually able to return to Kairi's heart.

Boy in White (Eraqus)

A boy engaged in a game in Scala ad Caelum, a place supposedly frequented by Keyblade wielders. Though exactly when this game takes place is uncertain, he seems to enjoy a friendly relationship with his silver-haired companion.

Boy in Black (Xehanort)

A young man playing a game with his black-haired friend in Scala ad Caelum. Apparently has a great interest in the Keyblade War, the Lost Masters, and tales of ancient times.



Chapter 10

THE CARIBBEAN

Chapter 10

The Caribbean

OUT ON THE OPEN SEA, A SHIP FULL OF PIRATES were singing together.

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me

The Kraken leapt from the ocean brine

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

And to the Locker the Sparrow confined

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me

A goddess thought she'd a Sparrow save

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

And brought a blackguard back from the grave

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me

The *Flying Dutchman* is on the hunt

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

To punish a Sparrow for his affront

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me

Within the chest his secret sleeps

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

The heart of Davy Jones still beats

Look out, me hearties, yo ho

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me

As the sun sank into the waters of the Caribbean, the sky was as beautiful as it ever had been on the Destiny Islands. Sora hummed happily as he gazed at the waning light from aboard a ship.

"Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me..."

Eventually, the sun vanished completely, leaving the boat beneath a starry sky. As Sora continued singing next to the mast, Donald asked, "Why are you so happy?"

"Cause we get to be pirates again!" Sora replied. He was dressed in a pirate hat, a slightly antiquated jacket over a red-brown vest and grubby shirt, trousers striped with shades of gray, and a pair of boots. His face was smudged with dirt, too, and this combined with his outfit conjured up images of a certain man they had met once before. Donald's and Goofy's clothes had transformed into similarly pirate-like attire as well. Goofy's shield was now shaped like a ship's wheel, while the tip of Donald's staff had become an armillary sphere.

"Yep, you always did like this world," Goofy said, an oar in his hands.

"How could anyone not? Still...it's a real shame we don't have a bigger ship."

The vessel that the slightly disappointed Sora stood upon was perhaps better called a raft than a boat. Just like the one that he, Riku, and Kairi had cobbled together back on the Destiny Islands, in fact. It did have a mast in the middle, but not even that could make it a proper sailing vessel, and it would never hold up in a storm.

"Got any idea where we're going?" asked Donald. He also had an oar, but he had no clue as to where they were headed.

"Where else? The edge of the world!" Sora cried as he thrust a finger toward the horizon. There was only one true destination for pirates, and that was as far as the ocean would take them.

Goofy got to his feet and performed a maritime salute: "Captain Sora!"

"What ails ya, Mister Goofy?"

"The edge of the world!" Goofy pointed in a different direction.

“Aye!” Sora turned to look.

“We’re runnin’ outta sea, sir!”

“Aye! We’re runnin’ outta sea,” said Sora, who puffed his chest out proudly like a captain and let loose with hearty laughter before meeting Donald’s gaze.

“Running *out*?!” the two of them exclaimed in unison.

The top of an enormous waterfall loomed dead ahead of their raft—they were really running out of sea. The waters almost immediately roughened, as if they were in a storm, and Sora grabbed hold of the mast.

“Hard to starboard!”

Though Donald and Goofy began paddling their oars mightily at Sora’s command, it simply wasn’t enough.

“But there’s no time, Captain!” Goofy cried as the raft tumbled over the edge of the sea.

The screams of Sora and his friends rang out over the water.

When the trio finally came to, they were on a seemingly endless stretch of white sand.

“Where’d we end up *this time*?” Sora looked up at the sky and groaned.

“How ’bout we start walkin’?”

“Okay...”

Taking Goofy’s suggestion, Sora got to his feet and began trudging along the desert. The sunlight beat down on them, and the sand seemed to go on forever. They had no idea at all where they might be.

“We’ve been walkin’ forever,” Goofy moaned while his two companions stumbled along dejectedly.

“I’m exhausted...,” Donald complained.

“Some pirates. We won’t get anywhere without a ship.”

Though it most likely had nothing to do with Sora’s grumblings, a small shape did come faintly into view off in the distance. And upon a closer look, it turned

out to be—

“A ship...,” Sora murmured as he came to a halt. Donald and Goofy stopped, too.

“Sora... This is dry land...Wak!” Donald yelled as he spotted what Sora was looking at. A huge vessel loomed some ways away.

The trio looked at one another. “It *is* a ship!” they shouted in unison, breaking into a run after the boat. Despite not being in the sea, it was somehow cutting its way through the sand of the desert.

Just then, a figure came running up to them from behind. Upon passing them, the person called out a greeting: “Hail, Sora!”

“Huh? Jack Sparrow!”

The voice belonged to a lone pirate—Sora and his companions came to a halt as they realized it also belonged to an old friend.

The pirate stopped alongside them. “*Captain* Jack Sparrow,” he corrected, sounding somewhat aggrieved.

Donald and Goofy shared a look—they’d heard this before.

“Sure is!” said Goofy. Donald voiced his agreement with a chuckle.

“Hey, Jack. Where are we?” asked Sora, but Jack was already running again before he even finished the question.

“Belay that. Ship absconding!”

“Huh?”

“Help me catch the *Pearl* before she gets away!”

The *Pearl*—the *Black Pearl*, to be precise—was Jack’s ship.

“Aye, aye, Captain!” Sora said with a grin before joining Jack in his pursuit. Upon closer inspection, the ship wasn’t moving on its own—it was being carried by small white things. Very quick small white things.

“Are those crabs?”

“...Crabs?”

Donald and Goofy speculated as they ran. Meanwhile, it was all Sora could do to keep up with Jack. The *Black Pearl* kicked up clouds of sand as it raced along.

And that was when the Heartless arrived.

“Let’s get rid of them, Sora!”

“Aye!”

Jack drew his sword from the sheath at his waist, and Sora readied his weapon as well. Just as they had before, the two of them chased after the *Pearl*, blades flashing. Jack and Sora cut a swath through the Heartless, and when they caught up to the ship, Jack reached up to grab a rope hanging down its side.

“Up here!” he shouted, reaching out to grab Sora, while Donald and Goofy hung from Sora’s legs. Jack clambered up the rope with all three of them in tow.

“Right, then.” Jack grinned once he finally stood panting on the deck.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy climbed on board, too, then gave one another high fives with beaming smiles all around. “We did it!”

A pirate needs his ship, after all.

The *Black Pearl* continued moving along the desert as before, eventually passing over a decent-sized rise in the sand. And beyond that, at long last, was the sea.

A group of familiar faces awaited the arrival of the *Black Pearl* along the shoreline. There was Gibbs, the *Pearl*’s first mate, Jack’s comrades in arms Will and Elizabeth—and then Captain Barbossa, who had once been Jack’s enemy. There was also a woman Sora had never seen before stroking the back of a white crab, as well as the rest of the *Black Pearl*’s crew.

Jack greeted Gibbs once he climbed down from the ship. “Mister Gibbs.”

“Aye, Cap’n.”

“I thought so. I expect you’re able to account for your actions, then.”

“Sir?” A questioning look crossed Gibbs’s face.

“There has been a perpetual and virulent lack of discipline aboard my ship—

why?”

“Sir, you’re... You’re in Davy Jones’s Locker, Cap’n,” the first mate whispered back in explanation.

“Davy Jones’s Locker?” Sora said from behind Jack, swiveling his head around. He’d never heard of this place.

A troubled expression appeared on Jack’s face for a moment. And then, as if irritated with himself, he said back to Gibbs, “I know that. I know where I am. And don’t think I don’t.” Sora guessed Jack was acting braver than he felt as he turned back to Sora with his typical swagger. “I’m in Davy Jones’s Locker. Assuredly.”

Sora cocked his head to one side quizzically. *Who’s Davy Jones, and why does he have a beach in his locker? I’ve never heard of him before.*

“Jack Sparrow.”

When Barbossa addressed the captain, Sora, Donald, and Goofy grew tense at the sight of their onetime foe.

But Jack seemed almost friendly as he approached Barbossa. “Ah, Hector! It’s been too long. Hasn’t it?”

“Aye, Isla de Muerta, remember? You shot me.”

“No I didn’t.”

Barbossa’s first name was apparently “Hector.”

Will and Elizabeth walked over to Sora as he watched the two captains’ exchange curiously.

“Sora. We meet again.”

“It’s lovely to see you all.”

“Oh!” Sora cried. “Will. Elizabeth. Is...something about you different?”

The Elizabeth Sora and his friends knew had worn pretty dresses, but now she was a bona fide pirate.

“Yeah, you look all swashbuckly,” Goofy commented.

Elizabeth replied, “Well, I’ve seen some adventures. But I never thought I’d find *you* here.”

“Speaking of... Where exactly *is* ‘here’? What’s all this about a locker?”

It was Will who answered Sora’s questions. “Davy Jones’s Locker. Jack neglected to repay a certain debt to Jones. So Jones sent the Kraken to devour Jack, and that’s how he ended up here.”

“Then...Davy Jones’s Locker... You’re saying that we’ve gone beyond...” Sora trailed off.

“Beyond the grave?” Goofy supplied. Donald let out a little yelp.

“And we’re here to wrest Jack from his fate.” Elizabeth looked over at Jack, who was now speaking to the unknown woman. She had long dreadlocks and an air of mystery about her.

“Tia Dalma, out and about, eh? You add an agreeable sense of the macabre to any delirium,” Jack said to her in an amiable tone.

Tia Dalma only smiled slyly back at him.

“He thinks we’re a hallucination,” Will explained, and Jack Sparrow turned mirthfully toward Sora, Donald, and Goofy.

“Heh... Complete with these three masqueraders.”

Before the “three masqueraders” could reply, Elizabeth stepped in front of them. “Jack, this is real. We’re here. We’ve come to rescue you!”

“Have you now? That’s very kind of you. But it would seem that as I possess a ship and you don’t, you’re the ones in need of rescuing. And I’m not sure as I’m in the mood.”

“Jack, Cutler Beckett has the heart of Davy Jones,” said Will. “He controls the *Flying Dutchman*.”

“He’s taking over the seas,” Elizabeth added.

Jack briefly faltered at that, and Tia Dalma chose that moment to break her silence.

“And him must be stopped. The Brethren Court is called.”

“Leave you people alone for just a minute and look what happens. Everything’s gone to pot!” Jack exclaimed in exasperation as he gazed out over the sea.

Sora stood beside him, confused. “I’m lost. What’s going on?”

“Well, um...sounds to me like this Beckett fella they mentioned is tryin’ to conquer the ocean.”

“Oh.” Sora nodded at Goofy’s succinct summary.

“The sea belongs to everyone!” Donald cried indignantly.

“Yeah! No conquerors,” Sora said with a clenched fist. *Jack may pretend not to care, but I’m sure he’s upset. He wouldn’t just leave this be.*

“Listen, Jack,” said Gibbs. “The world needs you back somethin’ fierce.”

“And you need a crew,” Will added, but Jack only shrugged.

“Why should I sail with any of you? Four of you have tried to annihilate me.”

Sora flung his hand into the air enthusiastically. “Jack, *we’re* on your side!”

“Aye, so you are, mates. I never could have caught the *Pearl* without you. Sora, Donald, Goofy, you’re hired.”

“Yes!”

With a sidelong glance at Sora’s near-excessive excitement, Jack passed in front of the remaining assembled faces.

“Now, as for the rest of you...” He paused. “Tia Dalma, you’re in.”

The woman replied with nothing but the secretive smile she’d been wearing the whole time.

Jack stopped before Gibbs next.

“Gibbs, you can come.”

The first mate grinned.

“Weigh anchor, all hands! Prepare to make sail!”

His orders issued, Jack opened his compass. But instead of leading him north, the needle spun wildly around and around.

Barbossa chuckled at the sight, holding a nautical chart in his hands as Will and Elizabeth stood behind him. “Jack... Which way you goin’, Jack?” he asked.

With some frustration, Jack Sparrow motioned for the three of them to board the *Black Pearl* with a jerk of his chin.

Once everyone was on board, Sora took the helm. After a few lessons from Jack, his technique was perfect. The only problem was...he didn’t know where they were headed.

And I thought that desert was huge—the sea really is endless. Well, maybe not completely, since we got here by falling off the edge.

I don’t even know if there’s a point to steering anymore.

Sora plopped down beside Donald and Goofy in the shadow of the mast and stared blankly into the distance. “So we *do* have a destination, right?”

“I can’t tell anymore.” Goofy sighed.

Across the deck from the three of them, Jack stood staring intently at the nautical chart.

“Jack is just making it up,” Donald whined.

Tia Dalma slowly walked up before the bored trio. “Cast your fate with Jack Sparrow, and you soon be sharing in the wrath of Davy Jones,” she said with a smirk.

“The guy who Will mentioned? Who does he think he is, anyway? And what did Jack ever do to him?”

Tia Dalma observed them with interest. “Truly? You don’t know who Davy Jones be? And you say you be men of the sea?”

She doesn’t seem worried, but...there’s something strange about her. I can’t put my finger on it.

More importantly, how do I answer her question?! “Let’s put it this way—we’re from another sea.”

“Hmm, are you now?”

It was hard to tell what Tia Dalma thought of his explanation—but she soon

shifted her gaze to Jack and continued speaking at her usual languid pace.

“Jack and Davy Jones’s fate be intertwined. Jones, him raised Jack’s precious *Pearl* from the depths and make Jack captain for thirteen years. In exchange, Jack promise to give Jones him soul as payment. But thirteen years pass, and Jack fail to return. So Jones, him send the Kraken to devour Jack, taking him and the *Pearl* back to the depths. But...if Jones learn that Witty Jack cheat that fate, him wanna punish Jack even worse. And Jack’s friends, too.”

She turned back to face Sora, Donald, and Goofy.

“Are you, um, talking about us?”

“Ya mean that the Kraken’s gonna eat us?”

Donald and Goofy spluttered out fearfully.

“Aw, let the Kraken have a crack. I ain’t scared!” Sora retorted, full of courage.

Tia Dalma took a long look at his face, genuinely interested for the first time. “Hmm... Not scared at all? That be rare. Most men, them run for land at the mention of the Kraken. Not you. But Jack be scared. He want to be free of his debt to Davy Jones. That’s why him need the box.”

“Box?!”

Sora and his friends shared a look. Organization XIII was after a box, too.

“It be a chest...,” Tia Dalma continued, “where Davy Jones lock away the part of him that hurt. The pain it cause him was too much to live with...but not enough to cause him to die.”

“And...what part of him is that?” Sora asked.

“Him heart,” Tia Dalma answered with a smile.

Heartless, hearts, and a box... Organization XIII would be interested in all of that. Are they up to something here, too?

On another sea—a sea whose waters still touched the waters where Sora was—floated a large ship.

Two men stood upon its deck, both of them clad in black coats.

“Oh, how does he do it? A creature absent a heart and yet somehow able to

keep existing... Not even my finest Replica can claim that achievement. The secret must be in that box. I have to know what mystery it contains,” Vexen said with fascination in his voice.

Luxord stood across the deck, listening to him. “I believe our orders were to find the box and seize it. No more. Put a leash on that runaway curiosity.”

“Always so shortsighted. Why would the Organization seek me out just as soon as I was recompleted if not to reaffirm my intellectual prowess and invest in my research? Every stride I make is a stride for all of us.”

“Oh really? And what exactly are we striding towards?”

Vexen’s eyes narrowed. “Luxord, do I detect...a hint of treachery in your words?”

“What? Don’t be absurd. But to be clear, I serve the Organization. I don’t share your need to please Xemnas. He’s good at wrapping you around his little finger—always has been.”

This was true. Luxord didn’t share any special bond with Xemnas, Xehanort, or even Ansem the Wise.

Though Vexen sneered, his explanation sounded as if he was trying to convince himself as much as Luxord. “All I desire is the freedom to continue my research. Ansem the Wise refused to nurture my talents. So I cast my lot with Xemnas—with Xehanort, rather. Simple as that.”

“I see. And you don’t care how he uses your research?”

“Not in the slightest. All that concerns me is that I complete the perfect human vessel,” Vexen declared.

Luxord closed his eyes for a moment. “That’s all well and good. But I know this world better than you. Kindly stay out of the way.”

“Oh, of course. Considering those pests have shown up, I’d hardly get anything done,” the academic replied, referring to Sora and his friends.

“I already know what to do with the ‘pests.’ Then you can resume your stuffy studies.”

“Ah, that’s my boy. I’ll be watching from the shadows, then,” Vexen said, then

vanished into a shroud of darkness.

Just as the last rays of sun sank into the horizon, their final light was punctuated by a green burst, and the *Black Pearl* appeared in the waves—upside down. The ship was able to right itself underwater, but that still didn't change the fact that everyone got completely soaked.

Sora couldn't hide his displeasure. "Thanks, Jack. You could've warned us."

Goofy took the opportunity to chime in. "Yeah, everything went topsy-turvy and upsy-downsy!"

"Well, at least we're back in the land of the living," said Sora.

"Thank goodness!" sighed Donald as Jack deflated somewhat.

Either way, they had escaped Davy Jones's Locker and emerged into the Caribbean.

"Never fear. All according to plan." As always, Jack refused to take anything seriously.

"But that be no reason to rest easy," Barbossa commented. The old captain was watching something off in the distance.

"A ship!" Will cried, pointing at the enormous vessel.

"I've never seen one like that," Elizabeth murmured.

No sooner had she spoken than a swarm of small Heartless came flying from the ship. In their wake came another monster with great dragon-like wings—the Raging Vulture. The giant Heartless attacked with bolts of light that slammed into the water just short of the *Pearl*, creating waves that tossed the ship.

"Heartless!" Sora summoned his Keyblade.

"Barbossa, have you allied with those fiends again?"

"Don't impugn me honor. Why would I conspire with them?"

"But you *did* conspire with them."

"Could you discuss it later?" Elizabeth cut in before the two captains could waste more time bickering.

Suddenly Tia Dalma whispered something in Sora's ear:

"Use that key to free me, Sora, and you have my most certain promise—all the power on the sea you ever wish for be yours."

"Huh?"

"Get ready!" Will shouted in warning to the startled Sora.

The fact that their foes were airborne made it impossible for them to fight back.

"Hmm... I sure do wish we could get a little closer," Goofy said.

"What? Walk on air? We can't do that!" Donald retorted—but that gave Sora an idea.

"We can!"

Sora broke into a sprint and jumped off the *Black Pearl*, landing on one of the smaller Vaporfly Heartless. The creature had wings, and an anchor was attached to its posterior.

"Sora!"

"Donald and Goofy, protect the ship! I'll handle the Heartless."

Sora rode the Vaporfly up into the sky, then leaped across the backs of its fellows as they swooped in to attack him. He was getting closer to the Raging Vulture, but the *Black Pearl* was taking damage from its glowing orbs.

"I've gotta hurry!" Sora finally drew near enough to jump over and hit the Raging Vulture with a downward strike of his Keyblade. "Taaaake...THIS!"

One blow wasn't going to do the job, of course. Just as he was about to plummet into the sea, Sora found another Vaporfly to hop aboard and ride back to the Raging Vulture. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the others aboard the *Pearl* fighting their own battle, and his own determination was renewed.

With one final strike, his foe vanished in a flash of light.

"All right!"

Unfortunately, the defeat of the Raging Vulture also signaled the

disappearance of the Vaporflies.

“Wha—? Wait!” And then Sora was hurtling headfirst toward the water. “Oh noooooo!”

“Sora?”

“Sora!”

As Sora slowly drifted back to consciousness, he realized the voices calling his name belonged to Donald and Goofy. They peered into his face.

“Where are the others?” Sora asked as he sat up. They seemed to be on a beach somewhere.

“After you fell, we came looking for ya. I guess they musta kept goin’.”

“That’s desertion,” Donald quipped.

“Oh... And I was so happy that we got to see them again,” Sora said sadly—but the trio wasn’t alone.

“That eager to sail under Captain Jack Sparrow?”

Apparently, they hadn’t been completely deserted after all.

“Jack!”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy turned to see their friend standing before them.

A white crab dropped from the cuff of Jack’s trousers and scuttled off along the beach.

Meanwhile...

The *Endeavour* was a ship belonging to the East India Trading Company, currently scouring the seas of all pirates so that it might rule the waters unchallenged. The ship was under the command of Lord Cutler Beckett, a nobleman dispatched by the East India Trading Company and known for his ruthless treatment of marauders.

Belowdecks, Lord Beckett currently stood facing none other than Captain Jack Sparrow.

“Perhaps you’ll consider an arrangement. One which requires nothing from

you but information,” said Beckett as he poured something to drink into a glass.

Jack accepted the glass from Beckett and drained it as he presented his demands. “Regarding the Brethren Court, no doubt. In exchange for fair compensation... Square my debt with Jones... Guarantee my freedom...”

“Of course. It’s just good business.”

“Were I in a divulgatory mood, what then might I divulge?”

“Everything. Where are they meeting? What are their plans?”

The Brethren Court was the meeting of every pirate captain in the world, and Barbosa was attempting to convene it. Their plan was to free the sea goddess and win her help against Beckett and his forces. This was what Beckett wanted to know.

On the other hand, Jack was hoping to strike a deal with the ruthless nobleman to protect himself from Davy Jones.

“Shall we?” asked Jack, taking the lead.

“Shall we what?” Sora asked from behind.

“Some pirate! Won’t get anywhere without a ship. So let’s go get one.”

“Yes!” Elated, Sora pumped his fist in the air as he ran after Jack.

Goofy and Donald chuckled as they followed.

“Sora and Jack sure are cut from the same cloth.”

“They even talk alike!”

Sora came to a sudden halt, though, as he recalled what Tia Dalma had said to him on the deck of the *Black Pearl*—

“Use that key to free me, Sora, and you have my most certain promise—all the power on the sea you ever wish for be yours.”

What had she meant by that? Free her how?

“Sora?”

“What’s wrong?”

Donald and Goofy watched Sora’s face anxiously.

“Oh, nothing really. I’m good,” he said with a reassuring smile, then hurried to catch up with Jack.

They hadn’t gone far before they reached a dead end. All that lay ahead was a cove; the island where they’d washed up was quite small.

“Gawrsh, is there nowhere else to go?” said Goofy. “Guess we really do need a ship.”

“You think we could swim through here to one?” Donald asked worriedly.

On the other hand, Sora didn’t seem concerned in the slightest.

“No sweat! Islander, remember? I’m a better swimmer than you’d think!”

“So am I!”

Sora and Donald charged straight for the water, only to stop as Jack called out to them. “Alas, I am not gifted with the use of magic like you three. Forgive me if I leave the undersea exploration to you.”

Goofy turned back toward Jack before he could wade in after Sora and Donald.

“You can’t swim, Jack?”

“I’m a pirate, aren’t I? Of course I can swim—just not for very long.”

“Well, okay, then just leave findin’ the ship to us!”

With that, Sora, Donald, and Goofy dived into the cove.

What greeted them below the sea was a marvelous coral reef as beautiful as any they had seen in Ariel’s home. There was also tons of treasure to be found in the sunken wrecks scattered about.

“Oh yeah, we’ll definitely find a ship here.”

Their magic allowed them to speak underwater. The three friends swam even deeper.

“Look! Something’s glowin’,” Goofy called.

A closer look revealed what appeared to be two shimmering antennae wavering above the sand. There was a treasure chest sitting right between

them.

“That seems suspiciously convenient,” said Goofy.

“I’ll check it out.” Sora swam toward the glow.

“Sora, this could be dangerous.”

“But, Donald! No pirate worth his salt ignores treasure.”

A sigh of bubbles left Donald’s beak.

Just as Sora began to inspect the chest, the antennae twitched and a humongous Heartless shaped like a fish from the deep sea—the Lightning Angler—burst forth from the sand, its maw open wide.

“I knew it!” Donald shouted as he readied his staff.

“I figured this would happen,” Sora said, summoning his Keyblade. The trio squared off with the Lightning Angler, but they were quickly knocked aside as the aquatic Heartless barreled into them at incredible speed. The creature then swiftly spun about and charged again, but Sora managed to swim out of the way in the nick of time. Its target lost, the Lightning Angler began swimming wildly around, which gave Sora the opportunity to strike its tail with his Keyblade.

Donald faced the fishy fiend head-on with magic while Goofy rammed it using his shield. Their combined efforts managed to stun the Heartless.

Sora delivered a final Keyblade blow, sending the Lightning Angler crashing into a rock wall.

“We did it!”

The Heartless vanished, leaving behind a large opening. The caverns continued beyond the hole.

“Let’s go take a look!” said Sora as he swam into the passage. The waters gradually grew shallower as they proceeded, and before long, they had reached a sandy shore within a cave—and a large ship at anchor.

“Wak...”

“Whoa...”

“Oh, cool.”

They softly whispered to themselves as they gazed up at the boat.

“Whoo-hoo! It’s our very own ship!” Sora and his friends shouted with glee as they ran up to their prize, only to see that someone stood upon its deck, looking down at them.

“Are you certain about that?”

“Jack?”

Jack Sparrow was already on board the ship. “Finders keepers.”

“How’d he get here so fast?” Goofy wondered.

Jack couldn’t hold his breath for long, and they hadn’t sensed anyone following them—so just how did he get here?

“Mine. Savvy?”

Donald and Sora didn’t agree.

“No savvy!”

“Jack, you already have the *Black Pearl*.”

“Aye, to which this ship holds no candle. But take what you can, mate,” Jack said, completely unfazed. He made a show of turning back to work on the ship but, after a dramatic pause, added, “Now then, my ship has a captain, but it does appear I’m in need of a crew. Suppose you’ll have to do. Don’t dawdle. Climb aboard!”

He grinned down at his dumbfounded audience.

They couldn’t exactly refuse to board the ship, so they went ahead and joined Jack as his crew. Sora was again assigned to the ship’s wheel.

“Ready now, helmsman?”

“Ready enough, Cap’n, but...aren’t we kinda...trapped?” Sora replied, looking pointedly up at the ceiling of the cavern. How would they get out?

“Now, Sora, I know you’ve made passage through straits far more dire than this. Just follow your heart’s command.”

Sora nodded at Jack's advice, then closed his eyes. He opened them again, his gaze straight forward.

"Make way!"

As soon as the words left Sora's mouth, the cave wall directly ahead collapsed, opening the way to the expansive waters of the sea beyond. Sora guided the ship forward.

Their new ship was sailing along at a decent clip for a while—until an eerie fog began to rise around them.

A lone vessel emerged from the murk into view. It was identical to the strange ship that had waylaid the *Black Pearl*.

"It's the Heartless!"

Sora and his friends steeled themselves for a fight until Goofy said, "But look. This time there's somebody aboard."

The man on the deck was wearing a black coat—a member of Organization XIII.

"Not the merry company I'd hoped for." Jack groaned wearily, apparently recalling his past run-in with the Organization.

The man on the ship removed his hood, uncovering his short blond hair and mustache. They had crossed swords with him in this world before—it was Luxord, formerly number 10 in the Organization. "Parley!" he shouted.

The right of parley was a part of the Pirate's Code. A captain could invoke parley to begin negotiations with another captain, and nobody from either crew was allowed to interfere. This wasn't the first time Luxord had used parley to strike a bargain with Jack.

"Of course..." Jack sighed. Then, with a shrug, he raised his hand.

A few minutes later, Luxord stood aboard their ship.

"You back in the Organization?" Sora asked tersely from behind Jack.

"Yes. Surprising, isn't it, that they'd do me the honor? Never count your cards until they've all been dealt," Luxord replied.

“Jack,” Sora called, “don’t you give this creep the time of day.”

“Yeah!” Donald agreed.

While they had reached an agreement with Luxord in the past, the gambler was slippery enough that doing so had proven quite challenging.

“Come now, are you really so unsophisticated that you’d decline a gentlemanly conversation?”

“What’d you say?!”

Sora bristled at Luxord’s mocking tone. *Don’t treat me like a kid.*

But Jack lifted a hand to calm Sora, then took a step toward Luxord.

“Sora. Stand down. It’s the Code. Mustn’t strike a pirate aboard ship...when said pirate offers to confabulate.”

Luxord seemed pleased by Jack’s gentle admonishment. “Ah yes. And how could I love games and contests without honoring the rules? Because only by winning fairly does victory have any savor at all.”

“But...of course the Code is actually more guidelines than rules. Speak your piece,” Jack replied, as confident as could be.

“I am looking...for a box. A chest, perhaps.” Luxord appeared to be gauging their reaction, and Jack provided him with one, albeit small.

A box—was that the box Tia Dalma had spoken of? The one that contained a heart?

“You know the one?” Luxord asked, pressing for more. Now aware of the cracks showing in his armor, Jack began trying to dodge the question.

“Yes. M-maybe. No! I know of a box. But said box is not a box you want to trifle with, mate. Trust me.”

“Really? A wager, then.”

“And of what nature would this wager be?” Jack shrugged at Luxord’s invitation.

“What say we have a little race to that charming port town you hold so dear?”

“Port Royal?”

That was where Sora had first met Jack and the others.

“Yes. Whoever reaches it first is the victor. And the stakes: You tell me all about that chest.”

“Against what?”

“I will get you whatever it is you want.”

Jack mulled over the bet for moment, then broke into a grin. “Done!”

“Jack!” Sora couldn’t stop himself from protesting. Any offer from Luxord had to be a trap!

But Luxord didn’t even acknowledge Sora’s presence. “Then we have an accord.”

Darkness roiled up around the gambler—and then he was back on the deck of his own ship. “Now, let us begin!” he shouted.

“All hands!” Jack called. “Prepare to make sail!”

Sora was still not having it. “But, Jack—!”

“Drop canvas!”

Jack marched across the deck, giving out orders left and right, while Sora followed him unhappily every step of the way.

“Hey...Jack!”

The captain was still giving the commands needed to get the ship moving, and Sora was still trying to get his attention.

“With a will, lads!”

“Jack, *listen!*”

With a loud “What?!” Jack finally turned to face Sora.

“You can’t let him get his hands on that box. Do you really know whatever it is that he’s looking for?”

“Let’s just say...there’s a potential possibility he wants the chest containing Davy Jones’s heart. But I haven’t the foggiest notion why he’d covet the

blighted thing.”

“Is it a *black* box?”

“It is more black than blue... So yes!”

The box the Organization wanted was definitely black. Sora thought things over for a moment, then conferred with Goofy and Donald.

“Hmm... Do you think it’s the one?”

“Could be.”

“And winnin’ the race would keep it out of Organization XIII’s hands,” Goofy mused.

“Hey... You’re right!”

“What are you three muttering on about?”

Jack may have been irrepressibly irritated with his trio of slacking crewmen, but Sora was beginning to feel that things were looking up. “Basically, we need to win this race.”

“Precisely. No purchase, no pay. You might have the makings of a pirate after all.”

“Yeah!” Sora cheered happily in response to Jack’s little lesson on protocol. He rushed over and took the helm. Steering a pirate ship was a piece of cake!

“Let us be off!” Jack ordered, and Sora heeded the call with a spin of the wheel.

The wind blew strong, and their ship couldn’t have been in better condition.

Luxord’s ship was racing along beside them, but it was no match for their own as it slid skillfully through the waves.

“Lookouts, report!” Jack barked.

“Starboard side all clear!”

“Port, too!”

Donald and Goofy called from their posts on either side of the ship. They had left Luxord’s ship far behind, and there were no signs of any other hostiles in

the water.

“We got this one in the bag,” Sora crowed.

His confidence didn’t last long, though, as a fog rose up around them, and then a group of ships led by Luxord’s own emerged hot on their heels.

“The game isn’t over until it’s over. Fire!” The cannon mouths lit up with flames, and cannonballs came crashing down around Sora’s ship, rocking it violently.

“They’re closing in!” Jack shouted. “Come about! Make ready to return fire!”

“Aye, aye!”

Sora promptly followed the order, turning the ship so the cannons faced the enemy fleet.

“Fire!”

Donald and Goofy fired the cannons at Jack’s command, and the barrage managed to sink one of the five attacking ships.

“Isn’t there any way we can get ’em all at once?” Goofy wondered.

A devilish grin appeared on Jack’s face. “As luck would have it, this ship is rather remarkable. Hold on tight, lads!” he said, glancing back at his perplexed crew, then yanked a rope hanging down from the main mast. “Anchors aweigh!”

The ship suddenly leaped into the sky.

“Whoa!”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy clung to the rudder, mast, and whatever was at hand as the ship flew through the air and dropped down among the enemy ships. When it hit the water, the massive wave it caused slammed into their foes.

“Whoo-hoo!” Donald exclaimed as the hostile boats floundered. All that remained was the ship carrying Luxord.

“And now for the coup de grâce!”

Sora and friends boarded the enemy vessel, but she had seen better days. Several Heartless appeared on deck and moved to engage them.

“Once we finish off these guys, it’ll be all over!”

The four leaped into battle on the narrow deck and finally defeated the last of the Heartless. Once the creatures were gone, Luxord emerged from the darkness, offering a round of applause for their victory. “Magnificent! I salute you all, gentlemen.”

“You’re up to something,” Sora said, still prepared to fight.

“Admit it!” Donald added with an angry glare.

“Perish the thought. I know when I’ve been outdone,” Luxord stated matter-of-factly as if the loss meant nothing to him.

“You were outdone before you even started, mate. But I admire your conciliatory way of conceding defeat.” Jack seemed quite pleased with his victory.

In response, Luxord said, “Yes... Now, I believe I owe you your prize. But I neglected to ask you what it is that you want. Perhaps...you’ll enlighten me?”

“Aye, that’s easy. I want the chest that’s aboard the *Dutchman*.”

“No, Jack, don’t tell him!” Goofy cried out in panic, the only one of the group to notice that Jack had just revealed the location of the box.

“Really?” Luxord’s eyes narrowed.

Realizing his mistake, Jack turned to Sora. “Not good?”

“Oh, Jaaack...,” Sora groaned, summoning his Keyblade alongside his friends.

“Well...I didn’t tell him *which Dutchman*.” Reluctantly, Jack drew his sword.

“You tricked him!” Donald snapped.

Luxord smirked. “Actually, I outwitted him.”

“You knew he’d tell you where it was!” Sora protested while Luxord was oozing smug triumph.

“I’ve always been far more interested in the long game. Now, let’s see where it takes us. That is, if you stay apace,” he said by way of farewell, then performed his dark disappearing act once more.

In the same instant, a group of flying Heartless swooped down and scattered Sora and the others.

“Agh!”

The four came crashing down onto the deck of their own ship. Though they quickly jumped up to see what Luxord would do next, he and his boat were nowhere to be found.

“After him!”

Sadly, their ship was too damaged from the battle earlier to be of much use, so they made for Port Royal instead.

“Nay. There’s no point. The ship’s listing near to scuppers from that cannon fire. She’ll be needing repairs. Look for crabs. They’ll set her right.”

“Crabs? Why crabs?” Sora asked, completely confused.

As they talked, the ship had managed to reach a pier.

“Never mind the particulars, mate. The white crabs. Savvy?”

“Aye, aye.”

Despite the strangeness of Jack’s request, Sora, Donald, and Goofy disembarked in Port Royal and began the hunt for white crabs.

They found their quarry hiding beside barrels, alongside roads, and scattered almost everywhere throughout town. What was with all these crabs?

Once they had a good haul of little white crustaceans, the three friends returned to the pier and found Jack waiting for them.

“There, mates. Fit to sail any sea.” Jack gave Sora a long look. “Now, Sora, one final inquiry: Is there any particular reason you wanted this ship?” he asked, apparently greatly interested in how Sora would answer.

Final? What does he mean by that? Sora thought it over for a moment. “Yeah, to explore the seas, free as the wind.”

“Good answer! You *are* a pirate...Captain Sora!” exclaimed Jack, pointing at his young friend.

“But, Jack...why do you keep saying ‘final,’ like you’re leaving?”

“Ah... It’s because this me has run his course, mate,” he said as white crabs began to fall from his body.

“‘This’ you?”

“Aye, the surrogate me that the goddess of the sea sent here to help you lot. Of course, any me is still me. I may be duplicatable, but I’m always incomparable. The sea, she smiles upon us, Sora—and let’s leave it at that, shall we? For now, the *real* me has a crucial engagement...at Shipwreck Cove, where the Pirate Brethren will meet Beckett and his lot in battle to win back our freedom.”

“Then let us help.”

However, Jack’s form was already beginning to glow and fade away. “No, it’s for pirates to resolve. But not you, Sora. You’re as free as the winds now, and far you’ll go.”

Those were Jack’s final words before he vanished into one final blinding burst of light. All that was left was an enormous collection of white crabs, which scurried at once from the planks of the pier back into the sea.

“So Jack was showin’ us the way.”

“Even if he did get tricked,” Donald and Goofy said, sad to see their friend go.

Jack might be gone, but I won’t forget what he said.

Sora’s mind was already made up. “Jack... He said it was the pirates’ battle to fight. But a fight for pirates...”

He looked between Donald and Goofy, waiting for them to finish the sentence, and they nodded back at him. Unified in purpose, the three friends put their fists into the air and cried out together.

“...is a fight for us!”

“C’mon! Let’s find the real Jack!”

There’s no time to lose. We have to set sail and go after Davy Jones!

Meanwhile, on a sandbank in the Caribbean, Davy Jones stood face-to-face with Jack Sparrow. Beside Jones were Beckett and Will, while Jack was

accompanied by Elizabeth and Barbossa.

They were in the midst of a true parley.

From the neck down, Davy Jones resembled a monster of the seas and even had an octopus's tentacles where one would normally have hair and a beard. His missing right leg had transformed into that of a crab, and his skin and clothes were covered in barnacles. For some reason, he was standing in a tub of seawater.

Will had taken Jack's place as Beckett's hostage.

"You made a deal with me, Jack, to deliver the pirates," said Beckett. "And here they are. Don't be bashful. Step up. Claim your reward."

Elizabeth and Barbossa stared at Jack with stern disbelief. Jack started to mouth an apology to the two, but it was Davy Jones's turn to place his demands.

"Sparrow. Your debt to me is still to be satisfied. One hundred years in servitude aboard the *Dutchman*. As a start."

"That debt was paid, mate."

"You escaped," Jones retorted angrily.

Elizabeth interrupted with an idea of her own. "I propose an exchange. Will leaves with us...and you can take Jack."

"Done," Will replied.

But Jack, of course, was not having any of it: "Undone."

Nonetheless, Beckett approved of the deal. "Done."

Barbossa was on the side of the opposition. "Jack's one of the nine Pirate Lords. You have no right."

Elizabeth looked over at the older pirate. "King," she smoothly reminded him. She had been appointed the ultimate title some time before.

Jack doffed his hat and bowed to her, saying, "As you wish, your nibs."

"Scurvy blackguard!"

Enraged, Barbossa drew his sword and slashed at Jack, who stepped neatly out of the way at the last moment. The only casualty was one of the trinkets tied into Jack's hair. At the end of the severed lock now lying in the sand was a silver coin, one of the pieces of eight.

"Easy there, mate. You wouldn't want to damage the leverage, now, would you?" Jack shrugged at Barbossa, who plucked the fallen trinket up from the sand and flashed a grin in return.

"Now..."

Jack and Will both walked forward, switching places. Davy Jones regarded his new crew member with a satisfied expression, while Jack himself seemed thoroughly uncomfortable.

"Advise your Brethren," said Beckett. "You can fight, and all of you will die. Or you cannot fight, in which case only most of you will die."

"We will fight. And *you* will die," Elizabeth boldly replied before taking her leave.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy were sailing at top speed to find Jack when Luxord's ship emerged again from a wall of fog.

"Luxord!"

His ship had been fully repaired after their battle; not a scratch remained.

"Ahh, you do know how to make good time. Yes, one must simply marvel at your celerity. But such compulsive behavior is eventually going to bring you nothing but sorrow," Luxord said softly to himself. With a snap of his fingers, his ship vanished into the fog once more.

"Lost him again. He's plotting to swipe the chest in the heat of battle," Sora said with chagrin. Even when they knew exactly what Luxord was planning, they just couldn't seem to get the upper hand.

"To Shipwreck Cove!"

"Fast!"

Goofy and Donald were eager to be done with these sea skirmishes, too. Nevertheless, they all pressed on toward the final conflict.

Sora urged the ship onward, his grip tight on the ship's wheel.

At long last they arrived at Shipwreck Cove. All the ships anchored there looked to belong to pirates, but the trio were able to pick out the *Black Pearl* among them. Will and Elizabeth were standing in a daze on the deck of the *Pearl*, and Sora also spotted a bunch of white crabs falling into the sea from the ship's port side.

Had something happened here as well?

Sora brought his ship alongside the *Black Pearl* and called out to Elizabeth. "Guys! Are you okay?"

"Sora... You're a welcome sight!" Will shouted back. Sora, Donald, and Goofy hurried over to the *Pearl*.

"We've all been quite worried about you," said Elizabeth once they were all together. She sounded disheartened.

White crabs scuttled between her and Sora.

Seriously, what is up with the crabs?

"Where's Jack? And Tia Dalma?"

"I'm afraid you've missed a few things while you've been gone," answered Elizabeth.

Will answered the question, although it seemed difficult for him. "Jack... He's...he's been taken by Cutler Beckett."

"Yes, and Beckett commands Davy Jones and the *Flying Dutchman*."

"Barbossa thought we could defeat them if we released Calypso, the goddess of the sea, who was really Tia Dalma bound in human form. But it didn't work."

Their explanation still didn't explain very much.

"Aye, a fickle goddess, Calypso be," Barbossa spat, leaning over the starboard railing to watch the sea. He had been listening the whole time.

"So what now?" Goofy asked.

Barbossa had already given up. "Nothin'. Our final hope has failed us."

Really, what is going on here? Calypso was trapped in the form of Tia Dalma, and then when they couldn't free her, crabs took over the ship...or something...?

"Use that key to free me, Sora, and you have my most certain promise—all the power on the sea you ever wish for be yours."

What Tia Dalma had said to Sora rose up in his mind. The fake Jack, and the ship they had just happened to find right when they needed it... Tia Dalma—Calypso—had been helping them all along. If she had done so much for them already, maybe she could be convinced to help a bit more.

"You can't give up now. We can all fight—together. The sea belongs to everyone!" Sora declared fiercely, trying to rouse the spirits of Will and Elizabeth.

"I said that! Don't copy my expressions!" Donald protested.

"Huh? You did?"

"Sometimes it just goes in one ear and right out the other," Goofy said.

"Wait...really?"

"Yes!"

Elizabeth couldn't help but smile at the three of them. Suddenly, the low rumble of thunder filled the air, accompanied by ominous clouds swirling overhead. The powerful ocean wind whipped her hair around her face.

"It's not over. There's still hope for us," she said in a soft voice.

She then lifted her head and sprang into action: "You will listen to me. Listen!" There was no longer any trace of despair in her voice as she climbed atop the gunwale and gripped the rope, surveying the crew. "The Brethren will still be looking here to us, to the *Black Pearl*, to lead. And they will see free men and freedom! Our enemy will see the flash of our cannons and hear the ring of our swords, and they will see the courage of our hearts as we succeed and they fail. Gentlemen... Hoist the colors!"

"Hoist the colors!"

"Hoist the colors!"

Will joined Elizabeth's call, followed by Sora. Soon Donald, Goofy, and all the men aboard the *Pearl* joined in the defiant cheer.

A storm was brewing, and rain was beginning to come down in sheets.

Across the water, Davy Jones's ship—the *Flying Dutchman*—arrived with a fleet in tow.

The sea began to swirl with a mighty whirlpool that brought the *Dutchman* and *Pearl* hurtling toward each other. A fierce cannon battle commenced.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy moved to join the *Pearl*, but just as they reached the edge—Luxord appeared on deck.

"I knew it was you!"

Amid the heavy rain hammering the boat, Luxord had eyes only for the *Dutchman*; he had no interest in Sora.

"So that's the *Flying Dutchman*," he murmured.

"The chest Jack told you about has the heart of Davy Jones in it. There's no way it's the chest that you're looking for!" Sora said, but Luxord wasn't going to be dissuaded.

"No one knows what's in the chest we're looking for. If it's a black box, then we are to collect it, simple as that."

Wait, no one knows...?

"You don't know what's in it? Then why do you need it? How will you know when you've found it?"

"Got me. Regrettably, the higher-ups haven't deigned to tell us. But they did say the box contains 'hope.'"

Organization XIII is looking for hope...?

Big droplets of rain continued to spatter down on the deck. Meanwhile, the exchange of cannon fire only grew more intense.

Luxord finally turned to Sora. "That's all you'll get from me," he said. "Hmm, it's far too chaotic to find the box like this. Perhaps I'll remove that ship from the picture."

At a snap of Luxord's fingers, large squid-like tentacles emerged from the sea around the *Pearl*, seizing the ship and hoisting it aloft while the *Flying Dutchman* continued its assault from a short distance away.

"Now, this should afford me time to look," the Organization member said before vanishing in a burst of darkness.

"Hey!"

"Will and the others need us!"

"Yeah, I know!" said Sora, snapping back into the moment. *We have to do something about that monster—and the Dutchman!*

He decided to start with Davy Jones's ship. "Fire!" he shouted.

Meanwhile, the deck of the *Flying Dutchman* was rocking violently thanks to the unrelenting downpour, the barrage from Sora's cannons, and the churning waters of the sea. Jack did his best to quietly make his way along the deck, casting furtive glances around him as he went. He carried with him the Dead Man's Chest.

"So you got what you want. Perhaps you're the better player among us. However, I must demand you give *that* to me." Luxord stood barring Jack's path.

"Pardon? You must be mistaken, mate. I'll not be giving you anything."

"Then I invoke the right of parole—"

"Uhp, no! No parole," Jack snapped, rushing forward and leaning in threateningly close. "Look around. We're a little busy. And besides, I've already got all that I want, mate."

Jack opened his mouth and blew right into Luxord's face. Luxord flinched and staggered back from the stench—and then he lost his footing, tumbling from the *Flying Dutchman* headfirst into the sea.

Once he was sure Luxord was gone, Jack put a hand to his mouth and breathed into it to check the smell. He immediately wrenched his head away and gagged.

"Yup. Still works," he bragged, then resumed his progress down the deck—

only to run into Davy Jones himself.

“Jack Sparrow... Are you lost? Prisoners don’t belong on deck. Your station is in the brig!”

Jack was no match for Jones on his own, so he spun on his heel and made a run for it.

“We’re here!” It was at that moment Sora made his entrance, Keyblade in hand—with Donald and Goofy by his side, of course.

After putting a stop to the tentacles with their cannons, Sora and his friends had spotted Jack and boarded the *Dutchman*.

Jack turned back around with a cheeky grin. “Tables have turned, mate.” He placed himself beside Sora and drew his sword.

“Hardly. Just a few more maggots to join my crew!” Jones freed his own steel from its scabbard.

Sora charged and sprang from the soaked wood of the deck for an overhead strike. But just before the blow could land, Davy Jones knocked him aside with a spin kick. Jack used the opening to lunge forward with his blade, and part of Jones’s tentacle beard fell to the ground.

“Urgh!” Jones leaped away from his foes.

But then—the colossal tentacles struck at them from the sea. Seems they wouldn’t be so easily defeated.

Donald switched over to defense, fighting back the tendrils with magic. Several of the appendages flinched and retreated into the water, but those that remained launched a winding counterattack at Donald. Goofy stepped in to deflect it with his shield. Sora tried to hurry over to help, but Davy Jones intercepted him with a blow from his sword.

“I’m the one ye should be worried about, boy.”

Jones’s bladework was like a dance, forcing Sora and Jack to fight both offensively and defensively by turns. Finally, Jack pulled a small bomb from his pocket and threw it at Jones. The attack was successful, leaving the monstrous pirate stunned, and Jack delivered a forceful slash with his sword.

Meanwhile, the *Flying Dutchman* and *Black Pearl* were both nearing the center of the maelstrom.

“Ready to give up?”

Jones could barely stay on his feet, yet he still lashed out with one final, defiant flurry. Jack skillfully fended off each strike.

“The chest. Hand it over!”

“Jack!” Sora cried, rushing to help.

“Stay out of this, boy!” Jones roared. Tentacles rose from the sea to block any interference.

Davy Jones leaped to the top of the mast, and Jack followed. The air was filled with sparks as their swords clashed again and again.

They were practically in the middle of the vortex now, and the *Black Pearl* drew up alongside the battle raging on the *Flying Dutchman*. The two ships shuddered as they clashed together, and the Dead Man’s Chest fell from Jack’s hand to the deck.

Will swiftly swung over on a rope and snatched the box up, but a tentacle swung toward him and knocked it loose from his grip. Davy Jones dropped down from the mast, eager to recover the precious box. Jack moved to stop him.

A third contest of blades began between the two pirates, but this time, Jones’s obsession gave him new strength, and Jack was quickly sent sprawling. Now Jones would finally claim his prize—if Elizabeth hadn’t been standing in the way.

“Harridan! You’ll see no mercy from me.”

“That’s why I brought this!” she cried, pulling free her own blade. But despite her skill, she was no match for him, and she was soon sent to the deck herself.

Davy Jones stepped toward her, but he was stopped short by Will’s sword running him through from behind.

Jones let loose a shout of anguish, and it seemed he would finally fall—until he spoke a moment later as if nothing at all had happened. “Mister. Did you

forget? I'm a heartless wretch!"

He turned and kicked Will across the ship.

Will crashed to the deck but quickly managed to sit up.

"Ah...love. A dreadful bond," said Jones, approaching Will. "And yet, so easily severed."

"That's not true!"

Now, Davy Jones was confronted by Sora, Donald, and Goofy, who had finally dispatched the tenacious tentacles attacking them.

Will and Elizabeth loved each other, and they had promised to marry.

Sora had more to say. "I may still have a lot to learn about love, but I know what it means to share my heart with others. And it will take more than you to break a bond like that."

Jones merely scoffed. "What does a whelp like you know about the heart?"

"The whelp has seen far more of the world than you know," Jack interjected, gesturing at his young friend. Donald, Goofy, Will, and Elizabeth all agreed.

"Ha! What of it? Tell me, William Turner: Do you fear death?" Jones turned his blade on Will.

"Do *you*?"

Davy Jones turned back around at the question to find Jack holding the Dead Man's Chest. Its lid was open, and he had a dagger pressed to its contents.

"How disappointing," remarked the man watching the scene from atop the mast. "So this is all they meant when they said 'heart.' We've been chasing the wrong box this whole time." Intriguingly, the observer was not Luxord, but Vexen.

Now that he had seen what the chest held, he vanished in a dark flash.

"Heady tonic, holding life and death in the palm of one's hand," Jack mused, his blade a thrust away from ending a life.

"You're a cruel man, Jack Sparrow."

“Cruel is a matter of perspective.”

“Is it?” Davy Jones spat angrily, then turned back around and plunged his sword down and through Will’s chest.

With scream of anguish, Sora jumped onto Jones’s back, and Donald and Goofy weren’t far behind. He beat at the monstrous pirate with his fists, forgetting to summon his Keyblade in his rage while Donald and Goofy clung to Jones to pin him down.

“Will? Will? Look at me. Look at me!”

Elizabeth dashed over to Will, cupping his face in her hands as she made her frantic entreaty, but the life was already gone from his eyes.

Davy Jones managed to free himself from his three attackers. “You will not forestall my judgment!” He moved to finish off Sora, Donald, and Goofy with his sword.

And then—he froze. Only his head could move, and his eyes slowly fell on the source. The treasure of the Dead Man’s Chest—Jones’s own heart—had been pierced by the dagger.

The one who had stabbed it was Will. Beside him knelt Jack, who had placed the dagger in Will’s hand and guided his arm.

And thus ended the tale of the infamous Davy Jones.

Even Elizabeth, still cradling her dead lover’s face in her hands, turned to witness the legendary rogue’s final moments.

Davy Jones toppled into the sea with a last howl of agony, and it was over at last—or at least, the threat he provided.

While they were locked in combat, the *Flying Dutchman* and *Black Pearl* had brought themselves to the very cusp of the maelstrom’s center.

“She’s taking us down! Make quick, or it’s the Locker for us all!” Barbossa shouted from the helm of the *Pearl* as it drew alongside the *Dutchman*. Only the *Pearl* was trying to escape the clutches of the eddy.

But Elizabeth would not move from Will’s side. She needed to make her escape with the rest of them, but all Sora could do was watch as she grieved,

holding Will's body and sobbing.

"Jack, can't we save him?" he asked.

Jack walked over to Elizabeth and confronted her with the cruel truth. "Part of the ship, part of the crew. The *Dutchman* must have a captain. Elizabeth, say good-bye."

In piercing the heart of Davy Jones, Will had made himself the new captain of the *Flying Dutchman*. His fate was sealed, and his destiny was here forever.

"No! I won't leave you!"

With Elizabeth unable to accept reality, Jack had no choice but to wrench her away from her fallen lover by force and get her to safety. Sora, Donald, and Goofy leaped from the *Dutchman*, leaving Will behind.

Then, the *Flying Dutchman* and its new captain were swallowed up by the maelstrom.

At last, the rain stopped, and the seas were calm. But Elizabeth still couldn't stand on her own.

"Thank goodness, Jack," said Gibbs as Jack came running over. "The armada's still out there. The *Endeavour's* coming up hard to starboard, and I think it's time we embrace that oldest and noblest of pirate traditions."

The *Endeavour* was under Beckett's command, and he had assembled an armada that was positioned to destroy the *Black Pearl*.

"Never actually been one for tradition," Jack quipped back. He turned to Barbosa at the helm and the rest of the crew with a singular forceful command. "In we go!"

The *Black Pearl* turned her prow toward the *Endeavour*, which also turned to meet the charge. It sailed full speed at the *Pearl*, an overwhelming squadron of warships in its wake.

"It's nothing personal, Jack. It's just good business," Beckett said slyly with a chuckle—until his smile froze on his face.

The *Flying Dutchman* suddenly rose from the depths right beside the *Black Pearl*, as ferocious and indomitable as ever.

Standing at its helm was Will, who had assumed the mantle of its legendary captain. “Ready the guns!” he shouted.

The light returned to Elizabeth’s eyes.

“Full canvas!” Jack cried, and Barbossa quickly relayed the order to the rest of the crew.

“Aye! Full canvas!”

Will and Barbossa spun the wheels of their respective ships, and the wind carried the *Black Pearl* and the *Flying Dutchman* to the *Endeavour* in mere moments.

“Fire!” yelled Jack, followed by Gibbs, Will, Barbossa, and Elizabeth, loud enough to leave their voices hoarse.

A storm of cannonballs hit the *Endeavour* from both sides at once, smashing the ship to splinters and sending it into the depths of the sea.

The defeat of the *Endeavour* was so devastating that the rest of the armada swiftly turned tail and fled.

Everyone else was tossing their hats in the air and celebrating their victory, but Elizabeth stood off to one side, her eyes glued to the *Flying Dutchman*.

Sora grew concerned when he noticed her.

“The *Flying Dutchman* must have a captain. Just wed, and now she and Cap’n Turner must live in different worlds,” Gibbs explained to Sora.

The *Dutchman* was a ghost ship, and Will had died once and come back, this time to live forever. Sora looked out at the *Flying Dutchman*.

Will looked back at Elizabeth from the deck of his ship.

“One day ashore, ten years at sea. It’s a steep price,” Gibbs continued. Will would be allowed on land to meet Elizabeth but once every ten years.

“Will...”

Sora couldn’t help but say the name of this friend who had met such a tragic fate.

Gibbs went over to Elizabeth and said, “Your chariot awaits, Your Highness,”

indicating a dinghy hoisted up in the air. Elizabeth began to make her way toward it.

“Mrs. Turner,” Barbossa addressed Elizabeth. The rest of the crew lined up to see her off.

“Elizabeth...”

“Take care.”

Donald and Goofy both had concerned words of farewell to add.

After stopping before each of her friends for a moment, Elizabeth walked over to Jack and smiled.

“Jack... Thank you.”

And with that...Elizabeth boarded her chariot.

“One day isn’t enough time,” Sora said sadly.

“Oh, there’s always enough time for hearts to say what’s true,” Jack reminded him. “Sora, you know better than anyone. It only takes a moment to connect with your mates... With your hearties.”

Sora joined Jack in taking a look around themselves. They were surrounded by mates—and time didn’t matter when it came to making friends. What mattered was how much they cared for each other, the feelings they shared. That’s what Sora realized now.

“There’s always enough time.”

Jack grinned.

That’s right, time doesn’t matter—and if that’s how it is, then I’m sure our connection still holds strong.

Sora looked into the sky, his heart reaching out to his friends.

“And I’m going to find them.”

The waters of the sea were stunningly beautiful. Sora, Goofy, and Donald spotted the ship that had been of such aid to them in this adventure bobbing in the waves a short distance away from where the *Pearl* and *Dutchman* huddled close.

After a time—perhaps having finished its role—the ship transformed back into thousands of white crabs that vanished back into the sea.

INTERMISSION

Twilight

KAIRI OBSERVED HERSELF IN THE MIRROR.

On her bed sat a suitcase from Yen Sid, delivered to her by Merlin. The case was open and empty, and next to it was the dress she always used to wear.

Kairi did a little twirl in front of the mirror. Her new outfit was the same color as her old dress, but this one had a belt and a hood. On the left side of her skirt was a frilled section with a checkered pattern, while on the right were solid black pleats. There were also two big pockets.

She surveyed her new outfit, then took another look at herself in the mirror and grabbed a little bit of her hair.

Riku cut his hair recently, didn't he?

Her own hair had grown some in the time she'd spent training with Axel.

Which way would Sora prefer it? Short or long?

Kairi took a pair of scissors from a desk in the corner of the room and studied them, opening and closing the blades experimentally. She then went back over to the mirror and took hold of the ends of her hair.

Hmm, maybe shoulder length. Let's just hope I can cut it right!

I got some new clothes from Master Yen Sid. Guess you did, too.

I know I said before that time doesn't really matter here, but that doesn't stop my hair from growing. Or my stomach from growling!

Lea (Axel) is doing well, and so am I. We're pretty close now, actually, although I still catch him staring at my face every so often. I wonder what he's remembering when he looks at me...

Anyway, I'm thinking about cutting my hair. I think it's a good way to start the

new journey waiting for us. Or who knows—maybe it's already begun.

Where are you all now? What are you up to?

You guys saved me before, so I hope I can go out and save you.

I wonder if I can be friends with all your friends—the ones you've met before, and the ones you haven't yet. The people who need your help.

I'm doing well here; please stay safe until we see each other again.

Axel always watched the sun set behind the mountains once their training ended for the day, and today was no different.

Kairi called out to him from behind. "Hey, Axel!"

He turned to look, squinting a bit. "Hey. Liking the look. Cut your hair, too," he said somewhat distantly. This was his first time seeing Kairi's new haircut, but he didn't comment on it one way or the other. She didn't think Sora or Riku would've said what they thought, either.

"Mm-hmm. So you gonna try yours on?" Kairi asked.

Axel seemed at a loss for a moment, then shook his head. "Uh...I dunno. Maybe later."

"But you always wear the same thing."

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it. This is how you pick me out of a crowd. I make myself easy to remember."

He seemed to have a certain someone in mind—but who? Thinking about it caused a little pang in Kairi's chest.

"How thoughtful," she said.

Axel laughed off the comment, slightly embarrassed. "Nah, not really..."

Kairi sat down next to him and watched the sun make its descent. "Our training's almost finished."

"Yeah..." Axel blinked and turned back to the sunset.

"Somewhere inside me is Naminé. If we can free Roxas, we can free her, too."

"I guess so."

“Naminé was made when Sora freed me from his heart. So now that she’s a part of me again, I figured I was all right. But she can’t look at this forest, feel the wind on her face, none of it. And if she could, it would be different for her.”

Kairi’s shoulder-length hair stirred in the breeze, while Axel listened quietly.

“Her time was short, but she lived it, and that makes it hers. What right did I have to take those feelings and experiences back? They don’t belong to me. Nothing’s as it should be. Not for her *or* Roxas.”

“I know.” Axel nodded in agreement. The sun was almost completely set.

But Kairi understood now. She knew the sky glowed faintly red for a while even after the sun was gone, creating a moment between light and darkness—when the sky was most beautiful.

Axel gradually began to speak. “Way back when I was a kid, I met this other weird kid. Somehow we became fast friends. Never saw him again—nearly forgot about him, too. Then I met Roxas. Couldn’t believe it. The two of ‘em were identical. Oh, I didn’t tell Roxas. Didn’t want *him* to go vanishing on me, too.”

That had to be a secret Axel held dearly. He hadn’t even told Roxas, after all.

“The kid’s name was Ventus. He’s one of the lost Keyblade wielders we’re looking for. Think he’s still got *me* memorized?”

Ah, I see. Axel met Ventus a long time ago. They were connected this whole time—all of us were.

Kairi put a finger to her head and smiled: “Oh yeah. Very memorized.”

“Now that we’re going back, I’m worried about everything.”

Axel heaved a breath that wasn’t quite a sigh. His eyes looked moist—maybe he’d been looking at the light for too long.

“Well, you don’t have to worry alone anymore, Axel,” Kairi reassured him.

Axel had nothing to say in response and simply watched the sun fall the rest of the way.

Meanwhile, in Twilight Town, a dark portal opened near the old mansion in

the forest outside of town. The first person to step out was a stately middle-aged man with a beard, and the other a younger man with long gray hair—Ansem the Wise and Ansem, Seeker of Darkness. Both wore black coats.

“It’s about time!” Pence exclaimed, and Hayner hurriedly clapped a hand over his friend’s mouth.

“Heeey, shut it!”

The two men passed through the gate of the mansion.

Ansem the Wise looked up to the second floor at the window of what had once been Naminé’s room. She had spent all her time drawing in there.

“What now?” pressed the younger man.

“Please. I have created enough victims,” the elder Ansem replied.

“Yes, you have. All the children sacrificed in the name of your research... So make things right.”

Ansem the Wise regretted his shameful past, but ultimately, it was irreversible. He shook his head quietly. “I told you I did not take her. Her disappearance was why I put a stop to the research.”

But the false Ansem had no sympathy for the pain of his former mentor. “And that makes you honorable? You used Roxas and Naminé and threw them away. I doubt there’s a merciful bone in your body. You took the girl and hid her. Now, show me the data you are hiding here.”

“Roxas and Naminé... If there is any reason that I still draw breath, it is to atone for what I did to them.”

Pence, Hayner, and Olette had been listening in on the exchange from their hiding place behind the gate.

“He said ‘Roxas,’” Pence whispered to his friends.

“Yeah,” Hayner replied with a nod.

“That man needs us,” said Olette, and with that the three friends went into action.

Meanwhile, the conversation continued. “If you do find the girl, what is it that

you expect will happen?” Ansem the Wise asked the Heartless who had taken his name.

“The child’s memory holds a mystery to unravel—one concerning the battle we seek between light and darkness. You know something, and that...is why you stopped the experiments.”

Ansem the Wise shook his head at the accusation. “You are completely deluded, Xehanort.”

“We shall soon see.”

Xehanort-Ansem seized Ansem the Wise by the shoulder and began to force him toward the mansion.

“Yoo-hoo! ’Scuse meee!” Pence jumped out and yelled.

“Who are you?” asked Xehanort-Ansem, turning back angrily.

Trying to buy time, Pence said, “Oh, well, I’m looking for a friend who used to live here.”

“No one lives here. Begone,” the Heartless snapped.

“But, sir...”

“No, no, no! Not one more step. Get out!”

When Xehanort-Ansem took a few steps toward Pence, Olette used the opening to hurry over to Ansem the Wise and take his hand. “This way!” She took off running around the side of the mansion with him in tow.

Xehanort-Ansem spun around as he noticed the deception.

Now it was Hayner’s turn to jump in—with a flying kick. “Hey, loser!”

But just before the attack connected, a strange dark figure appeared from the evil Ansem’s back and caught the boy by the foot.

“...or not!”

“Hayner!” Pence called out to his friend, who now dangled helplessly in the air.

The creature hurled Hayner toward the perimeter wall, but at the last

moment, he was saved by...

“The squiggly things?”

Properly speaking, they were Dusks, low-ranking Nobodies. They lowered Hayner to the ground, then positioned themselves around Xehanort-Ansem and his guardian.

“They...protected me.”

“Hayner! Get a move on!”

“Oh... Okay!”

Pence and Hayner made a quick escape through the gate.

“I serve the Organization. This is treason,” Xehanort-Ansem said softly, his mouth twisting into a smirk. “I see what is happening. Have it your way, then.”

And with that, the Nobodies threw themselves at the Seeker of Darkness and his guardian.

The kids’ ploy for time worked perfectly.

Olette came running with Ansem the Wise into an underground passage. Hayner and Pence joined them shortly after.

“Are you guys okay?” Olette asked with concern.

Gasping for breath, the two boys flashed her relieved smiles

“Yeah, I think.”

“Nobody knows the twists and turns of Twilight Town better than us.”

“You are Roxas’s friends,” a surprised Ansem the Wise said.

“That’s right,” Hayner replied. “So you know him, too?”

“Oh yes. Quite well,” Ansem affirmed.

“Pay dirt. Guess it was worth staking out the old mansion after all, because this guy here is what I call a lead.” Pence pulled a photo of Roxas and the three of them out of a pocket.

“That’s the only proof we have that Roxas was our friend.” Olette smiled as she looked at the photo.

“Tell us about him. We wanna know him better,” Hayner said eagerly.

Just then, someone approached from behind. “My dear master. You are safe.”

“Who’s there?”

All four of them spun around to face yet another man in a black coat—a man who had once gone by the name Vexen as a member of Organization XIII.

“Even, is that you? So...those Nobodies were your doing.”

Hayner and his friends drew together fearfully as the Nobodies in question appeared behind Even. However, they showed no signs of aggression.

Even gave a low bow. “I have been waiting for this. Gave up a normal life in order to plant myself in the Organization. And when I heard Xehanort had gone looking for you, I realized it was my chance to find you as well.”

The academic straightened up again and looked his mentor in the eye.

“For you see, I, too, wish to atone.”

Intrigued by this request, Ansem waited to hear more.



Chapter 11

SAN FRANSOKYO

Chapter 11

San Fransokyo

SORA WAS RUNNING ALONG AN ENORMOUS RED suspension bridge.

“Whoa!” he cried out in glee and stopped. Each side of the wide bridge was supported by a row of thick suspension cables, strung from towers shaped like four crimson torii gates stacked atop each other. The sight was astounding, especially compared to the simple wooden walkways of the Destiny Islands. The sun was setting over a city full of skyscrapers in the distance.

Oddly, there were lots of empty cars along the side of the bridge...

“Cool!”

“C’mon, let’s go!” Donald griped, but the complaints did nothing to quell Sora’s enthusiasm.

“Aww, but I wanna take a look at the big city!”

“Yeah, it does seem pretty exciting,” Goofy added, strolling along beside Donald. Sora’s head was swiveling back and forth, desperately trying to take it all in.

“I feel so metropolitan! Uh, cosmopolitan?”

“Not-apolitan!” Donald spun back and snapped at Sora’s chatterboxing, which got a smile from Goofy.

Sora whipped out his Gummiphone and began tapping at the screen.

“Now what?” an exasperated Donald asked him.

“I gotta tell Riku what a blast this place is.”

“But we just got here. We haven’t even done anything yet.”

“Blast? I’ll show you a blast!”

But before Donald could complain any more, the bridge shook with a

deafening noise. When the three of them instinctively turned to see what had caused it, they saw smoke and flames rising into the air.

And flying around it all were—

“The Heartless!”

“C’mon!”

The three heroes readied their weapons and charged into action. Just then, something came hurtling past them from the blaze—a person wearing some sort of protective helmet and suit. As they skidded across the pavement, a large, red, and slightly chubby...robot? landed next to them.

“Go Go! You okay?” A boy wearing a blue and black suit hopped down from the back of the red robot.

“What the?!” Sora said with surprise.

“Go Go.” The boy watched her with concern, then turned back to the robot. “Baymax!”

“Go Go’s suit has shielded her from a major injury, but the blow she sustained to her head has caused a mild concussion. We should take caution and not move her until we can fully stabilize her head.”

“Got it.”

The boy stood up, and as Sora came running over with his friends, he could see the look of relief through the boy’s visor.

“Oh, cool! That’s a robot!” Sora exclaimed with a grin, looking up at it.

“Hello. I am Baymax, your personal healthcare companion,” it said back.

“This rules!” Sora couldn’t contain himself as he examined the large robot.

Goofy tried to bring his friend back to reality. “Uh, Sora. Remember our other problem?”

“The Heartless!” Donald added.

“Whoops! Oh yeah!”

Finally snapped out of it, Sora turned away from Baymax and ran off toward

the Heartless.

“Hey! Who are you?” the boy called out from behind them.

The three of them stopped and introduced themselves.

“I’m Sora.”

“Donald.”

“And I’m Goofy.”

The boy smiled, then gave his own name. “Name’s Hiro. You...mind helping us fight those things?”

“Sure!” the trio replied.

Hiro then added, “Our team’s called Big Hero 6.”

After sharing a final look, Sora and Hiro headed off to face the Heartless. Baymax joined them, and together the five of them clashed with the Heartless amid the cars along the bridge. Some of the creatures came at them from the air, while others fired shots at them from the ground.

The heroes made their way forward, taking out Heartless and hiding behind cars to avoid attacks as they went, until all of their cover was suddenly swept away by a huge, robotic Heartless—the Metal Troll.

“Let’s go, Baymax!” Sora called out, and then the rotund robot let him ride on his back just as Hiro had earlier. Baymax launched into the air with the help of the jet thrusters on his feet, and the two of them went on the offensive. The Metal Troll swung its giant ax around threateningly, but a solid punch from Baymax soon stopped it in its tracks.

“We did it!”

Sora hopped down from the robot’s back and gave Hiro a high five.

After the battle, Hiro led Sora, Donald, and Goofy to a dimly lit garage, where news about their run-in with the Heartless earlier was displayed on a large computer screen. According to the article, Hiro and his friends had lost the fight.

“Not cool,” said Go Go, the first person Sora had encountered on the bridge,

reading the article next to Hiro.

“People like spectacle, not truth,” lamented a girl wearing a pink suit.

“Yeah, who needs quality reporting when you can just make stuff up?” The complaint came from a young man who was dressed similarly, but in green.

“I don’t get it. I mean, didn’t they see how awesome we were?! Sure, those things landed a couple of good hits, but we had chem-balls, and laser hands, and fire breathing!” said a blue monster with the voice of a young man.

Baymax had removed his red armor and set it in the corner, revealing that he was actually pure white.

“Well, it really didn’t matter. They beat us,” the girl in pink said.

“Where’d they come from?” Go Go said with suspicion, her arms crossed.

The one in green looked over at Sora and his friends. “Why don’t we ask the guys who actually stopped ’em?” he suggested, and the girl in pink agreed.

“Hiro, you never introduced us.”

Hiro got to his feet. “Oh, right. Well, uh, this is...the gang!”

The girl in the yellow suit who had crashed onto the bridge when they arrived in this world was Go Go.

They called the young man in the green armor Wasabi, and the girl in pink went by Honey Lemon.

That left only the monster, who sauntered right up to Sora.

“I’m Fred. Don’t be alarmed. This is not my real body.”

The monster removed the head of its very unique suit.

The five of them plus Baymax made six—Big Hero 6. It seemed like a pretty cool setup.

“Those three are Sora, Donald, and Goofy, the, uh...,” Hiro said, introducing Sora and his friends.

Sora quickly finished for him: “Keyblade Hero 3!” then made his best attempt at a cool pose.

Donald and Goofy did their best to pose, too, but the members of Big Hero 6 didn't seem impressed.

"I am detecting minute contractions in your faces and shoulders, perhaps due to the garage's brisk temperature. To remedy that, I will give each of you a hug and warm you with my internal heat source."

Baymax's chest began to glow a warm color.

"Hey, why did you say *that*?!"

"Sora, you know Donald and I don't have Keyblades."

"So? Are we heroes, or aren't we?"

"Not here, we're not."

Go Go interrupted the argument. "The monsters. Tell us how you managed to take them down."

"They're called the Heartless, and they're drawn to the darkness inside people's hearts."

"Ooh, now we're talking! Light versus darkness. Classic conflict!" Fred seemed strangely excited by Sora's explanation.

"Would you calm down, Fred? This is serious," Wasabi told him.

Honey Lemon sighed. "Very serious. We don't have any way to fight them."

"Wait. So we're just gonna give up?" asked Go Go.

"With our current skill set," Baymax said, "my analysis places our chances at 0.0000—"

Hiro cut him off, sounding less than happy. "Yup, we get it, Baymax."

"Hey, don't sweat it. The three of us will go take care of the Heartless for you. Right, Donald, Goofy?" Sora said cheerfully, then started to leave. *The Heartless have a leader somewhere in this world, and it's our job to take them out.*

But Hiro stopped them. "Wait. We're going, too."

"It's okay. We've got it," Donald said.

Hiro looked at the floor for a moment before meeting their eyes again. "We

have to help. My brother would have.”

The rest of his team nodded their agreement, and Sora knew better than to protest further. They still weren’t any closer to beating the Heartless, though.

Wasabi shrugged and asked, “Great, buuut...don’t we need a plan?”

“We train up! When heroes are brought low, they get new powers. It’s *shugyo* time!” Fred exclaimed, striking a ridiculous pose.

“Did you read that in *Geek’s Quarterly*?” Go Go groaned.

Hiro smiled and offered his own opinion. “Fred’s not actually wrong. I have an idea.” He walked over to a corner of the garage and retrieved a strange contraption that looked like sunglasses or spectacles.

“This is an AR device, Sora.”

“‘AR device’?” Sora repeated, confused by the unfamiliar term.

“Yeah. Cool, huh? It creates a CG overlay that augments your vision. While you wear it, this device sees everything you do and logs it.”

But the explanation only left Sora more and more confused.

“...You put it on your face,” Hiro said finally.

Sora followed the instructions and put the strange glasses...visor thingy...“AR device” on his face. He could see a weird display over his vision, but nothing too drastic—until Hiro stepped to one side, revealing a Heartless behind him.

“Heartless! Donald!! Goofy!!!” Though Sora summoned his Keyblade as he normally would, his two friends merely looked at him in surprise.

“Are you okay?”

“There’s no Heartless here.”

“Whoa! Chill. Sora. Just take the AR device off,” Hiro hurriedly called out.

When Sora did as told, the Heartless disappeared. He put it back on, and there it was again. After several more rounds of this, Sora finally figured out what was going on.

“Wow, I have no idea how you’re doing it, but this is cool!”

“Thanks. But so far the data only covers San Fransokyo. I need to expand it.”

“Now can we *shugyo*?” Fred asked, butting into Hiro’s explanation.

“Not yet, Fred. He’s still learning,” chided Hiro.

“Sora, all you need to do is run through some courses that Hiro scripted. Like a mini-game,” Honey Lemon told him, and Go Go picked up where she left off.

“We’ll put a tracer on your movements so we can—”

“*Shugyo, shugyo, shugyo!*” Fred interrupted, hopping around excitedly behind her.

She turned back to look at him and sighed. “So we can *shugyo*.”

“I guess *shugyo*’s like training. That’s a good idea. We could probably use the practice.”

“Speak for yourself.”

Goofy and Donald each had their own opinions on the matter.

“I can *shugyo* by installing new combat data,” Baymax offered, although Sora was just confused all over again.

What’s “installing”?

“Hey. Let’s just try it out,” Hiro said with a shrug, and then Sora started up the AR device.

Running all over San Fransokyo for their *shugyo* really did turn out to be like a game. There were Heartless everywhere, and the members of Big Hero 6 were right there beside Sora.

When he ran straight up a wall, Go Go stopped and watched him make his ascent. “Interesting. Gravity—not binding.”

When Sora shot down some Heartless in the distance using his Shotlock power, Wasabi looked down at his own arms and said, “Hey, wait. My laser hands...can be projectiles!”

Sora used a transformation of his Keyblade to defeat yet more Heartless, which brought Honey Lemon to a new realization. “Ooh. Change the weapon, change the attack.”

And when Sora cast some magic, Fred cackled with glee.

“A freeze attack! Fire...and ice. Diametrically opposed...or so we thought!”

Sora eventually reached the goal, where he hopped onto Baymax’s back and flew through the city. *Man, this is fun! And this city is huge!*

“Thanks, Sora. That should be enough data,” said Hiro through the AR device. The *shugyo* was complete.

At almost the same time, he could hear the other members of the team chattering excitedly to Hiro.

“Yeah! Hiro, I think there’s a way to reduce excess resistance to the level of superconductivity by polarizing the field of the magnetic suspension bridge. I’ll need to verify the numbers when I get back, but I should be able to drastically increase my speed. I can make use of the Meissner effect that occurs at magnetic poles.”

“Hey, get this! My calculations indicate that by switching the shape of my laser plasma emitters from a closed configuration to an open one, I can expand the effective range of their magnetic field. That in turn will resolve any Maxwellian distribution instabilities. Man, I never would have thought of that!”

“Adjusting the atomic arrangement using chemical reactions opens the door to phase transitions into different shapes! The only question is at what density adaptable isotopic substances can coexist in the same space. If we can get the conditions down right, then the possibilities for combinations are endless.”

“A hero that harnesses two powers, fire and ice, is invincible! No evildoer will be able to stand against them! Huh, don’t you think? Hey, are you even listening?”

Even though he had no idea what they were talking about, the enthusiasm was contagious.

Back in the garage, the team busied themselves making preparations for battle, and Sora, Donald, and Goofy lent a helping hand.

Meanwhile, Hiro removed a small chip from the computer and inserted it into Baymax’s chest.

“That...should do it.”

Only a few seconds later, a news bulletin played on the monitor, and everyone gathered round to watch: *“We interrupt your scheduled programming to deliver this breaking news. Moments ago, the city’s South District was attacked by numerous unidentified creatures. Witnesses describe losing sight of victims during the mayhem. Many also said they saw strange, floating heart symbols in the vicinity of the missing victims. City police are urging citizens to stay at home. For those just joining us, only minutes ago, the South District was attacked by—”*

They all knew what to do.

“Go time.”

Okay, let’s get this party started!

The streets were full of panicked citizens fleeing from a horde of Heartless, which were attacking on the ground and from the rooftops.

Big Hero 6 and Keyblade Hero 3 decided to fight separately and cover more ground.

“Just try and catch me,” Go Go said as she picked up speed. She raced up a wall, then wiped out the Heartless chasing her with a single downward attack.

Wasabi unleashed rapid-fire bursts of laser plasma.

Honey Lemon took out a ball from her bag and threw it. “I’ve got an idea!” she called, and the ball exploded into a cloud of smoke.

“Hey! I can’t aim if I can’t see!” Wasabi complained, but Honey Lemon simply pulled out a second ball and threw it, too. The smoke turned solid, locking the Heartless in place.

“Better?” she asked Wasabi cheerily.

“Much better,” he said as he blasted the immobilized Heartless, dispatching them all in one go.

Now it was Fred’s turn.

“Freeze!” he yelled as he released a stream of icy breath from the mouth of

his monster suit. Once the Heartless had frozen solid, he switched over to a gout of flame.

“Whuh?”

All that did was free them from the ice—so this time he tried breathing both fire and ice together at the same time.

“Oh, I get it... It’s a combo move!”

The stream of opposing elements made short work of the Heartless.

As for Sora, he was on top of a building, busy fighting a huge, dinosaur-like Heartless called Catastrochorus with Donald, Goofy, and a red-armored Baymax.

“We’re here!”

The rest of Big Hero 6 joined them.

“Ugh! Can’t we pick on one our own size?”

“It looks the right size to me.”

“Watch me scorch ’em with my freeze-nado! The only tornado made of ice *and* fire!”

Inspired by Fred’s enthusiasm, Donald couldn’t help but show off, too. “You took on the wrong court magician.”

Goofy joined in: “And the wrong captain of the guard.”

“Prepare to face Keyblade Hero 3!” added Sora.

“And the crime-fighting team of Big Hero 6! Together, we’re unstoppable,” said Hiro, and then the real battle began.

Each of the team members hit the Heartless with their powered-up abilities, and the fight wasn’t much of a fight at all.

Baymax landed a rocket punch on the Catastrochorus, and Sora followed up with a downward slash of his Keyblade. The giant Heartless vanished, releasing hearts into the air.

“Nice, Baymax!”

The robot stuck out his hand, which was still clenched in a fist.

“What?” asked Sora.

Baymax replied, “Now, we fist-bump.”

“Fist-bump?”

“To display excitement. Hiro taught it to me.”

“So like...this?”

Sora made his own hand into a fist, then touched his knuckles to Baymax’s.

“Bah-la-la-la-la-la-la,” the robot said, drawing his hand back and waving his fingers in the air.

“Bah-la-la-la-la-la-la?”

Sora mimicked the gesture, which got a laugh out of Hiro as he watched them.

The day was ending, and everyone took a seat on the bridge with chocolate Popsicles in their hands. The sun sank down below the horizon as they watched.

“Was that awesome...or was that *totally* awesome?!” Fred gushed as he bounced around excitedly. Wasabi stood to one side, watching in disbelief.

“Yeah, I was pretty good,” Donald crowed.

“Your magic was amazing. Do you think I could study it sometime?” Honey Lemon asked him.

“Why not?”

“You just made Donald’s day,” said Goofy.

A short distance away from the others, Sora sat with Hiro, Go Go, and Baymax on the highest part of the bridge. They all had ice cream, too—well, except for the robot.

“My brother wanted to help people. Now, we try to do the same,” said Hiro softly, almost to himself.

“Your brother?” Sora asked.

“Yeah, Tadashi. There was a fire, and now he’s gone. But he always wanted to

make a difference. He cared about people. That's why he worked so hard to create Baymax."

"I'm sorry."

Whenever someone told Sora about something painful or sad, he couldn't help but feel a bit of their sadness himself. But there was a strength underneath the grief when Hiro said, "He's still here. In Baymax. In all of us."



“Tadashi—he lives on in your hearts.”

Sora looked over at Hiro, who looked downward.

“Yeah. Right. He will always be a part of us in some way,” Hiro said, finally raising his head again.

“And when you’re not strong enough, he’ll make up the difference.” Sora joined him in looking up at the red sky of the sunset.

Suddenly, the sound of a familiar bell popped into Sora’s mind, and it was soon followed by a memory of eating Popsicles with someone else beside him. Only the flavor was sea salt, not chocolate. Wait, was it really a memory? Or was it a feeling—a precious emotion that belonged to someone else sleeping somewhere?

The ones beside him were Hayner, Pence, and Olette.

“Sora. You okay?”

Hiro’s voice brought Sora back to the present.

What am I feeling? What am I remembering...? We watched the sunset together that day, and...

“Yeah. Fine,” Sora replied, feeling a presence deep within him. He placed a hand on his chest and turned his eyes back to the setting sun. *Yeah, this has to be his memory.*

“I’m with you,” Sora whispered into the sunset.

Darkness fell over San Fransokyo. As the billboards and lights turned on, the mood of the city slowly transformed. Sora walked down one of the streets with Donald, Goofy, and the members of Big Hero 6. With the Heartless leader down, it was just about time to say farewell to this world—or so Sora thought.

Suddenly they came upon several large, shadowy forms swimming through the air on one of the city’s main thoroughfares. On closer inspection, they were composed of many small cubes that were constantly changing their configuration, and their colors also shifted from black to white to red in a dazzling blur.

“What?!” Go Go yelled.

“Great, they’re back,” said Honey Lemon.

“Oh, we got this,” said Wasabi.

“Time for a lesson,” Fred shouted, slapping the headpiece of his monster suit back in place. “Cheee-aaarge!” he yelled as he took off. Wasabi, Honey Lemon, and Go Go followed his lead.

But Hiro called out for them to stop. “Wait! Uh, guys! That one’s not like the others!” Apparently, he had realized something when he observed the cubes.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy waited to hear more.

“It can’t be. Microbots?”

“Microbots? You know what they are?” Sora asked.

Hiro thought for a moment about how to answer. “Microbots are wired to do whatever you think via a neural transmitter that communicates what you’re...” He trailed off when he realized Sora and Goofy were not getting a word he said, and he tried to simplify. “They’re a kind of mini-robot I invented. Some bad stuff happened and I thought that meant they were totally gone. But those enemies are way too similar. Which means someone’s controlling them. The question is who... Could it be...?”

It looked like Hiro already had some idea of who the culprit might be.

“I’m gonna go back to the garage and look into it some more. You mind going after ‘em?”

“Sure!” Sora, Donald, and Goofy answered in unison.

“We need you on the sciency stuff,” Sora added, which brought a relieved smile to Hiro’s face. Hiro then looked up at Baymax. “Baymax... Stick with ‘em.”

The robot looked over at Sora and his friends, then said, “All right, Hiro. Sora, Donald, Goofy, I will be your personal healthcare companion.”

“Thanks, Baymax. We’re in good hands. C’mon, let’s move!”

With Baymax now accompanying them, Sora and his two comrades took off running after one of the masses of cubes. Unfortunately, Sora still didn’t know

the layout of San Fransokyo very well. The city looked completely different at night.

“Which way did it go?”

“No idea.”

All the buildings looked the same to Sora, and the group quickly realized they were lost. Then, almost as if he were aware of Sora’s situation, Hiro contacted him through the AR device.

“Sora, I’ve marked the target’s position. You can check it with the AR device.”

“Roger!” Sora said back, then noticed that his display had a new location marked on it. The trio hurried toward the marker, and they found it in what looked to be the center of the city.

“Target acquired,” stated Baymax with a finger pointed toward the sky. The mass of cubes above them spread out like a starfish.

“They’re not microbots... Be careful!” Hiro warned through the AR device. The mass of cubes briefly gathered itself up into a ball, then unfurled again. Sora and his friends stepped forward to engage it, but none of their attacks had any effect whatsoever on this shape-shifting anomaly.

“It’s no fair! Why can’t we hurt it?” Sora complained.

“Magic is no good.”

“What do we do?”

How’re we supposed to beat this thing...?

As they struggled to come up with an idea, the cubes briefly took a shape like that of a heart before zooming off again.

“This is weird,” Sora said as he watched it fly off.

Hiro contacted him again through his headset. *“Sora, you guys all right?”*

“Oh... Yeah, but the target escaped. Have you got any leads?”

“Tons. Somewhere inside that thing, there is a core. It’s what powers the whole cluster. The core is the only way to hurt it.”

"Now he tells us," Wasabi cut in during the middle of Hiro's briefing.

"Wasabi! What happened?" Hiro asked.

"Let's just say it's a handful."

"Team, check in," Hiro called.

Honey Lemon answered, *"So far, so good."*

Go Go and Fred weren't far behind:

"Guys, I'm really tired of just dodging this thing."

"Freddie getting frustrated!"

Everyone was having a tough time, it seemed.

"Guys, I'm on my way," Hiro said, announcing his intent to get in on the action.

"No, Hiro!" Honey Lemon said quickly.

"Hiro, you analyze the Darkubes," added Fred.

"Wait, did you just say 'Darkubes'?" asked Wasabi.

"Yeah. They're dark, they're cubes. I call 'em like I see 'em. Every bad baddie needs a cool name."

"Yeah, that's not cool," Honey Lemon said. She clearly had her hands full keeping track of the newly named threat, but she told Hiro, *"We'll gather as much data from the Darkubes as we can."*

"Hiro, figure out a way for us to beat this thing!" Wasabi urged. He wasn't letting up on his attacks, either.

"But, guys, I can't leave you out there all alone." Hiro hesitated.

Go Go was quick to remind him what was most important. *"Hiro. We are a team. And teams delegate. We need you at the garage. We trust you, so you trust us."*

"Fine," Hiro replied. *"I'll look for a way that we can expose the Darkubes' core. Just keep that data coming."*

"Copy," Big Hero 6 said in unison.

Having overheard the entire conversation, Sora shared a nod of solidarity with Donald and Goofy.

“Hiro, what should we do?” he asked.

“You protect the others. I’ll mark their position for you on your AR display.”

The locations of the Big Hero 6 team appeared, just as Hiro said they would.

“We got it!” Sora told Hiro, then called his Keyblade to his hand. “Time to go, Baymax!”

“All right.” The robot hurried along with him.

“Sora, the Darkubes are gonna be tricky to bust open. You’ll have to assess everyone’s situation, and...”

“Improvise! I know. Don’t worry!” Sora answered cheerfully as he smashed his Keyblade down onto a Heartless that appeared in his path.

He started with Go Go. From there he helped Wasabi, then Honey Lemon, then Fred, and once everyone was safe, Hiro contacted him again.

“Listen, Sora! The Darkubes have converged on a single location. Whatever’s happening can’t be good. I’m almost done pinpointing the core. If you need me to help—”

“Nah, it’s okay, Hiro. We’re on it.”

“Thanks.”

All that appeared in the display of the AR device were the Darkubes, which were all flowing toward the middle of the city, shifting from one eerie shape to another as they went. Sora and his friends made that their destination.

“Okay, there’s a lot of them.”

Go Go couldn’t hide her astonishment as she took in the scale of the Darkubes.

“What do ya suppose they’ll do?” Goofy asked worriedly.

“I don’t think we wanna find out,” replied Wasabi as he arrived. It seemed the rest of Big Hero 6 had joined the party.

“I say we destroy this thing!” shouted Fred, striking a less-than-intimidating battle pose.

“Yeah!” said Donald, brandishing his staff.

Honey Lemon was not so optimistic. “But without a strategy, we’d just be wasting our strength.”

“If we knew where to strike...,” said Sora, and they all took a closer look at their foe.

Hiro contacted him through the AR device again. *“Sora! I got it! I’m sending you an AR software update. It’ll show you where the core is—the Darkubes’ weak point. I’m coming to help.”*

But before he could say any more, the transmission suddenly stopped.

“Huh? That’s weird. Is it busted?” Sora wondered out loud, when suddenly a figure in a black coat appeared. “Hiro, what’s that on the display?”

“That’s not the display. He’s really here,” said Goofy, answering Sora’s question. Sora got his Keyblade ready, and the rest of Big Hero 6 prepared to defend themselves.

“Are you done messing around?” said the hooded figure.

“What? Wait, that voice...” Sora would never mistake that voice for anyone else’s.

“Hold on. You...know this guy?” asked Wasabi.

“And now...enter the supervillain,” said Fred.

“He definitely has the vibe,” said Honey Lemon.

The mysterious boy stopped and calmly removed his hood.

“Funny.”

“Riku... But...”

Sora lowered his Keyblade when he saw his best friend’s face. This wasn’t the Riku he knew now, of course, but Riku as he had been about a year ago.

“As if this stupid experiment wasn’t already a hassle.” Riku held out his hand,

palm up, and a small, red square popped into existence above it.

“Where’d he get that?” Hiro asked, shocked, the transmission working again.

“Hiro, do you recognize it?” Sora asked.

“Not quite ready,” stated Riku, taking the red object in his fingers and holding it up toward the sky.

“Yeah. That’s the first chip I made for Baymax. It’s full of combat programs.”

The members of Big Hero 6 shared a collective gasp at that.

“Programs?” Sora asked back.

Hiro answered, *“Yeah, they tell Baymax how to react.”*

Sora still seemed like he didn’t get it, so Goofy prompted him to clarify. “Does that mean...it’s like his heart?”

“Kind of...”

“More, then!” Riku said into the air, paying no attention to the rest of the group. He hurled the chip into the Darkubes and vanished into a shroud of darkness.

“Riku!” Sora shouted after him, but Riku could no longer hear.

The Darkubes changed shape and enveloped the chip, glowing and spinning. The shape they formed sprouted several flailing appendages that knocked the members of Big Hero 6 flying.

“Oh no!” cried Sora.

“Sora, I’m on my way,” Hiro called anxiously. *“I’ll look after my team. You guys fight the Darkubes! Remember to use the AR device to target the core!”*

“I got it!”

With their strategy decided, Sora turned to face the enemy.

He charged toward the Darkubes, then leaped upward and cast a spell. Baymax flew right behind him, and Sora landed on his back.

“Time to get to work, Baymax!”

“Power output to maximum.”

The robot delivered a punch, and the green light of the Darkubes turned to a deep crimson. The shifting mass then began to crumble, falling cube by cube to the ground, only to rise back into the air seconds later in the form of a colossal fist and seize Sora in a crushing grip. But Donald quickly fired off a succession of spells and sent the Darkubes falling to pieces again.

The fight continued for some time, and just as Sora, Donald, and Goofy began to run out of steam, the strange mass finally fell still.

The Big Hero 6 team eyed the Darkubes uneasily, waiting to see what came next. After a moment, the Darkubes crumbled apart, revealing the core inside—a cube-shaped Heartless. Sora dispatched it with a swing of his Keyblade, and the red chip came flying out.

Hiro tried to run over to pick up the chip, but someone else beat him to it—the Riku in black.

“Oh, this isn’t for you. At least not until we’re done.” Before the others could reach him, he leaped away from them.

“Riku... Is it you? Why do you look like that?” Sora asked.

“Looks are deceiving, but the heart? You know that it’s me,” Riku replied.

“I know Riku wouldn’t do this. Not without a good reason.”

“A reason? When did that matter? We’ve been trying to one-up each other since we were kids.”

“What...?” was the only response Sora could muster.

Donald and Goofy stepped in front of their friend protectively.

“Don’t listen to him, Sora!”

“The coat means he’s with Organization XIII! And *that* means he’s not really Riku.”

“Smarter than you look,” snorted Riku—or Dark Riku, rather.

“We defeated Ansem and Xehanort—every last one of ’em. But they still all came back anyway, right? So, maybe this ‘Riku’ came back, too, from the time when Ansem possessed him,” Goofy hypothesized.

He had a point. Ansem and all the others they'd defeated had returned. Sora turned back to Riku.

"Yeah, from the past!" shouted Donald.

"What? How?" asked Sora.

"Unlike a certain wizard you know, I had to play by the rules to travel through time. Which meant leaving my body behind."

"I know about this..."

Sora recalled the words Young Xehanort had spoken during their encounter in the dream world.

"That is Xehanort reduced to just a heart—the being you and your friends called 'Ansem.'"

Dark Riku picked up where Sora's memory left off.

"Xehanort's heart left his body in order to voyage back through time. He needed to tell his younger self of the great plans he had in store." He was likely referring to the man in the brown robe. "There in the past, his heart stayed and waited out the years until you and I came along. Xehanort's heart possessed me and became Ansem, the first adversary you faced."

They had encountered the brown-robed man on that stormy night—the outset of their first adventure. He was the one who had led Riku astray so he could claim his body.

"The rest of him, the piece he left behind, took the name Xemnas and created the first Organization. It was all a part of a larger plan to bring Xehanort into contact with the right hearts—enough of them to form the real Organization XIII. They could come from anywhere, any when...just as long as he had the right vessels at hand to place their hearts in."

Xemnas was Xehanort's Nobody. A shell missing a heart, yet somehow still holding on to a mind.

There was one part Sora still didn't understand, though. "Vessels?" he asked. *And why does he need the "right ones"?*

Donald and Goofy turned back toward Sora and said the answer at the same

time. “Replicas!”

“That’s right. The Replica Program was a success. We are as real as people.”

“Then pack up and leave! What are you still doing here?” Sora asked in bewilderment.

“To see if we can re-create a heart from data.”

“What?”

That was the same plan the king and Riku had proposed for bringing back Roxas.

Dark Riku laughed as if he had read their minds. “Sorry, did we steal your idea?” He glanced at the chip in his hand, then over at Baymax. “That walking balloon over there has a ‘heart.’ At least that’s the nonsense I’m supposed to believe.”

Sora disagreed. “There are hearts all around us. You only have to see them for them to become real.” *A heart can grow anywhere—even in a robot.*

Hiro came up beside Sora. “Where’d you get that? That’s my chip. I made it.”

“Oh, well, I’m sorry about that. But I promise I’ll put it right back where I found it,” Dark Riku said as he looked down at Hiro, then laughed again.

“What do you mean?”

Dark Riku shrugged. “I think I’ll be getting back to work now,” he replied unhelpfully before melting away into the shadows.

“Wait!”

“Sora! We gotta stop him. Guys—”

Sora and Hiro started to give chase, but then stopped and turned back to see that Go Go and the others were still struggling to catch their breath.

“You are all suffering from acute exhaustion. I recommend rest,” said Baymax.

Hiro looked down for a moment, then acquiesced. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s regroup.”

Back in the garage, the mood was heavy, even after everyone was rested.

It wasn't long before the doom and gloom was too much for Fred. "C'mon, guys. What's with all the long faces? Did you forget that we *won*?!"

"Fred. Not now," Go Go admonished him.

"His name is Riku? And you know him?" Hiro asked.

"Yeah... Well, I know *a* 'him,'" Sora answered. Whoever they'd just met only looked like Riku.

"That one is a fake!" Donald added.

"The fake one's with Organization XIII, our arch-nememies," said Goofy.

That only gave Wasabi, Honey Lemon, and Go Go more questions.

"Okay, but how'd he get Hiro's chip?"

"And what did he mean about an experiment?"

"And what do they want?"

Sora's eyes drifted to the ground as he explained things as best he could. "He said they're trying to re-create a heart from data, but I don't know what they *really* want. None of us do. These guys, they show up—and instead of fighting fair and square, they go for the heart and say things to try and get under your skin. They're cowards. And now they're doing it to hurt you, too. It's our fault."

Who knew what the Organization was after this time...

"No," Hiro interjected. "This could be good. That chip might finally be able to give me some answers."

"You said that you made it, right?"

"Yeah. This Baymax—he's actually the second model," Hiro said, turning to the robot in question. "Uh, no offense."

"I am a robot. I cannot be offended," replied Baymax in the same gentle tone as always.

Hiro smiled back, then began to explain again. "It's a long story. But the first Baymax and the chip I made...vanished into another dimension along with the microbots. The chip's back..." Hiro paused for a second. "So the first Baymax might be back, too."

He seemed upset by this—maybe the disappearance of the first Baymax was connected to some painful memories for him.

A somber mood instantly fell over the members of Big Hero 6.

Until Baymax dispelled it with a few words. “Those who suffer a loss require support from friends and loved ones.”

A sudden rumble shook the garage. Hiro dashed over to the monitor and typed frantically at the keyboard. An image of the Darkubes trashing the city again appeared on-screen. The battle wasn’t over, after all.

“Guys, c’mon!”

Everyone quickly answered the call.

Meanwhile, in another part of San Fransokyo, Maleficent and Pete were walking along the highway as two rather distinctive figures in the urban landscape. The Corridors of Darkness opened behind them, revealing Dark Riku.

“Why are you snooping around?” he asked.

Maleficent glanced back. “That would be none of your concern.”

“Overstep, and darkness will consume you again.”

The witch gave Dark Riku a long look. “What an interesting thing to say. I shall do anything I please. As should you,” she retorted, completely unfazed.

Dark Riku’s reaction was equally confident. “Oh, I intend to.” With a smirk, he vanished back into the darkness.

“Who’s he? Friend of yours?” Pete asked.

“Yes. Though I could not tell you from ‘when,’” Maleficent said in reply as they continued on their way.

The Darkubes hung in the blue sky the next day over the rooftop of a building in the middle of the city.

Sora, Donald, Goofy, and the Big Hero 6 team looked up at their adversary.

“Hope it’s learned some new tricks,” said Go Go.

“Yeah, now it’s gotta face *all* of us,” Wasabi added.

“That’s right,” Honey Lemon agreed.

“Freddie want to destroy!”

“Our probability of success is—”

“You don’t have to crunch the numbers, Baymax,” Hiro said, cutting off the robot before he could finish. “It’s not the sum of our parts. It’s the sum of our hearts.”

“Yeah,” Sora agreed with a nod.

A familiar voice suddenly spoke to them. “Which adds up to what? Show me.”

When they turned their eyes in the direction it came from, they found Dark Riku standing atop a floating turbine modeled after traditional carp-shaped wind socks.

Dark Riku leaped down from his perch and struck the core of the Darkubes, instantly shattering the construct. The glowing red core then burst into three. Dark Riku held the red chip in his hand. “Almost there.”

“What?!” Sora asked, but Dark Riku merely kicked the pulsing crimson cores.

“This pile of junk collected the data we needed... The terror of being attacked without warning... The despair of having no place to run... The longing for vengeance...”

“A heart’s more than that!” Sora shouted at him.

Everyone from Big Hero 6 had something to say, too, starting with Wasabi. “It’s working together.”

Donald and Goofy joined in: “Smiling at something funny!”

“Trusting friends,” Hiro added.

Sora spoke last. “In every heart, there’s hope.”

As the group of heroes nodded resolutely, Dark Riku only smiled back.

“You’re right,” he agreed, holding up the chip before him. “That’s why I made sure our creation fought you. Now the data contains a complete heart.”

“A heart made from conflict? That can’t be real,” Sora shot back at him.

“What was it you said? I only have to see it for it to become real?” Dark Riku smiled and said, “So let’s see it.”

He thrust his hand skyward, opening a portal to the Corridors of Darkness in midair that began sucking up the Darkubes.

“First, we need a vessel.”

The red Darkubes then dropped back out of the dark portal in a spherical form.

“What’s going on?” Go Go asked nervously.

“Another Darkube form?” Honey Lemon theorized, curious despite the danger.

“Doesn’t look as bad as the last one,” Fred said, trying to reassure himself.

As the captain of the guard, Goofy made sure everyone was on their toes. “It could be a trick.”

“Usually is,” Wasabi agreed.

“We can stop it!” Donald exclaimed.

Sora summoned his Keyblade, and Hiro took an anxious breath.

“Wait!” Hiro suddenly shouted. “That’s...Baymax.”

Everyone froze in place.

“What?! No way.”

The whole team turned their eyes nervously toward the sky where the Darkubes were gradually shifting into the form of a jet-black Dark Baymax with sharp spikes on his shoulders.

“Baymax...,” Hiro called to the robot.

But Dark Riku turned back and coldly dispelled his hopes. “Don’t bother. This puppet has lost his heart. He won’t wake up.”

“He’s not a puppet! Baymax, he’s like my family. Please! Give me back my friend.”

Dark Riku laughed at Hiro’s heartfelt entreaty.

“Yes... I did promise I’d put this back where I found it.” The chip flew from Dark Riku’s hand and slipped right into the port on Dark Baymax’s chest. The robot’s eyes instantly began to glow red. “But there’s one piece missing. Sora, you’re the one who’s going to complete this heart.”

“Yeah right,” Sora said back, his Keyblade ready for battle.

“You can’t have a heart without sadness...without loss. You see, you’re going to destroy Hiro’s friend right in front of him.”

With that, Dark Riku disappeared into a dark portal, laughing all the while.

“Wait!”

Sora tried to go after him, but then Dark Baymax shot into the air, aiming to deal Hiro a crushing blow with his fist.

“Hiro!”

The rest of Big Hero 6 ran over to shield their friend from the attack, but they were quickly scattered. Sora, Donald, and Goofy hurriedly joined in the defensive effort and finally managed to stop Dark Baymax’s onslaught. Their own Baymax was last to arrive, dishing out a blow that sent his dark counterpart flying.

“Hiro...”

Go Go and the rest ran over to their young friend. Dark Baymax had disappeared from view when he tumbled from the roof, but he had recovered during his fall and flew back up to the top of the building. His disproportionately large right hand appeared to be composed of Darkubes, glowing with a menacing light that hinted at the power it contained.

Donald and Goofy rushed over to confront him.

“Hiro, tell us. What should we do?” Sora asked, his Keyblade still at the ready.

Clenching his fists nervously, Hiro took a step forward where Donald and Goofy were doing their best to keep Dark Baymax away. “Baymax means everything to me. But that chip isn’t who he is. I already made this mistake once before. Tadashi wouldn’t want there to be a Baymax that hurts people. Sora, he has to be stopped.”

Sora nodded in understanding. *Still, I know it hurts to fight someone who means so much to you. Hiro doesn't need to go through that.* “Okay. Help Go Go and the others. You can leave this guy to us.”

“Thank you,” replied Hiro with a smile.

Sora hurried over to face Dark Baymax. The robot launched himself into the air, knocking Donald and Goofy away in the process.

“Oh no!”

A battle in the sky put them at a disadvantage.

Hiro looked up at their foe, then shouted, “Sora, take Baymax!”

“Okay! Baymax!”

The red robot heeded Sora's call, running out and then taking to the air. Sora jumped onto his back, and the two of them flew off toward Dark Baymax.

Baymax chased his dark counterpart through the skies above San Fransokyo, and Sora could even see the ocean off in the distance. Every so often, Dark Baymax would send black cubes to throw them off his trail, forcing Sora to knock them out of the way as they wove between the buildings.

Dark Baymax's left hand glowed red—apparently made of many small cubes—then detached and shot toward his pursuers. Sora and Baymax evaded it as they closed in on their foe.

“We have to stop him! Let's go, Baymax!”

“Roger. Increasing power output to maximum.”

The robot hit Dark Baymax with a devastating punch, while Sora leaped from Baymax's back and hammered his Keyblade down from above. Black cube fragments scattered from the point of impact, and Dark Baymax fell still.

Baymax sped after the corrupted robot, which continued to plummet toward the ground.

Suddenly, Dark Baymax sprang to life and seized his red counterpart by the leg.

The two robots grappled for a moment as they dropped, eventually ending up

locked in a position with Baymax underneath. If they continued to fall like this, the heroic robot would be the first to hit the ground.

Fortunately, Baymax fired his left arm into Dark Baymax at point-blank range. The blow separated the two, inflicting grievous damage as it did so. Once he was free, Baymax righted himself and landed safely, while the limp Dark Baymax crashed loudly to the ground nearby.

Hiro and the rest of Big Hero 6 came running over—but they were mostly concerned about Dark Baymax. Sora wondered what it was that made the first Baymax so important to them. He guessed it wasn't really Baymax at all, but the connection he represented to someone else—probably Hiro's older brother.

"So...did we stop him?" asked Wasabi.

Hiro walked over to where Dark Baymax lay, a sad look on his face. The robot's body was giving off sparks and black smoke, as if it had shorted out inside.

"Safety mode kicks in if he's put under too much stress, so he's probably just in stasis. We'll have to destroy the chip if we want to be certain." Hiro knelt down beside the fallen robot.

"But...are you sure?" Honey Lemon asked.

"Yeah, dude...," said Fred, "you don't need to go *that* far."

"Maybe we can find another way," added Go Go.

But Hiro simply shook his head. "It's the right thing to do." He removed the chip from Dark Baymax's port.

The black cubes covering the robot's right arm began to vanish, while the dark armor turned into cubes and disappeared in a burst of red light.

All that remained was another Baymax, completely white. His eyes were closed.

"Tadashi would've done the same thing," said Hiro, placing a loving hand on the robot's body.

"But, Hiro...isn't that Baymax's heart?" Sora asked.

Hiro shook his head gently, then replied, “It’s okay. Baymax is *here*.”

He put a hand to his own chest, then looked down at the chip.

“I...should be the one.”

Hiro curled his fingers around the chip—and crushed it.

Back in the garage, Hiro gave the last input to activate Baymax.

“Ow?”

“Hello, I am Baymax, your personal healthcare companion.”

Sure enough, the robot woke up, and cheers erupted all around.

The all-white robot reached out for Hiro and gave him a hug. The other Baymax then came and gave him another hug from behind. The whole gang was elated.

“Two Baymaxes!” Fred was the first to exclaim.

“This is great, Hiro!” Sora said.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Sora took this moment to try and ask a favor. “So, uh, do you think I could take one of them with me?”

Both of the Baymaxes looked at Sora.

For his part, Hiro was a bit caught off guard by the question, perhaps unsurprisingly.

“Uh, that’s a no.”

“What? Come on.”

“No. Who’s gonna repair him?”

“One. Just one of them. C’mon, please?”

“He’s *my* healthcare companion?”

As Hiro and Sora went back and forth, everyone else in the garage laughed.

Aw, guess I won’t get a Baymax of my own after all. Flying around with him on other worlds would have been super fun.

Oh, well. Maybe I'll see ya again sometime, Baymax.



Chapter 12

DARK WORLD

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Dark World

SORA, DONALD, AND GOOFY WERE LOOKING FOR THE next world in the Gummi Ship when a familiar ringtone suddenly filled the cockpit.

“Huh?” Sora pulled the phone out of his pocket.

“Sora, somebody’s callin’ us on the Gummiphone,” said Jiminy Cricket as he hopped onto Sora’s shoulder to better see the screen. Donald and Goofy crowded in from either side, eager to find out who was calling, and Sora hit the button.

“We got baaad news!” Dale squeaked from the screen.

Chip quickly pushed Dale off to one side. “We’ve totally lost contact with the king and Riku! They’re all on their own in the realm of darkness!” he reported.

Everyone on the Gummi Ship cried out in shock. “Whaaat?!”

“See? I knew we shoulda gone!” Sora complained.

“Chip, how do we get to ‘em?” asked Donald.

“Now we can ask?” Sora said, reminding him of what happened the last time this came up.

As always, Goofy kept them focused. “It’s not like we can use that big door anymore. It’s completely gone.”

“Yeah, we closed it after beating Ansem,” Sora said, now directing his irritation at Goofy.

Jiminy paused thoughtfully. “And we certainly can’t ask the king or Riku.”

“Cause you wouldn’t *let* me ask,” Sora snapped back.

Before they could argue further, Dale interjected. “Only King Mickey can open a door to the realm of darkness.”

“Huh?”

“It’s because he has a special Keyblade of darkness. He figured out how to make it open the way,” Chip told everyone as he struggled with Dale to stay in front of the small screen.

“Oh...” Sora contemplated the situation for a moment.

“Gawrsh, what’ll we do, then?” Goofy asked dejectedly.

Sora turned his eyes forward.

If the king’s Keyblade can open doors to the realm of darkness...

“May my heart be our guiding key. It’ll show us the way,” he said, then called his Keyblade to his hand and pointed it out before them. The Keyblade began to emit light, and just as when they opened the way to Olympus, a portal appeared within the Ocean Between.

“A gate!” they exclaimed.

“But where does it lead?” Sora asked.

“It doesn’t matter! Go!”

“Hurry, Sora!”

Donald and Goofy urged him.

“Okay,” Sora replied, then took the helm of the Gummi Ship and guided them through the gateway.

They arrived on a beach among clear skies, blue seas, and the sound of waves—the Destiny Islands, the very same small place where Sora and his friends’ journey had begun.

“Why do you think that gate took us here?” Sora wondered as he, Donald, and Goofy walked along the beach. Nothing appeared to be any different than ever—except for what he’d just spotted lying in the sand.

“A Keyblade?”

He picked up the weapon, which must have belonged to someone else.

“It looks so old,” Donald commented.

Sora inspected every inch of the Keyblade—he'd never seen one like this before. The color of it was quite dark, and he didn't recognize the shape on the key chain.

"How did it end up here?" he murmured, turning it this way and that.

"Hmm, maybe it's another guiding key," suggested Goofy.

"Sure, but to guide us where?"

Sora took the Keyblade in hand and listened to where his heart told him to point it. A beam of light gathered at the tip of the blade and headed straight into the entrance to the Secret Place. As the light faded away, it revealed...

"A door!"

"Let's go."

Donald and Goofy were raring to go, but then Sora stepped in front of them and said, "Not you guys."

Donald and Goofy were shocked. "Huh?!"

Sora approached the door alone. "The realm of darkness—it isn't safe for you."

Donald and Goofy weren't going to take this sitting down, though.

"Forget it. I'm going."

"Yeah. You can't make a whole pint without us."

Sora turned back to face them. "Come on, guys, think about it. Even the king and Riku struggled in the realm of darkness. Someone needs to stay out here, just in case. If something happens to the rest of us, you two need to carry on."

Donald and Goofy looked crestfallen.

"Sora...", Donald said softly, and then more angrily: "Stop it!"

Goofy wasn't ready to give up, either. "We understand, but we don't want you goin' someplace dangerous on your own."

Sora only gave them a smile. "Thanks, guys. But I'll be fine. I'll make sure Riku and the king are safe. Trust me." He punctuated the reassurance with a heroic

pose.

Goofy and Donald looked at each other, then turned back toward Sora.

“You promise to be good?”

“And come home nice and safe?”

“Yeah,” Sora said with a firm nod to his worried friends.

Meanwhile in the realm of darkness, at the edge of the water, Riku and Mickey were locked in battle with a Demon Tower. It wasn't going well; when Riku was distracted by Mickey in trouble, he was swatted across the beach.

“Riku!”

The swirling mass of Heartless didn't miss the opening Mickey left in his defenses as he started to run for his friend. The Demon Tower swallowed the king up, sending his Keyblade tumbling to the ground.

“Mickey!” Riku shouted from the sand.

The king was completely immobilized, trapped inside the pitch-black mass. Then, from within the darkness stepped forth a figure hidden by a swirling shroud.

“This Keyblade...”

The figure picked up Mickey's fallen weapon.

“Is it her?” The king gasped as the darkness fell away to reveal her face.

“Mickey... You're too late.”

“Aqua?” Riku said, almost to himself.

The woman who turned back to face them had pale-blue hair and golden eyes—the golden eyes of someone consumed by darkness.

“What happened?” Mickey asked sadly.

Aqua's grip tightened around the Keyblade. “You abandoned me, that's what. Left me in this shadow prison for more than a decade, knowing what it would do to me...”

“I'm sorry. It's all my fault.” Mickey's face was filled with sorrow; he couldn't

even look at her.

“I reached this shore after endless wandering,” Aqua hissed as she walked over to the edge of the water. “Waited forever for help to arrive. But no one ever came. I lost my Keyblade. Had no means of fighting my way back through the Heartless. You should have known I was stranded.” As she spoke, she walked over to the edge of the water.

“Do you have any idea how lonely it is here? How frightening it is to have no one? All that’s left in my heart is misery and despair...and now, you can share it!” she shouted, turning to face him.

Riku stepped forward. “There’s no need,” he said. “Got my own.” He closed his eyes for a moment, sensing the presence of another version of himself. Not long before this second trip into the realm of darkness, they had met right here at the Dark Margin. Riku, and who he used to be—his Replica.



And this Replica was with him now—had been with him all along.

Will you come with me? I know, I don't have to ask. Where one of us goes, the other follows. You're the darkness in my heart, so you'll always be with me. I wouldn't be who I am now without you.

Riku opened his eyes and focused them on Aqua.

The power welling up within him transformed into a Keyblade.

Quietly, he stepped toward the fallen master awaiting him beneath the light on the water. But the Demon Tower moved to block his path, Mickey still in its clutches. This battle wouldn't be easy.

“Get lost!”

Riku attacked the Demon Tower with all the power surging within him. The Tower itself was a huge mass of smaller Shadows merged together. It swirled about like a vortex, occasionally rising up in a huge column that swiped at Riku. He wasn't about to let it defeat him, though—he would save Aqua from the darkness that had taken hold of her.

The Demon Tower burrowed into the ground to reveal Aqua. She attacked him with magic, but he deflected the spell and chased after her. Aqua swung her Keyblade at Riku and used the recoil of her blade against his to put some distance between them, just as the Demon Tower boiled back up out of the ground and knocked Riku away. Now that Aqua was nowhere to be found, he charged at the colossal mass of Heartless again.

Riku struck with his Keyblade again and again, putting every ounce of strength he had into each blow. But no matter how many Shadows he destroyed, more arrived to take their place. He wasn't getting anywhere like this.

“Sora...” Riku didn't know why the name left his mouth as he gasped for breath.

A door opened in the sky, releasing a blinding light and—Sora himself.

He flew down and dropped to the ground next to Riku.

“I made it!” Sora exclaimed with a smile, which Riku returned. The connection between the two took visible form as a brilliant halo around them. Their

Keyblades merged, producing a powerful torrent of light.

The Heartless were no match for the devastating blast and scattered, finally freeing Mickey from his prison. Riku tried to run over to the king, but Aqua was hot on his heels. Just before her Keyblade could strike his back, Sora jumped between them and blocked the attack.

“How, Sora?” Riku asked.

Sora showed him the Keyblade he’d found on the Destiny Islands. It was also the one Aqua had once wielded herself—the Master’s Defender.

“I...had a little help,” Sora replied. “Watch over the king. I’ve got this.” He turned to face Aqua with the Keyblade at the ready.

“Okay.” Riku hurried over to Mickey.

Sora watched him go for a moment, then devoted his full attention to Aqua.

I’m finally meeting her for the first time, but it doesn’t feel that way. Not because of the darkness—there’s something deep in my heart that knows her.

I have to find a way to stop her here.

Aqua came flying at him, and Sora held her back with his Keyblade. The blow made his hands go numb, and he gritted his teeth against it. With a small smirk, Aqua put some space between them again.

He couldn’t afford to go easy, not even a little. Not only had she embraced the darkness, but she was also a Keyblade Master.

Sora charged at Aqua, but just as he reached her, she split into three copies. He couldn’t tell which one was real. He tried magic on the Aqua closest to him, and the copy burst into specks of darkness. He just barely managed to get his Keyblade up in time to intercept a downward slice by another Aqua from the side—just as the third Aqua darted in from behind and knocked him upward.

Sora managed to recover in midair just before he landed. That was apparently what the two Aquas had been waiting for, though, because they were both on him instantly. A spell from Sora made quick work of the attackers, which meant all that remained was the real Aqua. He parried her Keyblade, then used the momentum to get in close and land a solid hit. Aqua dropped to her knees,

clutching her chest.

Light radiated from the Keyblade in her hand as a dark fog enshrouded her body, and Mickey's Keyblade slipped from her fingers before vanishing in a brilliant flash.

Aqua fell onto the surface of the murky water and began to sink.

"So...this is the end," she said softly, then closed her eyes.

"Aqua!"

Suddenly, Sora reached for her.

What was it that she saw? Was it light? Or was it...?

"Sora..."

Aqua reached out to take his hand, and then the world went white.

For so long, the waves were the only sound out here on this beach.

Just waves crashing in the darkness. Nothing else. I thought I would never hear anything else again.

No one would come to save me. After all, I couldn't save anyone else. I broke my promise. I failed.

I'm sorry.

I can feel myself sinking deeper and deeper into this darkness. Soon I'll be too far gone, and no one will ever find me again.

"Aqua!"

I hear a voice calling my name. Ventus's voice.

"Aqua!"

Terra, too. Oh, they look so worried. And the sky behind them is...blue. And so bright.

What's happened to me?

"Ven... Terra..."

I say their names, too.

Maybe I can keep my promise after all... I have to, no matter what.

The darkness is behind me...and I'm awake.

"Aqua!"

Sora and Riku peered at Aqua's face. They were on the Destiny Islands with her and Mickey, right at the edge of the waves, as they had been the last time the two returned from the Dark Margin.

Aqua's eyes opened slowly, and she sat up. "It's you..." Confused, she took in her surroundings.

"Thank goodness! You're awake," Mickey said to her.

"Mickey..."

The barest hint of understanding began to dawn on Aqua's face. "Are these... the Destiny Islands?"

"That's right," Mickey replied.

Aqua still seemed a little dazed. "When did they fall to darkness?" she asked, but Riku shook his head and smiled.

"You're in the realm of light."

As Aqua looked up at him, tears began welling in her eyes.

"You're home," said Sora, extending a hand to her.

The tears spilled over, and Aqua wept with joy.

"You're home!"

"Welcome home."

Donald and Mickey ran up and embraced her, Sora and Goofy joining shortly after. Riku hesitated, then slowly joined them, too.

The lonely silence was finally over.

The welcoming sun of the Destiny Islands shone down upon everyone.

Aqua walked toward her former training grounds, accompanied by Sora, Donald, and Goofy. The terrain was uneven, and the sky was filled with dark, heavy clouds.

She had only just returned from the realm of darkness, however, and Goofy was worried about her. “You sure about this, Aqua?” he asked as Castle Oblivion loomed before them.

“If you want, we can take you back to Master Yen Sid’s tower to rest with Riku and the king?” Sora suggested, with Donald nodding his approval.

But Aqua only shook her head and smiled as she kept walking. “Thank you. But...Ven’s expecting me. I promised to wake him. Said I’d be right back, but I’m not even close. I’m in for an earful.”

She came to a stop before the imposing castle.

This was once the Land of Departure, where she and her friends had once trained, but it was unrecognizable now. It had existed as Castle Oblivion ever since the day Aqua had sealed off the land in order to keep Ventus safe.

Aqua took a deep breath, summoned her Keyblade, and pointed it at the gates of the castle.

A large Keyhole appeared, and when the light from her Keyblade reached it, they were struck by what felt like a powerful gust of wind. There was a large boom, followed by the sound of a door opening.

The entire structure of Castle Oblivion began to reorganize itself until it looked entirely different, and even the clouds dispersed to reveal a clear blue sky. Before long, the castle was the home she knew again.

“Ready?” Aqua asked, and they headed inside.

The place was just as she remembered it, but Aqua hurried through it without even stopping to take it all in. She eventually reached a large entryway, which revealed Ventus seated on a throne in the back of the hall.

“Ven.” Aqua ran to her friend and took him in her arms. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

Ventus showed no indication of waking up, though.

Aqua took him by the shoulders and shook him. “Ven, wake up. Open your eyes, please! Why? Your heart never found its way home?”

But the answer came from a voice none of them had expected to hear here.

“That was a neat trick. No wonder no one could find him.”

Everyone spun around in surprise, ready for a fight.

“Vanitas!” Sora shouted.

Aqua stood upright and placed herself in front of Ventus protectively. “Why are you here?”

“Oh, I’m sorry for interrupting your touching reunion, but surely you won’t begrudge me a moment with my brother?”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy charged at Vanitas with weapons in hand, but he lithely spun around them and perched himself on the back of the throne where Ventus slept.

“So Venty-Wenty wants to keep sleeping. What am I ever going to do with you?” he said, a touch of humor in his voice.

“Shut up!”

Aqua sprang into the air and swung her Keyblade down at Vanitas. But he simply blocked the blow with his own Keyblade, not even bothering to stand up.

“You better settle down there, ‘Master.’” Vanitas shoved Aqua back, then leaped after her as she flew through the air. They both landed in the center of the hall at almost the same time.

“Aqua, I’ll handle him!” said Sora.

“No,” she replied over her shoulder. Her voice was firm. “*I’m* ending this.”

“But...you haven’t recovered yet.”

“Sorry, but you’ve seen me too weak, too often. Now it’s my turn to shine,” she answered with a smile, then turned to face Vanitas again, erecting a barrier around the two of them. He wouldn’t be able to harm Ventus, but Sora and the others couldn’t help her, either.

“Aqua!” Sora shouted.

Shutting out their concern, Aqua charged at Vanitas and struck. He swatted away her Keyblade and knocked her back, but Aqua didn’t miss a step as she quickly threw herself back on the offense. When Vanitas tried magic against

her, Aqua responded in kind.

Their Keyblades clashed together, flew apart, and then came together again, over and over.

How long would this go on? Fatigue was taking its toll on them both.

Vanitas shook off his weariness and cast another spell—but this time, he aimed for Ventus.

The barrier cracked.

Vanitas fired off another round of magic.

Aqua had to do something, or Ven would get hurt...

She rushed forward and threw herself in front of the spell, taking the full brunt of it. As she lay on the ground, Vanitas walked slowly to her and stood over her.

“Aqua!!” Sora yelled—and then he heard a voice.

I...have to wake up...

It sounded like it was coming from the deepest reaches of his heart.

Sora called back. “Yes. Tell me what to do.”

The power of waking...

“I can’t. I still don’t have it yet,” Sora said. *I’m still nowhere close...*

You never lost it...

It sleeps...until someone needs it...

Call to it...

“I am calling...with all my heart,” Sora said softly, thinking of what lay beneath the darkness.

I have to save everyone.

Thank you for always keeping me safe, Sora.

A blinding light enveloped Ventus and the throne he sat on—and in the blink of an eye, that light had pierced the barrier.

The light was Ventus, awake at long last.

“Aqua!!”

Ventus and Vanitas clashed together, and the barrier shattered and fell to pieces.



Sora, Donald, and Goofy hurried over to protect Aqua, while Vanitas leaped away to safety. “Three guardians are more than I care to face,” he spat. “But now that Brother is awake...I’m just certain he’ll come to visit.” He opened a path to the Corridors of Darkness behind himself and made his escape.

Ventus helped Aqua to her feet.

“Aqua, are you all right?” Sora asked worriedly as he walked over.

“Yes. I’m fine, Sora,” she replied with a smile.

Beside her, Ventus was eyeing Sora with some bemusement—why did he look so much like Vanitas? “Huh?! You’re...Sora?”

“Yup. Hey, Ventus.” Sora held out his right hand.

“I get it,” Ventus said softly. “You were my second chance.”

“Huh?”

But instead of explaining further, Ventus just reached out and shook hands with Sora. “Call me Ven.”

Sora nodded. Once they had finished shaking hands, Aqua reached out and gently placed her own hand on Ventus’s head.

“Good morning, Ven.”

“Good morning, Aqua.”

Ventus returned her smile.

It was a moment of joyful relief for everyone—and now the true battle could begin.

INTERMISSION

Secret Talk

MEANWHILE, IN THE PLAZA IN RADIANT GARDEN, two men were holding a conversation.

“WHAAA—?!” Demyx yelped.

Vexen hurriedly slapped a hand over the other man’s mouth. “Quiet, you dunce!”

“But, dude, why would you pick me?” Demyx whined once Vexen removed his hand.

Vexen scowled at him. “I cannot let the chosen catch wind of this, understand?”

“Oh, I see! It’s because I got benched!” Demyx retorted indignantly.

“I got ‘benched,’ too!” Vexen snapped, and it was Demyx’s turn to clap a hand over his mouth.

“Wha—? Hey! Quiet!”

After Demyx released him, Vexen cleared his throat awkwardly.

“Okay, man, look. Real talk? Backstabbing those guys would be stupid. If they find out, we are yesterday’s toast. I mean, what’s in it for me?”

“Forgiveness,” Vexen answered softly.

“Huh? For what?”

“Men like us—in the pursuit of science, we sometimes make terrible mistakes. Lose sight of our mission to help people. But now I can help someone with my research. Now I can atone,” Vexen confessed with utter sincerity, his gaze focused on some far-off point.

However, Demyx was less than interested.

“I’m not a scientist,” he stated matter-of-factly, then waved good-bye and made to leave.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Vexen put a hand on Demyx’s shoulder and pulled him back.

“C’mon, dude. I’m useless; I’m chicken. We’re not friends. I can count the number of times you and I have hung out on one hand—less than one hand! I didn’t even *know* you in the old life!”

“Fine, *fine*! But listen,” Vexen said, then beckoned him closer with a gesture. He whispered something into Demyx’s ear. The suspicion on Demyx’s face soon changed to surprise.

“Huh? No way!”

“It’s true. The whole thing was his idea.”

“Huh? No stinkin’ way.”

Whatever information Vexen had just shared with him, Demyx apparently found it difficult to accept.

“He wants to atone, too. But he is one of the chosen, so his hands are tied. Hence my actions on his behalf, hence my need for you to act on my behalf should all go awry. As you said, we are far from friends. No one would ever suspect you.”

“Hmm...”

Demyx mulled over the idea for moment. “So I’m not doing any fighting?”

“Correct. And more importantly, no benchwarming.”

That brought a smile to Demyx’s face. “Ha! Yeah, baby! Sign me up,” he crowed, hopping into the air and striking a macho pose.

Vexen wasn’t impressed.

“Yes! Demyx time!” Demyx said with a grin as he went on his way.

Meanwhile, in Ansem the Wise’s laboratory, also in Radiant Garden, Ienzo stood deep in thought before a screen, as he often was.

“We’ve come a long way toward reconstructing Roxas’s heart. But a vessel...

Without that...," he said to himself, his eyes closed.

We already have the data, and the analysis provided by the king's servants has proven quite helpful. We simply don't have a vessel—and a living person is out of the question. It's the backup data plan or nothing now. As long as we have a backup, Roxas should be able to exist as data.

"But...the backup plan isn't a true solution," lenzo muttered to himself, when suddenly a dark portal opened behind him.

"Finally. 'Bout time."

Startled, lenzo spun around just as Demyx stepped out of the gateway with some sort of large object slung over his shoulder. An object that looked to be human shaped.

"Ooh. Nice place."

"Demyx? Is that you?!" asked lenzo. He was from the Organization; how could he have made it all the way in here...?

"Hey, Zexion! Long time!" Despite lenzo's apprehension, Demyx cheerfully lifted a hand in greeting, then set his burden on the floor. "How's humanity treatin' ya? I rejoined the Nobodies, but, like... I just can't shake the feeling that I've been sweet-talked, y'know? We have sooo got to have a chat."

"Whoa, back up. What?" lenzo was slightly confused.

Perhaps intending to confuse him even more, Demyx continued: "Oh! Sorry, sorry. I'm gettin' ahead of myself. I'm actually here on a top secret mission. Apparently, I'm so off everyone's radar that I'm just the guy to handle a special delivery." The dark portal behind him was still open, and Demyx gestured back toward it with a flourish. "Ta-daaa!"

Someone stepped out of the corridor. That someone was—

"Master Ansem!" lenzo gasped.

"Ah, well met, little lenzo," Ansem the Wise said with a gentle smile as he slowly stepped into the lab.

Dilan and Aeus burst into the room, alarmed by all the commotion.

lenzo's eyes drifted to the floor, and his shoulders trembled. "They told me you'd gone mad. That you'd abandoned us. I was just a little boy, but I should have known better. I am truly, deeply sorry."

Ansem the Wise quietly placed his hands on lenzo's shoulders, then lifted the boy's face so he could see his eyes.

"I think what matters is that you recognize the mistake. Peace, lenzo. It was I who was consumed by hatred—who failed you in my obligations as your mentor. Forgive me."

lenzo, Dilan, and Aelean listened in silence.

"So, uh...are we cool to get on with things here?" said Demyx as he popped his head between lenzo and Ansem, ruining the quiet moment. He now had everyone's attention, at least. "Got ya a present from Vexen. One was all he could manage for the time being, but hey, he figured you guys would know what to do with it."

"A vessel!" lenzo exclaimed as he examined the bundle Demyx had delivered.



Chapter 13

A S H O R T R E S T

Chapter 13

A Short Rest

NINE PEOPLE HAD GATHERED BEFORE YEN SID IN the Mysterious Tower.

“At last, we are all assembled. First: Sora, Riku, Donald, Goofy, Mickey, I cannot thank you enough for what you have done.”

The five bowed their heads.

Yen Sid’s owlish eyes moved to two others. “And you, Aqua and Ventus: We are fortunate to have you back.”

“Thanks. I only wish we could have returned to help sooner.” Aqua turned to the others beside her and lowered her head in thanks. “We’re grateful to all of you for rescuing us.”

“Thank you,” Ventus added.

“I feel bad for letting you guys down. We tried, but we still haven’t found Terra,” said Mickey, somewhat downcast.

“Don’t. He studied with Master Eraqus, just like us. He’s our responsibility.” Aqua looked over at Ventus, and the two shared a reaffirming nod.

“Mickey told me that you saved me in the realm of darkness,” Riku said. “I should have gone to help you right away. But I was too inexperienced. I’m sorry. I know that I let you down.” Some time ago now, he had worked with Sora, Mickey, Donald, and Goofy to seal the door to the Kingdom Hearts of this world.

Aqua shook her head. “No, just the opposite.”

“Did ya know Riku’s a true Keyblade Master now?” Goofy interjected proudly from the side.

“That’s wonderful,” said Aqua with a smile.

“The king, too,” Donald told her.

“Good for you!”

Mickey laughed bashfully at the compliment. Back when Aqua had been on her quest, Mickey had still been a Keyblade wielder in training.



“But Sora needs work,” Donald added pointedly.

Sora was none too happy about the comment. “Yeah, rub it in...”

Everyone had a little chuckle.

Aqua turned to Sora. “I’m happy to see you haven’t changed one bit.”

“Huh?” Sora was confused. *How would she know if I’ve changed? Did I meet her somewhere before?*

“Sora, you probably don’t remember...”

“Um... Uhhhhhh...” Sora scratched his head, trying as hard as he could to remember.

“It’s okay.” Aqua’s high spirits weren’t dampened by his forgetfulness.

Axel, who had not been participating in this conversation at all, cleared his throat.

Yen Sid responded at once. “Ah yes. Let us not forget our new Keyblade wielders. Lea, Kairi, you have made tremendous strides.”

“Hey there. And that’s ‘future Keyblade Master’ —”

“Kairi?” Aqua reacted to the name, cutting off Axel mid-sentence. She ran over to Kairi and looked at the pendant on her chest. “Incredible! It *is* you.”

“You know her?” asked Mickey.

“When you and I first met in Radiant Garden, the Unversed tried to attack a little girl. Do you remember?”

“Oh, gosh! That little girl was Kairi?”

Aqua and Mickey’s discussion of these past events still didn’t ring any bells for Kairi.

“I guess it must have worked—the spell that I cast on you.”

“I’m sorry. Those days are hazy for me. But it sounds like I’d have been in trouble without you. So thank you.” Kairi bowed her head toward a smiling Aqua.

“Please. You were really very little. Anyone would forget, hazy memory or

not.”

Still an outsider to all of this, Axel cleared his throat again and interjected. “This is all very touching, guys, but where do I fit in? Ven looks just like Roxas—or is it Roxas looks just like Ven? And now I have to explain all of that to him—which is in itself a crazy long story—and apparently, everybody already knows everyone, and this is an insane amount to get memorized!” he complained with increasing frustration.

“Sorry, Lea,” replied Ventus.

“You remember me?” asked Axel, pointing a finger at his temple the way he often did.

“Yeah, ’course! We’re friends. I can’t believe you became a Keyblade wielder just like me.”

“Yeah...” Axel’s irritation softened into a smile.

“Axel, you know Ven?” Sora asked, but that only confused Ventus.

“Axel? Who’s Axel?”

“See, see, see? Major brain ache,” complained the former Nobody.

Then Jiminy hopped out of Sora’s hood.

“Now who?” Axel gasped in surprise.

Jiminy had something to tell everyone. “Not to worry, folks. To help us out, I’ve given each of you a Gummiphone. They’ve got summaries of everything that’s happened so far. That way, you can read up, if you like. And if anyone has any questions, we can call each other.”

Basically, if anybody was confused about their situation or their companions, they could find the information there.

“That’s our Jiminy.”

“He’s always prepared.”

Jiminy puffed his chest out proudly at Donald and Goofy’s praise.

“Welp, we’ve got our seven guardians,” said Mickey happily, but Sora still looked troubled.

“Yeah. But...I do wish that Roxas, and Naminé, and Terra could be here with us, too.”

“Since when do you mope, Sora?” Riku nudged. “Come on. Terra’s gotta be with the Organization. Which means we’ll have a chance to save him.”

“Leave it to Ven and I,” said Aqua. “We’ll bring him home.”

Ventus was just as determined as she was. “Yeah, I made Terra a promise. I said I’d be there for him when he needs me.”

“And I’ll figure Roxas out,” added Axel. “Don’t know how, but...I’ll get him back.”

Beside him, Kairi placed a hand to her chest. “Naminé is right here, safe with me. I know that we’ll find a way to help her. Trust me—I’m not giving up.”

“Kairi’s right. We’re all in this together, Sora,” said Mickey in a gentle voice.

“And Donald and I are no Keyblade wielders, but we’ll always be right there to help keep ya steady. We’ve got your back, not just now, but always,” Goofy said to his friend.

All eyes in the room were on Sora now.

Yeah. Guess I’m really not alone, am I?

As a warm feeling grew in Sora’s chest, Donald gave a little tug on the leg of his pants.

“Three half-pints make a whole!”

“That again?”

Everyone laughed at Sora’s annoyed reaction.

Yen Sid soon brought everyone back to the task at hand. “It is a shame that all of our friends could not be here. But our seven guardians of light have united. Perhaps you might say that we have nine guardians, with Donald and Goofy. Given time, I know the others will soon stand with us.”

“Yeah.”

Yen Sid smiled softly at Sora’s response, then continued. “Today, you recuperate. On the morrow, you journey to the fated place.”

“Right!” the heroes chorused.

Aqua and Ventus descended the steps of the tower together beneath a dark sky twinkling with distant lights.

“The stars here are so beautiful. I noticed it when we arrived.”

“Yes,” Aqua agreed, then joined him in looking upward. That starry expanse was the Ocean Between they had once traversed.

“We’ve gone without this for so long.”

“I know.”

Ventus seated himself on the steps next to Aqua. “I remember dreaming a lot. Of you and Terra. Of Sora and his friends, too, I think. And there were some people I didn’t recognize. Oh, and I saw these weird animal creatures! It’s like... I’ve been part of some big adventure.”

Aqua sat down beside Ventus and hugged her knees to her chest. “I’ve been places, too. But pretty soon...things’ll be back to normal.” She sounded almost as if she was trying to convince herself that was true.

Ventus’s reaction was to pull his Wayfinder out of his pocket and hold it up to the stars. The little charm was a symbol of their friendship, one Aqua had made for him back before they parted ways. Terra should still have his, too.

“Let’s share stories when Terra’s back,” Ventus said.

Aqua pulled out her own Wayfinder, held it to the sky, and nodded.

Above them, the stars filling the heavens glittered and shone.

Meanwhile, in Twilight Town, a woman in a black cloak walked down a street lit dimly by the light of the setting sun. The woman was Maleficent, and Pete was nagging at her again.

“I’ve had it with this stupid treasure hunt! Every box we’ve found has been nothin’ but a bust.”

“I agree. Our search ends today,” she replied without even looking at her companion.

“What-a-huh now?!”

“You cannot find the unfindable. The box does not exist,” Maleficent explained, still looking off somewhere into the distance.

“I *knew* they was takin’ us for a ride!”

The fairy struck her staff against the ground and finally turned toward Pete. “Silence, imbecile,” she snapped. “I mean the box does not exist *now*.”

“Is that some kinda riddle? Just where we s’posed to be lookin’?”

“Light and darkness are fated to clash. A Keyblade War is upon us. We need only wait for that destined moment. No matter the victors, the box will be revealed,” Maleficent answered, then turned away.

Pete still didn’t seem to understand. “That’s it?! But when’s *my* big moment?”

“You will have it soon enough. Once I possess the box, our real work can begin.”

Her back still turned to Pete, Maleficent opened the way to the Corridors of Darkness and passed through.

“Ugh...!”

Pete hurried after her.

Also in Twilight Town at around the same time, Axel was taking a bite from a sea-salt ice cream bar and watching the sunset from the clocktower. He was holding two more bars in addition to his own.

“Well, Roxas...I shoulda been there for you by now, but here we are,” he said into the dusk.

Just then, he sensed someone behind him.

“Shouldn’t you say good-bye to your *real* home?” asked a man wearing a black coat just like Axel’s own—Saïx.

“Why...?”

“I’m not here to fight. Relax.”

Saïx sat down next to Axel, then plucked one of the ice cream bars from his hand.

“Hey!”

“You can’t eat all this. Why did you buy three of them? One for Roxas and two for good luck?” asked Saïx, his tone light and free of any hostility as he started in on the ice cream.

“I dunno. Because I felt like it, okay? Why are you here?” Axel looked away from Saïx and returned to his own bar.

“Got it memorized?” Saïx said, using Axel’s catchphrase. “Back when we were still friends, we used to sneak into the castle.”

Axel nodded. “Yeah...”

Back when we were still friends, huh? Guess that means we aren’t now.

“And we made a friend there, a girl. We apprenticed to Ansem the Wise to rescue her.”

“Yeah, and we failed. One day she was just gone!” Axel snapped in a way that was reminiscent of his younger self.

“You gave up.”

“I did not give up,” Axel retorted, stopping to think for a moment. His eyes looked off in some direction away from both Saïx and the sunset. “One day we’re apprentices, the next Ansem the Wise has up and vanished, the day after we’re Nobodies, day after that we’re doing icky jobs for Xemnas. I couldn’t keep up with you.”

While Axel threw his hands up in the air as he spoke, ice cream and all, Saïx simply stared forward and worked on eating his own bar.

“Following Xehanort’s Nobody was the only way to discover what happened to her. She was his lab rat.”

Axel pointed the untouched sea-salt ice cream in his left hand at Saïx and said, “So? You found her? I helped you rise up in the ranks, so I hope it paid off.”

“I’m afraid not. Nary a trace. I started to wonder if we’d imagined her. Maybe she never existed. And then, in time, I awakened to a new purpose. I realized I could be stronger.”



This time Axel gestured with both of the frozen treats in his hands. “Well then, you blew it! Wise up already and just quit.”

Saïx merely regarded him quietly. “Face it. Roxas is just like our other friend. Gone forever. You need to accept that.”

“You wish. I’m getting her back. All of ’em! Especially Roxas! I’m even dragging *you* home.”

Despite the desperation in Axel’s voice, Saïx merely finished his ice cream and got to his feet. “The marks under your eyes. They’re gone.”

Axel was taken aback for a second. “Yeah. Don’t need ’em.”

“Always told you they’d stop you from crying. The upside-down tears,” Saïx said with a smile.

Axel waved his ice cream around in irritation. “Would you get lost? I’ll clobber you tomorrow.”

“I expect no less.”

Darkness swirled around Saïx as he made his exit.

Axel was left alone, staring into the sinking sun with his two ice cream bars.

Riku sat on one of the sandy beaches of the Destiny Islands, gazing at a sunset of his own.

He, Sora, and Kairi had chosen to return to their home on the eve of the battle.

“How long have you known that I was with you?” someone asked next to him.

Riku looked over to the side. “You *did* save me.”

There sat his own Replica, who only replied with a derisive snort.

“I think you came along for a reason,” Riku mused. He realized then that the Replica beside him wasn’t really there, but was in his heart.

“I didn’t make much of myself as a Replica. I was a failure, and after you and Sora moved on, my body fell to ruin and the darkness took my broken mind. I was all ready to give up and let it happen, and then you showed up.”

“You took that as a sign?” Riku asked the Replica with a smile.

“Maybe. I’d rather face my end with you than in darkness.”

“That’s...what you want?”

Riku recalled what they’d said to each other back then, before they fought each other for the last time.

“Because I’m you.”

“No, I’m me.”

“‘I’m me,’ he says. Must be nice being real.”

You weren’t wrong. You found your way back to me, because you are me.

“Yeah. But I’m not done yet. Got one last thing to see through.” The Replica looked out at the sunset.

“Take the time you need,” said Riku, joining him in watching the horizon.

Meanwhile, Sora had turned to look at Riku.

“Hey, why’s Riku all alone?” he asked.

Kairi sat beside him on the branch of the paopu tree. Back before their adventure began, this was where they’d come to talk about all sorts of things.

“He said he needed time to himself. Let’s let him be.”

“Okay...,” Sora replied, but he was clearly still worried about Riku. After all, his friend was sitting over there alone on the beach, but it really looked like he was having a conversation with someone...

Suddenly, something appeared in Sora’s face.

“Here!”

“Huh?”

It was a star-shaped paopu fruit.

“Tomorrow’s fight will be our toughest yet,” Kairi said with an earnest expression. “I want to be a part of your life no matter what. That’s all.”

The legend of the paopu fruit—it said that if two people gave each other the

fruit to eat, their lives would never be truly separate again. No matter how far apart they may go, they would always find their way back to each other.

Sora accepted the paopu fruit from Kairi. She held another of the fruits in her other hand.

“Kairi, I’ll keep you safe.”

Kairi shook her head and answered, “Let *me* keep you safe.”

The two of them offered the paopu fruit to each other, took a bite, then shared a smile.

The setting sun shone down on the two of them—on those here in their world.



Nine heroes stepped onto a barren, windswept land.

“It’s time. The Keyblade Graveyard is up ahead,” Mickey informed them.

Everyone nodded, directing their eyes toward their destination.

“Someone’s coming,” Sora announced softly.

Beyond a cloud of dust, Master Xehanort approached them across the wasteland, his pace calm and unhurried.

He stopped before the assembled heroes and began to speak:

“Legend has it that darkness once covered the world. We know so little about the Keyblade War—only that it was just the beginning. If ruin brings about creation, what, then, would another Keyblade War bring? When the darkness falls, will we be found worthy of the precious light the legend speaks of?”

Ansem appeared beside Master Xehanort. “Or will all of creation be instead returned to the shadows? Today, we will re-create the legend and see.”

Next, Xemnas stepped forward, taking his place on the other side of Master Xehanort. “But first... Your light shines far too brightly. It must be extinguished in order for the truth to be seen.”

Vanitas appeared in front of the previous three. “Only when your hopes have been broken by battle upon battle can the key be claimed to Kingdom Hearts.”

“And break you is what we shall do,” said Young Xehanort, who had appeared next to Vanitas. “It has been etched.”

Darkness flowed from the five villains and surrounded the whole area, blocking out the sky itself. The cloud opened, and countless Heartless, Nobodies, and Unversed began raining down upon Sora and the other guardians of light.

“Look at how many there are!” Sora summoned his Keyblade and prepared to defend himself.

“Okay, gang, get ready!” Mickey cried out as the number of Heartless grew and grew.

All the heroes got their weapons ready for battle. The number of creatures

surrounding them was fast growing into a near-endless horde. Sora thought back to the exhausting battle he had faced in the Hollow Bastion. *But I wasn't alone then, and I'm not alone now. With all my friends together, we can win this.*

A quick glance showed him Riku, Donald and Goofy, Aqua and Ventus, Axel, and Kairi all locked in combat.

After managing to clear out the Heartless in their immediate vicinity, Sora and the others paused to catch their breath.

"Is everybody okay?" asked Mickey as he surveyed the team. When he saw that they were, he relaxed somewhat with relief.

"C'mon, let's go," Sora called out. But just as they were about to get moving, yet another figure appeared in the distance.

Ventus was the first to notice. "Terra!" he shouted, running off before anyone could get a word in.

Aqua started after him, calling his name with a hint of apprehension. Ventus was unaware that Terra's body was under Xehanort's control.

"Terra! We found you!" Ventus exclaimed as he took his friend's hand.

In a rather more cautious voice, Aqua pleaded, "Terra, please say you're in there."

Instead of replying, Terra observed her quietly. His blue eyes seemed to stare right through her, and she placed a hand on Ventus's shoulder to draw him away.

"What gives, Aqua?"

"I know that you're not him," she said as she placed herself before Ventus protectively. "Now, let our friend go!"

That was when Terra's hair turned white, and his blue eyes turned to gold.

"He *is* their thirteenth," Mickey said softly.

"Today is the day you all lose," Terra-Xehanort quietly told the nine heroes.

"What?!" Aqua cried.

A dark fog began to congeal behind Terra-Xehanort. “Before you even face the thirteen, every last one of you will be torn heart from body. But fear not. The χ-Blade will still be forged.”

Terra-Xehanort called his Keyblade to his hand. Beyond the dark fog, atop the cliffs looming above the wasteland, countless Keyblades stood thrust into the terrain like grave markers.

“We’re not gonna lose to you.”

With a smirk at Sora’s challenge, Terra-Xehanort launched himself at Ventus, closing the distance in a single moment, and dealt the boy a devastating blow with his Keyblade. Ventus was sent flying and crashed to the ground in a cloud of dust.

“Ven!” Aqua gasped.

“That’s it!” Sora shouted as he charged at their foe. But Terra-Xehanort caught Sora’s strike on his Keyblade and sent him sprawling on the dirt as well.

Terra-Xehanort next set his sights on Kairi, lunging for her. Axel threw himself in front of her, but he, too, ended up cast to one side.

“Axel!”

Terra-Xehanort held his Keyblade over Kairi’s head, poised to strike. Scrambling to his feet, Sora rushed over and threw his arms around her protectively.

“No! Sora!” Mickey shouted as Donald and Goofy rushed past him to either side.

Goofy’s shield found its way in front of Terra-Xehanort’s Keyblade just before it could connect with Sora. The clash sent both of them staggering back, while Donald poured his magic into a spell so powerful it created glowing emblems on the ground beneath him:

“Zettaflare!”

A tremendous beam of light shot from Donald’s staff straight into Terra-Xehanort, cascading over him and blasting him away. Utterly exhausted, Donald collapsed, and Goofy and Mickey hurried over to him.

Aqua checked on Ventus, while Riku and Kairi went to aid Axel.

“This can’t be real,” Sora whispered.

They were completely out of their depth. He could hardly believe what he’d just seen; Terra-Xehanort had taken down three of them with almost no effort at all.

And another dark whirlpool was growing beyond his fallen friends, releasing another wave of Heartless.

Riku ran over to Sora and took him by the shoulder. “Pull it together, Sora! We haven’t lost them. They still have their hearts. But we have to protect them.”

“Right!” Sora agreed with a nod. *Riku knows. We can’t let ‘em stop us here.*

The stream of countless Heartless in front of them swirled upward in a vortex.

“We stand together,” said Aqua as she came to join them, Keyblade in hand. She looked back at the king. “Mickey, Kairi, Goofy, watch the others.”

“No, we should all get to safety while we still can,” the king pleaded from where he knelt beside Donald.

Watching the storm building in the sky, Riku replied, “It’s too late for that.”

Masses of Heartless wove through the ravines, congealing into a colossal river that rushed straight at them. The legion of Heartless—the Demon Tide—was so enormous they could hardly understand what they were seeing. This was nothing like anything they had seen in the realm of darkness. Everyone looked on in stunned amazement as the Demon Tide reared into the sky like a whirlwind.

“It can’t be... No...”

The memories from her time in the darkness were rising in Aqua’s mind. The nightmarish Heartless that came back again and again no matter how many times she struck them down...had been just like this.

Perhaps sensing this sudden weakness in her mind, the storm of Heartless swept over her.

“Aqua!” Riku shouted. He watched as the Demon Tide swallowed up Mickey, Goofy, Donald, and the rest in one fell swoop. Kairi knelt, protecting Axel, but she was quickly carried away, too.

Her hand reached for Sora’s—but their fingers passed through empty air.

What should I do? What can I do? Everyone’s gone. I don’t know what to do anymore.

As the strength left Sora’s body, his Keyblade slipped from his grasp and vanished.

What can I possibly do?

Sora dropped to his knees and screamed, falling forward onto his hands in the dust.

“Sora!” Riku hurried over to his friend.

“They’re gone. Kairi, Donald...Goofy, the king... Gone forever.” Sora raised his head slowly, eyes brimming with tears. “What do we do? Without them... I... All my strength came from them. They gave me all of it. Alone, I’m worthless. We’ve lost... It’s over.” Sora’s voice was choked with tears.

Riku considered comforting Sora with a hand on his shoulder, but he chose to get to his feet instead. “Sora, you don’t believe that. I know you don’t,” he assured him, then walked toward the Demon Tide to face it himself.

As Sora watched, the Heartless attacked, and Riku took the full brunt of it head-on. The flood of Heartless split in two against Riku’s Keyblade, streaming out around them to either side. But not even that was enough—eventually, the darkness swallowed him, too.

Sora gasped—and then the world went black.

And so, as foretold, darkness prevailed, and light expired...

Two young men sat before a game board in a room filled with warm light.

A lone white chess piece sat on the board, surrounded by thirteen black ones; the formation suggested that it had been sent into the enemy ranks alone.

“Checkmate,” said the boy in black, setting one of his black pieces before his

opponent's lonely king.

The other boy, dressed in white, stared intently at the board.

"And so darkness prevails, and light expires. You need a new strategy."

"My move, isn't it?" the boy in white—Eraqus—softly replied. He then moved his remaining white piece back into his own territory.

"Huh?" gasped Xehanort—the boy in black.

"It's not over."

"C'mon. That's not fair. I know I had you."

True, he should have won. However, in this game, "checkmate" was a position with one final move remaining. If Xehanort captured his opponent's last piece on his next move, the game would end. Even if Eraqus returned his piece back to his own side of the board, Xehanort would still be able to take it on his next turn.

"Yes, you nearly did. But a game's no fun if you know where it's going. There's more to light than meets the eye. I told you," Eraqus said, and seven new pieces appeared at the edge of the board to protect his remaining piece. He grinned. "Some light comes from the past."

The game isn't over yet.



Chapter 14

THE FINAL WORLD

Chapter 14

The Final World

“WHERE AM I?”

Sora stood up and looked around. He had no idea where he was, only that it was somewhere very bright and that he could hear water. It felt like the sky and sea spread out forever around him, but even that was uncertain. He didn't know if what he saw was really a sea at all or just...water. Water that stretched so far he couldn't see the shore. There was a sun overhead, too, shining down.

What happened to me? Did I...fall into the darkness?

As Sora started walking, each step created a little splash. The clouds in the sky above were reflected in the water at his feet.

Suddenly, a voice spoke to him from somewhere. The voice was high and unfamiliar.

“Can't stay away, now, can you?”

“Hello?” Sora called.

A speck of light drifted down from above and released a bright flash as it landed in the water, revealing a little creature that looked like a cat-shaped plush toy.

It looked up at Sora. “The name's Chirithy, and this is the Final World.”

“I'm Sora. What's the...‘Final World’?”

“Final”? I've thought things were coming to an end plenty of times, but maybe this is the true end...?

Chirithy had the answer. “There's nothing else beyond this. You've wandered here more than once before on your visits to the Station of Awakening, buuut...I let that slide. The edges of sleep and death touch, and one can't help the occasional crossover.”

But Sora latched on to one of the words Chirithy said. “Wait, ‘death’?”

Am I...dead?

“Yes. The natural end for those whose hearts and bodies perish together. But some persist and arrive here.”

“My heart and body perished? Um, does that mean...?” Sora couldn’t make heads or tails of any of this, so he just said what came first to his mind.

Both my heart and body perished, but I’m persisting? Does that mean I’m not dead, then?

“Something is holding you here—refusing to let you go. You’re hanging by a thread.”

“What about my friends?” Sora asked. It was the most important question on his mind.

“I’m afraid that no one else arrived with you. And if they’re not here, they’re either gone forever, or they’re clinging to the world you came from.”

Sora summoned his Keyblade to his hand. “I’m going back!”

Chirithy called to Sora as he started to run off. “Whoa, whoa! How, exactly? You can’t just wander out like your other visits.”

“What?” Sora stopped and looked back at the little creature.

“I told you. The other times, you came here by your own choice. This time is very different. To become your old self again and return to the real world, you’ll have to piece yourself back together in this world first.”

“Agh! Why am I in pieces?!” Sora checked himself over frantically. *Wait, I haven’t really looked at myself since I came to this place. I’ve still got a body... kinda, but it’s transparent. So it’s gone, but not really?*

“What? No, not literally, of course. You’re conceptually in pieces. On the inside, who knows? But on the outside, you’re just fine.”

“Oh, okay. You kinda freaked me out there!” Sora sent his Keyblade away, sounding much more like himself.

“Oh, boy...” Chirithy sighed, but Sora didn’t seem to hear. Pulling itself

together, the little catlike being looked back up at Sora. “Usually, only a heart can reach the Final World. But since you’ve clearly managed to retain some kind of form, that can only mean your body was cast into this world as well.”

“Okay, so...then if I can find my body, that means I’ll be able to go back?”

“Precisely. But there’s a lot of you to find. You’re going to be busy,” Chirithy said, then disappeared in a bright flash.

None of that really gives me any idea where to start, though...

Sora looked up and saw himself off in the distance—quite a few of himself, in fact.

He chased after one of them, and when he finally caught it, it turned into light and absorbed into his body. After catching several of the other Soras, he spotted a cluster of glowing crystals. They danced together in the nebulous form of a star, but they seemed ready to scatter at any moment. Sora brushed his fingers against one of them.

“That’s strange. I’m running and running, but I can’t get to Papa. Oh! This is hide-and-seek! I love hide-and-seek! I’m going to find Papa. He’ll be so proud.”

“Uh, hello?” Sora said, but the star didn’t seem to realize he was there.

“Hmm...I can’t seem to find him. I give up, Papa! Come out! Come out! ...I’ve looked so hard for him. Isn’t he looking for me? Wait, that’s Papa’s voice. I hear his voice! It’s that light! I understand, now. I have to run toward that light!” The star fell silent.

Sora thought back on what Chirithy had told him, that his was a world that normally only hearts could reach.

He decided to try speaking to another of the stars.

“Hello?”

“Oh, good. If you’re speaking to me, I suppose I must exist. I feel a consciousness. Or memories, perhaps. Feelings. They pass through my mind one after the next, but none of it feels real. And that was fine. I’d resigned myself to simply forget. To let it all slip away.”

“What do you mean?” Sora asked.

The star simply glimmered. “But there was one piece I couldn’t let go of—a fragment I couldn’t forget. Maybe that sliver of memory is what’s kept me here this whole time...”

The star went quiet, as if whatever had been holding it here had at last vanished.

Sora kept catching more of his copies, stopping to speak to more stars here and there.

“Did I matter?” asked one. “Was I ever there at all? I thought I’d found my place, surrounded by people I trusted. But look there. I’m gone, yet they go on meeting up just the same. Hmm? The table’s set wrong. There’s too many glasses... Oh. Added a new member, have they? That didn’t take long. That was my seat. That was *my* place at the table. Their glasses against the newcomer’s, one after the next. No, this is not my place. Maybe it never was.”

“Whoever said love and hate are two sides of the same coin is a liar,” said another. “The second our eyes would meet, we were at each other’s throats, every time. The idea of us as friends is laughable. I’m finally on my own here, and what a relief! Just...not as big a relief as I’d thought. It’s weird. Something’s just...missing. Ugh, is that how this works? Did I keep going back for another fight just so we could spend the time together? Maybe it’s not as simple as ‘like’ or ‘hate.’ The heart’s a complex thing. Wonder if he feels lonely, too... Takes two to have a fight, after all.”

“We spent so many years together. A lifetime. It wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows, of course. We had our share of troubles. Sorrows, too. But all of it is dear to me now, every minute we had. We got to experience so much. I have no regrets. At least, that’s what I thought... Special occasions may stand out, but there’s nothing so precious as the quiet days between them. That’s what life is, really.”

“‘I have nothing left to teach you.’ I thought those words would make him happy, but it was sorrow that clouded his face. I had shared all I know, my every technique. What more did he seek from me? I never heard the answer. Time passed on, and...here we are. But now, since we’ve parted, I think I understand. He wanted the same thing I did. This wasn’t just about passing on knowledge. It

was a communion. A connecting of hearts.”

None of the stars interacted with Sora. After they had said their piece, they became completely unresponsive.

Sora also noticed that his body was, bit by bit, beginning to feel more real again. He couldn’t quite see through himself anymore, either.

He tried talking to another of the glittering stars.

“Hello?”

“Good day,” the star replied.

“Oh, cool! You can talk.” Sora was delighted to receive a greeting in return after most of the other stars hadn’t acknowledged him at all.

“You look like a person. How is it that you retain your appearance? Are you special?”

The star had the voice of a girl. Sora didn’t recognize her, but she sounded slightly uneasy.

“Um... I’m a little hazy on the details.”

“As are we all,” the star said, then simply glimmered quietly.

“So whose heart are you?”

If she was just a heart—then where exactly was her body?

“No one’s anymore. They took away my name—everything about me.”

“No way. They couldn’t have taken away your heart,” Sora exclaimed. After all, if she was here speaking with him now, that was proof she still existed.

“Only because it pines for another.”

“Yeah? Someone’s coming for you?” Sora asked.

“I cannot be certain. He’s been changed beyond recognition—his heart replaced with another’s. But were he to regain his old self, he would be distressed by my absence. So I choose to wait here, where he can find me.”

Her strong conviction reminded Sora of someone... But who? Who did she remind him of?

“Good. You have to believe.”

Sora looked closely at the glowing apparition. *She really doesn't give up—it's a lot like Aqua. But there's someone else she makes me think of more...*

“Believe? Oh, you mean know in my heart that he will return? Without any proof?”

“Exactly, *believe*. I thought it was all over for me, but a friend of mine looked me in the eye and said, ‘You don't believe that.’”

The glimmer of star giggled and shimmered at Sora's words of encouragement.

“So, uh...who did this to you? Heartless steal hearts...so a Nobody?”

“A...somebody.”

“Really? Hmm... Well, I wish I could help...but my situation's no better.” Sora sat down beside the star and looked skyward.

“You must see to the tasks before you first.”

“The tasks before me? There's so many.”

The star twinkled in a way that somehow suggested a smile. “All the more reason for you to make an effort.”

“Yeah. You're right. I just wish I knew what to do,” said Sora anxiously. He had yet to see any other people in this world, and even if he did, they would probably just be stars like his conversation partner here.

The glowing star-girl had more to say. “Here you are on the brink, and yet you hold on to who you are. You possess a strong sense of purpose. And in that purpose you will find direction.”

“Thank you,” replied Sora, taking her words to heart. He got to his feet. “I'm really glad we met. You cheer me up. I hope that your friend finds you soon.”

The star-girl twinkled happily and said, “Thank you. Me too.”

“Oh, hey. If I see him, I'll tell him that you're here. What's his name?” Sora asked. The star drifted a little closer to his ear and told him.

“Our secret,” she then said, and fell silent like the other stars.

Who was she?

Barely a moment passed before a giant platform rose up beneath Sora, like a huge boulder made of solid ice. The mass was followed by more like it in sizes great and small, piling up in what came to resemble some sort of structure.

Inside it were even more Soras than before.

“Okay, time to go catch some more!”

Sora began chasing down his copies with gusto. Some of the Soras flew, some sat upside down, while others dashed about willy-nilly.

And during his pursuit, Sora bumped into another star.

The star addressed him by name. “Sora?”

Hey—I’ve heard this voice before. But I can’t remember where...

“Yes?”

“It’s me, Naminé,” the star said back.

“Naminé?” Sora said in shock.

“I’m so glad that you managed to hold on to who you are.” The star glimmered and did a little spin.

“Why are you here?” Sora asked.

“I was in Kairi’s heart, but then we were struck by a powerful darkness...and I woke up here.”

Naminé’s answer worried him. If Naminé had been inside of Kairi and she was here now, did that mean...?

“And Kairi?” he asked.

“I can feel her heart. She’s fighting with all her strength to keep you from fading away,” the star-shaped Naminé said in a soft, gentle voice.

“So the reason I retained my form in this place—”

“It’s because she’s holding you together. Go to her,” Naminé quickly finished for him.

“I’m trying. But what about you? I can’t just leave you stuck here.”

The star-shaped Naminé released a little sparkle of light. “It’s okay. Really. Kairi is where I came from. So once she’s safe again, Kairi is where I’ll return.”

Sora had more to say. “Naminé, I know that I’m supposed to thank you. The datascape doesn’t count. I need to say the words myself. But...not like this. You and Roxas can’t tell me you’re okay with this. I know how much you’re hurting. I...felt that pain through Roxas.”



He had no idea what expression Naminé would have been wearing if she still had a form.

The star-Naminé shimmered for a moment before speaking. “He’s the one they all miss. It’s...not me.”

Sora quickly disagreed. “Wrong. What about me, Kairi, Donald, Goofy? The king! Roxas, too, he misses you! And someone else special I know won’t let you down.”

I want to see you, too, Naminé.

“Sora. Thank you.”

You’ve done so much more for me than I’ve ever done for you...but I need to thank you properly. I have to bring you back from Kairi. And if I’m going to do that, I need to restore myself.

Sora took a step toward the many other Soras still off in the distance.

“Well then, I’m gonna go save Kairi so at least you’ll be free of this place. Okay?”

He was about to hurry off when Naminé called out to him.

“Oh, wait!”

“Huh?”

“While sifting through memories, I spoke to Terra, the Keyblade wielder you’ve been looking for. He has a strong will, and it keeps him tethered to the realm of light. I’ll try tracing that connection. Maybe that’ll be enough to tip the scales in the other direction.”

Naminé brought up an interesting fact that Sora had completely missed.

“Huh?” he said.

Naminé met Terra...?

“Um... Let’s just say I’ve got your back?” she said to Sora. Her tone suggested she was smiling gently.

“That part of you—it reminds me of Kairi. Thanks, Naminé. Oh! That’s not the

official thank-you!”

“Uh-huh.” She twinkled, seemingly pleased by Sora’s words.

“Well, see ya!”

“Be careful,” Naminé called out to him as he got on his way.

Sora continued collecting the fragments of himself.

“Sheesh, why are there so many of me?!” Sora grumbled at the seemingly endless numbers.

He leaped down from where he had been standing—all the giant boulders vanished, leaving only the sky and shallow water from before.

Then, a light drifted down toward him, a light he recognized. When it touched the water, Chirithy appeared in a flash.

“I see that you found them all.”

“Yup!” Sora exclaimed, striking a triumphant pose.

But Chirithy’s reaction wasn’t so cheerful. “Then isn’t it time that you left?”

“Oh, thanks,” Sora said, a bit miffed.

“What? I’m doing you a big favor here, you know. Don’t push it.”

Chirithy was getting grumpy, but Sora didn’t let it get to him. Instead, he asked something that had been on his mind.

“Hey, Chirithy. You still look like you, right? Would you like me to help you find *your* pieces?”

“Oh, I don’t work like that.”

“So, like...you’re waiting for someone to rescue you?” Sora asked, thinking back to Naminé.

“Mmm...sort of?”

“Well, tell me who! I’ll find ’em.”

Sora cupped a hand behind his ear and leaned toward Chirithy, expecting a whispered answer like the one from the star-girl. But the little catlike creature didn’t seem to want to share the name.

“Uh, no no no no, that’s okay. He doesn’t remember the past. Besides, I’m sure he’s happier with his new friends. But I’ll wait. He’ll arrive here one day.” Chirithy apparently had its own view on the situation.

“Okay... I’ll be back here to visit you,” Sora said, bending down a little bit to get a better look at Chirithy.

“What?!” Chirithy yelped, taking a step back.

“You and me are friends now.”

Friends—Chirithy glanced downward for a second before meeting Sora’s gaze again. It seemed to be remembering something from long ago. “Really? I’ve missed having friends.”

“Well, see ya ’round! And thanks!” Sora turned and was about to leave when he paused for a moment.

Chirithy watched him curiously.

“Um... Could I get a hint how to save the others?”

“Seriously?” Chirithy seemed a tad exasperated. “Are you a Keyblade wielder or aren’t you? Haven’t you already learned how to restore someone’s heart after it’s been lost?”

“Restore their hearts? Is that the same thing as...the ‘power of waking’?” Sora stopped to think.

“I’m not sure, but...give it a shot?”

“No.” He remembered what Hercules had said. “This’ll take *all* my heart.”

Sora knew what he needed to do now. *As long as I want to help my friends with all my heart—the way will open for me!*

“Okay.”

With a nod of determination, Sora took his Keyblade in both hands and pointed it at the water.

The light formed a Keyhole that then grew into a kaleidoscopic magic symbol, from which light began flowing upward from it into the sky.

“Look for the light in the darkness!” Chirithy shouted to Sora just as he leaped

into the circle. The radiance swallowed Sora up, and then he was gone.

Chirithy gazed up after him and said softly, “May your heart be your guiding key.”

And then, Sora was back in the Keyblade Graveyard.

“Sora, you don’t believe that. I know you don’t.”

Again, Riku strode off to face the Heartless as Sora knelt on the ground. The Demon Tide crashed and split on Riku’s Keyblade, but that didn’t save him. Sora could only watch, reaching out helplessly as his friend was taken from him.

The Demon Tide then engulfed Sora, too, leaving him alone in the darkness.

“Riku!”

That light off in the distance—it has to be Riku. Sora struggled through the darkness to reach it.

“Riku! Answer me!”

Sora fought his way toward the light.

When Sora came to, he was in Olympus—specifically, the home of the gods.

Is Riku here? This place is so empty...

“There’s nobody here...,” Sora muttered softly.

Then someone hopped out of his hood onto the ground and made their presence known. “Gee, I’m here!”

“Jiminy! You’re okay!”

It was Jiminy, his constant companion. Of course he would still be here. Jiminy jumped into Sora’s hands.

“Well, ‘okay’ might be a stretch, but what are we waitin’ for? We need to find the others!”

He’s right. No matter what happens, I’m never alone.

Sora smiled and nodded at the cricket, then started up the steps. Beyond the doors of the temple, Riku floated above a giant brazier.

“Riku!”

His friend's body was transparent, just as his own had been a short time ago. Sora ran up to Riku, thinking maybe he was going to need to go chase down pieces of Riku, too. But before Sora could reach his friend, a Heartless appeared in his path—the Lich. With a skull for a head, it was the picture of a spirit of death. The Lich drew Riku's heart out of his body, bound it in chains, drew it into its body, and fled.

To make matters worse, the Lich left lesser Heartless like Shadows behind it to keep Sora occupied. Sora wasn't about to let that stop him, though. He eventually cornered the Heartless and fought it for Riku's heart.

The battle began up close and personal before switching to magic, and before long, it seemed that Sora had won. But then a dark corridor opened behind the Lich. It left Riku's heart behind, but it managed to escape.

Meanwhile, Riku's heart was flying off in a different direction.

"Hey! Wait!" Sora called after it.

Jiminy hopped onto Sora's shoulder. "There's no need to worry, Sora. He'll return to the place he fell, like you did. We gotta focus on rescuing the others."

Oh, so Riku's heart's just going back home?

"Okay!"

Reassured by his friend's wisdom, Sora plunged into the Corridors of Darkness after the Lich. *It's going after everyone else's hearts—which means if I chase it down, I can bring the others back, too.*

Sora pursued the Lich through passage after dark passage, each one leading him to a world he'd visited before.

He found Aqua in the Caribbean, Goofy in Arendelle, Donald in Monstropolis, Ventus in Toy Box, and Mickey in the Kingdom of Corona before at last defeating the Lich and reclaiming the heart of Axel in San Fransokyo.

However...Sora merely looked up at the city skyline sadly after his victory.

"Well, Sora, I'd say we've been to every world that we can visit," Jiminy commented from his perch on Sora's shoulder.

"But we're one short. Where's Kairi's heart?"

“Gee, I wish I knew.”

Both of them were getting worried.

Just then, the Corridors of Darkness opened to reveal Young Xehanort.

“You!”

Sora tensed up instantly, ready for a fight. Young Xehanort regarded Sora calmly, then smiled.

“All that gallivanting through the Sleeping Worlds, and yet you learned nothing. Dream by dream, you nearly buried yourself in the darkness of sleep. And now you’re at it again?”

Sora recalled his experiences in the Sleeping Worlds. It was true; he had crossed the boundaries of slumber many times in his travels.

“The Lich you’ve been fighting—it’s not like other Heartless. It exists to usher hearts down to the depths of darkness. If you chase it, you will condemn your heart to that same abyss.”

Sora gritted his teeth and pressed a hand to his chest. *The depths of darkness? No, my heart’s here, with me.* “You’re wrong. My heart is strong.”

“What do you think the power of waking is? It’s for traversing hearts to reach worlds. Not for traversing worlds to reach hearts. There’s a high price to pay for wielding such power foolishly.”

His warning delivered, Young Xehanort turned away from Sora.

“So what? You’re worried about *me* now?”

“No. There’s no saving you.”

“...What?”

Sora had no idea what Young Xehanort was getting at. But the Organization did have a habit of trying to psych him out.

Young Xehanort turned back to deliver one final proclamation: “You’ve paid the price. And it lies at the bottom of the abyss.”

He then opened the Corridors of Darkness and vanished.

“Wait!”

Sora was about to give chase, but then he heard the Gummiphone ringing in his pocket.

“Sora!” Jiminy prodded him from his shoulder. Sora took out the phone and answered.

“Hurry, Sora! The way to the Keyblade Graveyard is open!” Chip squeaked excitedly from the screen.

Dale jostled Chip out of the way and added, “Chipper and I found a new path!”

A grin spread on Sora’s face.

“Of course! That’s the one place we haven’t checked yet!”

“Off we go!” Jiminy cheered.

Sora summoned his Keyblade. As when he journeyed to the Keyblade Graveyard from Chirithy’s world, a Keyhole appeared on the ground, and he dived into the opening.

Sora fell through the darkness toward a distant light below.

And next to that light...was Kairi.

“Sora.”

“Kairi!”

The two of them linked their fingers together.

“I found you!” Sora smiled at her. They released each other’s hands and began to drift through the darkness side by side, moving toward the light.

“You see? I had no doubts that you’d pull through.”

“The light in the darkness. It was you. You’re the one who kept me from fading away.”

As a Princess of Heart, Kairi had a miraculous ability.

“All I did was believe that you wouldn’t,” she replied, gazing ahead into the radiance.

“I feel strong with you, Kairi.” Sora grinned, and Kairi answered with a little smile.

She reached out to her left and took Sora’s hand into her own, and the two of them flew straight into the light.

“The others are ahead. Come on.”

As the radiance swept over them, Sora remembered something.

Rapunzel had revived Flynn, and then Anna had saved Elsa.

They were members of the New Seven Hearts. And as it happened, so was Kairi.

They all possessed a very special power to protect those they cared about.

I want to keep my friends safe, too, but if it weren’t for Kairi, I wouldn’t have been able to make it back at all.

“I told you, Sora. You’re safe with me.”

“Yeah.”

Sora went into the light with Kairi leading the way.



Chapter 15

KEYBLADE GRAVEYARD

Chapter 15

Keyblade Graveyard

SORA STOOD ON THE WASTELAND, HIS RIGHT HAND clasped firmly in Kairi's left.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Kairi."

Kairi smiled back at him. When Sora looked around them, he saw that all the others were there, too.

"It *did* work."

I'm so glad.

Sora felt the tight knot of emotions within him slowly coming undone. The despair had threatened to consume him—but it was thanks to all those he saw here now that he had made it back. Sora slowly released his grip on Kairi's hand. Everything was going to be okay.

Donald and Goofy smiled valiantly.

"Of course!"

"Now point us back at those guys!"

Their enthusiasm filled Sora with relief, and he faced forward again. "Right!"

Everyone quickly agreed and got moving. Master Xehanort and his cohorts—the real Organization XIII—awaited them across the wastes.

Ventus was the first to catch sight of the figure up ahead amid the whirling dust. "Terra!" he shouted, running off before anyone could get a word in.

Aqua started after him, calling his name with a hint of apprehension. Ventus was unaware that Terra's body was under Xehanort's control.

"Terra! We found you!" Ventus exclaimed as he took his friend's hand.

In a rather more cautious voice, Aqua said, “Terra, please say you’re in there.”

Instead of replying, Terra observed her quietly. His blue eyes seemed to stare right through her, and she placed a hand on Ventus’s shoulder to draw him away.

“What gives, Aqua?”

“I know that you’re not him,” Aqua said as she placed herself before Ventus protectively. “Now, let our friend go!”

That was when Terra’s hair turned white, and his blue eyes turned to gold.

“He *is* their thirteenth,” Mickey said softly.

“Today is the day you all lose,” Terra-Xehanort quietly told the nine heroes.

“What?!” Aqua cried.

A dark fog began to congeal behind Terra-Xehanort. “Before you even face the thirteen, every last one of you will be torn heart from body. But fear not. The χ-Blade will still be forged.”

Terra-Xehanort called his Keyblade to his hand. Beyond the dark fog, atop the cliffs looming above the wasteland, countless Keyblades stood thrust into the terrain like grave markers.

“We’re not gonna lose to you.”

With a smirk at Sora’s challenge, Terra-Xehanort launched himself at Ventus, closing the distance in a single moment, and dealt the boy a devastating blow with his Keyblade—or he would have, if someone had not intercepted the attack.

“Who are you?”

The one who blocked and knocked away Terra-Xehanort’s Keyblade was a man clad in armor. “Got you, Xehanort,” he said, forcing the possessed figure back.

“Terra?” Aqua said softly. That armor had once belonged to their friend. And what lay within it now...was Terra’s lingering will. Though there was no one physically in the armor now, the thoughts and desires dwelling within it were

still fighting to protect everyone.

“This is impossible!” Terra-Xehanort seemed panicked as the Linging Will strode ominously toward him.

“How I’ve waited for this moment.”

Its Keyblade lashed out like a whip and wrapped around Terra-Xehanort’s weapon, and the Linging Will yanked back its Keyblade with enough force to fling Terra-Xehanort into the air. Terra-Xehanort quickly let go of his ensnared Keyblade and adjusted his trajectory in midair so he could attack his armored foe head-on. But the Linging Will’s Keyblade transformed into what looked like a giant cannon and released a blast of light.

Terra-Xehanort let out a cry of anguish as the beam sent him hurtling back. The Linging Will wasn’t about to let him escape, though. As soon as Terra-Xehanort had recovered his Keyblade, he was forced to fend off a furious assault.

“Terra!”

“No, Ven!”

Aqua stopped Ventus as he tried to join the fray.

“But—”

“Them first,” Aqua said as she turned around. Ventus followed her line of sight to a vast throng of Nobodies, Heartless, and Unversed that practically filled the sky—and it was coming right at them. The ground rumbled and shook as an inky darkness spread—and from it emerged the Demon Tide.

“We’ll hold off the others.”

Aqua and Ventus charged toward the advancing army.

“Okay. We’ve got this!” Sora replied, and then he, Donald, and Goofy turned to take on the Demon Tide. Riku, Mickey, Kairi, and Axel readied their Keyblades for battle as well.

Sora hacked away at the Demon Tide, which was like a tsunami composed of hundreds of thousands of Shadows. Goofy did his best to fend off any attacks on Sora, but whenever the Heartless managed to land a hit, Donald was right

there to patch him up with a spell.

Meanwhile, Riku and the king fought the horde of Heartless, Nobodies, and Unversed. It was like taking on all the different foes they had ever faced at once.

“You hangin’ in there, Riku?”

“I’m fine! What about you?”

Just as he had been back in the realm of darkness, Riku was reminded of how much Mickey was looking out for him. Their friendship was a little different than his and Sora’s. He and Mickey were open with each other, of course, but there was still a sort of respectful distance between them. That distance didn’t exist between him and Sora, but was still comfortable for Riku all the same.

I guess it’s like...we know we’ve got each other’s backs.

Riku risked a quick glance to the side to check on Kairi, who was fighting alongside Axel. The fruit of their training was evident in their teamwork.

“I’ve got this!” Kairi called out to Axel as she parried an attack from a Nobody.

“Glad I’ve got you in my corner, Kairi!”

“Right back at you, Axel!”

Though the two of them were trading banter as they always did during training, this was no time for joking around. Axel threw his flame-wreathed Keyblade at the enemy. “I just wish I felt better about all this.”

These Nobodies used to work for me, after all. Fighting them...kinda hurts. And it wouldn’t hurt if I didn’t have a heart now. I can feel that sadness and loneliness. Yeah, I might have been faking emotions back then, but it’s not like I couldn’t remember how they felt. If I had lost all my memories—like Roxas did—then I wouldn’t be thinking about all this.

Axel’s Keyblade returned to his hand. Across the battlefield, Ventus and Aqua were going head-to-head with a giant Heartless.

I never forgot about Ventus. But if you don’t go back to those memories every once in a while, they’ll just slip away. Bet that’s why so many things are coming back to me lately. But there’s still so much more I have to remember.

“Aqua!” shouted Ventus, who dashed over to his friend as a punch from a huge Heartless sent her to her knees. He caught the follow-up attack that was intended for her with his Keyblade. He took advantage of the recoil to rush in close and finish it off.

“Thanks...but it looks like now isn’t the time to talk,” Aqua replied as she got to her feet and moved off to confront more Heartless.

Ventus followed suit and went after an Unversed.

I never thought the two of us would be fighting together side by side again. I hope all three of us will be together again soon—but right now, I’ll trust the piece of him he left in that suit of armor. Terra will come back to us, just like Ventus did. I know he will.

The Heartless, Nobodies, and Unversed kept coming—no matter how many they struck down, there were always more to take their place. It seemed like the darkness was blotting out the sky itself.

All the same, they couldn’t give up.

“Let’s end this!” Sora shouted as he dealt the Demon Tide an attack so fierce that the whole shape of the mass shifted.

“C’mon...” As Sora came back to the ground, he watched as the Demon Tide began swirling around itself in a vortex.

“Something’s wrong,” Goofy said.

“Look out!” Donald shouted.

All the Heartless, Nobodies, and Unversed were sucked into the winds it had stirred up, forming a colossal hurricane of darkness.

Soon, Riku, the king, Kairi, Axel, Aqua, and Ventus were staring in awe as well.

“What now?” Goofy asked as he edged backward, using his shield to fend off the wind.

“Sora?” Donald asked with an uncertain glance.

“I’ll stop it!”

Sora broke into a run, knocking aside any Heartless that got in his way as he

made a beeline for the Demon Tide.

“Sora!” Donald and Goofy both shouted behind him.

Just as Sora sprang into the air and was about to come down on the Demon Tide with his Keyblade, a blinding light engulfed him.

“Need some help?”

Standing within the light was a boy Sora had never even seen before, let alone met. The boy had silver hair and a red scarf around his neck.

“Huh?” Sora gasped, then found himself back on the ground again. When he opened his eyes, thousands of Keyblades were flashing through the air above him. It was like all the Keyblades thrust into the soil like grave markers had taken on a life of their own, joining together to attack the Demon Tide.

Sora leaped onto the swarm of Keyblades and rode it straight toward the dark vortex. The Keyblades plunged into the Demon Tide and scattered it.

Need some help?

I don't know who that guy was, but I bet he's the one who called all these Keyblades into the fight. I can feel the emotions in each and every one of them—these must be the wills of the ancient Keyblade wielders.

The surviving Heartless of the Demon Tide came back together to form what resembled a black comet hurtling toward Sora. But the Keyblades fanned out to shield him from the onslaught, and together with all of them, Sora became a ray of light and sliced the dark mass apart.

Once he landed back on the ground, Sora looked up at the thousands of Keyblades. Their purpose served, the proud weapons burst apart into glimmering shards.

“Sora! Are you okay?” Riku called, running over.

“Yeah,” he replied with a smile.

“What was that?” Mickey asked, looking up to where the Keyblades had been a moment ago.

Aqua answered. “Keyblade wielders...from long ago.”

I knew it. I was feeling the hearts of Keyblade wielders from ancient times.

We're all connected...

"It's the light of the past," Ventus added as he, too, looked up at the sky.

"Look." Kairi spotted someone and pointed.

"Just send out the Big Bad," Axel grumbled.

The one strolling toward them across the empty battlefield...was Riku—a Riku that was a little younger than the one with them now. He snickered at the guardians.

"You!" Riku shouted, taking a step forward.

Mickey quickly stepped over to hold him back. "The Organization's been using hearts. Ones Xehanort got to in the past and has influence over. So that must be you from when Ansem had control of *your* heart."

"Yeah. How could I forget?" Riku said half to himself, lowering his head for a moment. Amused by his chagrin, the other Riku—Dark Riku—opened his eyes wide, bared his teeth, and laughed loudly.

"I'd say that was our finest hour."

Riku returned the gaze of his younger self. "Wrong. My hour of weakness."

"You sure? How about we find out?!"

A black miasma billowed up from Dark Riku, and then, from behind him, a gigantic shadow shaped like Master Xehanort rose ominously. It extended its arms to the sides, filling the sky.

"A real test for the Mark of Mastery!" cried Dark Riku.

Xigbar chose that moment to make his entrance. "We gotta make sure you're not blundering your way toward a second failure," he said with a sneer.

Axel answered with a snarky comment of his own, "Blundering? I'll have you know we failed with style, *chief*."

"At least you admit it. Well, if you guardians think you brought the goods, you'll have to prove it to the old guy one last time. Kid, take it away," returned Xigbar, clapping a hand onto Dark Riku's shoulder and vanishing in a swirl of

darkness.

Dark Riku let out a bellow, causing the dark figure looming behind him to swell even larger. Several Demon Towers burst from the ground around Sora and his friends. Dark Riku made a shadowy exit of his own, leaving the world shrouded in darkness.

The Shadows were so great in number that it was hard to tell if they were a tower, a tide, or even individuals at all. One thing was certain: There were enough of them to consume the world. The creatures attacked haphazardly, and while Sora and the other guardians dispatched any that came their way, there was no end in sight. It wasn't just Shadows—or even Heartless—that threatened them, either. There were also Nobodies and Unversed among the throng.

“Form up! Now!” Aqua shouted.

Everyone gathered in a circle, but they were being pressed back in on one another. Within the defensive ring, Mickey looked down at the Keyblade in his hand.

Is this it for us...? No, we can't fall here!

Mickey started to raise his Keyblade—only to be stopped short by Riku. Mickey looked up at him, but Riku only shook his head quietly.

“If you try to use time magic against these numbers, you won't have enough strength for the final battle.”

Mickey lowered his eyes sadly.

“I'll try and break through,” Aqua called. “Everyone, get ready!”

“Alone? That's crazy! I'll help!” said Ventus. Both of them struck at the Heartless, but no more than that.

“Two is no better,” said Kairi.

“Yeah, splitting up's a bad idea!” Axel added, punctuating the statement with a swing of his Keyblade. Even as they argued, more and more Shadows were falling from the sky like a black rain.

“There's way too many!” Goofy yelled, dropping into a fearful crouch.

“We’re finished!” Donald quickly joined him.

It’s gonna be just like last time...

Or so Sora thought, until an orb of light lanced through the gloom overhead and fell upon their foes. The light grew into a radiant column that sent the Shadows flying every which way, and the guardians had to shield their eyes against it. When they opened them again to see what had happened, standing before them was Yen Sid.

“Master Yen Sid!”

The sorcerer, who was also a Keyblade Master, clapped his glowing hands together, then quickly held them aloft, releasing a burst of light that destroyed any Shadow it touched and created a pathway straight through the horde.

“Go, my young champions. I will hold them all here for as long as I can.”

“We’re not gonna leave you behind!” Mickey cried.

Donald and Goofy looked at each other and then, with a nod, ran over to Yen Sid’s side.

“You guys go on!”

“Me and Donald will stay here. The two of us’ll back up Master Yen Sid!”

The two of them readied their weapons to protect the sorcerer’s back.

“Donald... Goofy...” Sadness filled Sora’s voice. They had stuck by his side through all his adventures thus far, and he hated to leave them.

“You’re a whole pint by yourself, Sora,” Donald said in reply.

“Don’t worry. We’ll catch up with ya in just a bit!” Goofy added with a smile.

Sora and Mickey looked at their friends.

“Okay!”

“We’ll regroup later!”

Yen Sid then shouted, “Make haste!”

Sora and the rest of his companions ran down the glowing path the sorcerer had cleared for them.

The seven guardians of light eventually reached a crossroads in the wasteland marked out by countless Keyblades thrust into the reddish-brown soil. Aqua, Ventus, and Terra had been here before.

Sora and the others came to a halt in the middle of the crossroads. Thirteen figures clad in black coats were walking toward them with Master Xehanort at the center.

“Today, we join these other wielders and leave our mark on fate. I have waited patiently...but together, we shall unlock the Keyblade War’s secrets. Now we forge it. The ultimate key... The χ-Blade!” he said, calling his Keyblade to his hands and plunging it into the ground.

With a deafening rumble and huge clouds of dust, thick walls engraved with arcane symbols rose up from the wasteland, cutting off any other possible paths for Sora and his companions and trapping them in a labyrinth. The guardians of light found themselves surrounded on all four sides, and beyond the maze they could see Master Xehanort standing atop a solitary stone pillar in the distance. Just below him, the remaining twelve figures in black coats stood before him like a barrier on top of a wide, square platform.

“Here we go,” Sora said to his friends, and then they stepped into the maze that beckoned them onward. After a short time, they reached a fork in the path. Sora was wondering how to best make their way through the narrow corridors of the maze with so many people when Riku offered an idea:

“Looks like splitting into two groups might be our best option.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

Riku walked down one passage, while Mickey walked down the other. Aqua and Ventus followed the king, while Kairi and Axel joined Riku.

“Be careful, everyone,” called Kairi.

“Same to you,” Sora said back, then let out a deep breath. *Donald and Goofy aren’t with me anymore, but that doesn’t mean I have to do this alone. I just have to choose carefully...*

“Agh!”

Mickey's yelp brought Sora back into the present. He could see the king fighting multiple Organization members down the right-hand path.

"Your Majesty!" Sora shouted and took off running. Barriers slid up from the ground to cut him off, but he was able to dodge them as he hurried to aid his friend.

Mickey was surrounded by Marluxia, Larxene, Luxord, and Xemnas. Aqua and Ventus were nowhere to be found. Maybe he had sent them on ahead while he handled things here?

Luxord threw cards from Mickey's left, while Larxene released a blast of lightning from his right. The king leaped high in the air to avoid both, but that was when Marluxia chose to spring at him with his scythe. Mickey did a quick flip in midair, and the blade just barely whizzed by, leaving a trail of scarlet flower petals behind it. Sora ran over to the king's side when he landed.

"Your Majesty!"

"Sora!"

As soon as the two of them joined up, the combat began again in earnest. With an arrogant sneer, Xemnas floated into the air and summoned a hedge of black brambles around the battlefield.

Marluxia pressed the attack with his scythe, while Larxene kept up the heat with her electrified throwing knives. Meanwhile, Luxord came after them with tricky maneuvers from his playing cards.

Still, Sora and the king were starting to gain the upper hand, until...

With another smug sneer, Xemnas held out his palms and released a black light that poured over Luxord and infused his body with its power. With one final conceited laugh, Xemnas released the dark barrier around them all and vanished.

"Xemnas!"

Luxord, Larxene, and Marluxia remained.

When Luxord fanned out the cards decorated with black symbols in his hand, they flashed red for a moment.

“Exactly what I needed,” he said, then scattered cards in every direction. The cards grew in size and formed a large enclosure around Sora and Mickey. Then, while the two of them were watching this unfold, Luxord threw his final card right at Sora.

“Sora, look out!” Mickey swiftly darted in to protect him.

“No!” Sora yelled out as the card intended for him sucked the king inside with a flash of light. It returned to Luxord’s hand, only now bearing an image of a trapped Mickey.

“Sora, one final game. The rules are simple. All you have to do to win is find me among these cards and strike me down,” said the roguish gentleman.

The cards surrounding Sora began to rotate around him. Luxord then snapped his fingers and disappeared, leaving Sora alone with Marluxia and Larxene in the ring of cards.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get you out!” Sora swung his Keyblade at one of the cards.

“Too bad,” Luxord said as the card vanished, and Marluxia swung down at Sora from behind with his scythe. Sora was able to block the attack, though, and then go for the next card. Unfortunately, a cackling Larxene stood in his path. The crackling knives she threw sent Sora tumbling back, but he quickly bounced to his feet and rushed for the next card.

“Impressive,” Luxord commented as his position was revealed. Sora closed the gap between them in a single bound and let him have it with his Keyblade.

“You were born for these sorts of games.” Luxord gasped as the blow sent him to his knees. The rotating cards scattered, and a black miasma flowed out from him.

Snorting with laughter, Luxord threw a card to Sora, who caught it.

“What’s this?”

“A wild card. You’ve earned it. Hang on to it. Could turn the tables.”

“Play ya again sometime,” said Sora, observing the card. “When we’re just guys.”

Luxord grinned and replied, “I should like that very much, Sora.” With that, he

transformed into pure darkness and faded from view, leaving behind only a single card, the one bearing Mickey's image. With a flash, the king was released from his prison.

"Thanks," Mickey said.

Sora gave a thumbs-up in response—but their reunion was cut short by a flash of lightning.

"I always knew he was useless."

Larxene came flying into their midst hot on the heels of the blast, but Sora and Mickey shared a quick glance and dodged back out of the way.

"You're so *annoying!*" she shouted, and she sprang straight at Sora, sending a knife flying ahead of her. Sora knocked it away, but this time Larxene leaped high into the air and threw more knives that stuck into the ground and crackled with electricity.

Avoiding the onslaught by a hairbreadth, he landed a swift Keyblade strike on Larxene as she returned to the ground.

The desperate blow knocked the fight right out of her.

"Are you kidding?" Larxene sank to her knees in pain as the darkness fled her body.

"You're gonna be recompleted," Sora reassured her. *Just like Axel and Ienzo were. I wonder what she was like as a human...*

"I didn't ask you for your garbage opinion. I lost! To a bunch of losers like you! But...could be worse. Become that geezer's heart tank? No thanks." Larxene cast her gaze up toward the sky.

"Then why help him?"

"I was really just along for the ride," she said offhandedly.

"With...?" Sora asked.

Larxene shot him a quick glance from the corner of her eye. "My secret," she said with a finger pressed to her mouth, then faded to oblivion.

That left only Marluxia, who Mickey had been dueling while Sora was busy

with Larxene. His scythe left trails of crimson petals fluttering in the air as the two of them exchanged blows.

When Sora ran over to join the fight, Marluxia threw his scythe to stop him short. Apparently, he had been keeping tabs on Sora even while he was otherwise engaged. Sora deflected the scythe, sending up another outpouring of red petals. Mickey used this moment to fire off a spell, which Marluxia had to teleport away from to avoid. This time, Sora was the one ready with a counterattack, firing off a volley of shining energy that sent the villain tumbling to the ground.

“You pests...”

As had happened with his comrades, a dark haze began to stream into the sky from Marluxia’s body as he sagged to his knees. His scythe vanished in a shower of petals as it hit the earth beside him.

“Oh... So *now* it all comes back to me.” Marluxia chuckled sadly.

“Hey. Is that a real laugh?” Sora asked.

Marluxia placed a hand against his own chest and turned his gold eyes toward Sora.

“Yes... My heart is remembering how to feel.”

“Really? That’s good,” replied Sora, returning the gaze.

“And now, I am on the cusp of reclaiming my identity... My purpose for being... Thanks to you, Sora,” Marluxia said. With that, he faded away into black mist.

“Sora!”

“Your Majesty!”

The two friends shared a smile.

“I’ll go after Xemnas while you find the others,” said Mickey.

“Okay!”

Sora left him and headed back to the initial fork in the maze. This time he took the other path. While the walls were more aggressive in their attempts to

stop him than before, Sora made clever use of the cover available as he proceeded.

He could see Riku up ahead, locked in combat with the other version of himself. Observing it all with crossed arms from a short distance away was Ansem. It appeared Axel and Kairi had gone on ahead.

“Riku!”

“Sora!” Riku shouted back. He caught an attack from his dark counterpart while Xigbar fired a barrage from his Arrowguns. Sora and Riku nodded at each other, then each chose a target to go after.

Sora decided to start with Ansem, who hovered in the air and attacked with a barrier of lasers protecting him. But the barrier couldn’t stay up forever, and Sora waited for the moments when Ansem was defenseless to jump in with his Keyblade.

Dark Riku was focused solely on Riku, engaging him in a frenzied contest of Keyblades off in the distance. That left Xigbar, who darted about the battlefield unpredictably. The struggle continued in this manner for a time, until...

“Shadows!” roared Ansem as he created a barrage of black orbs. While Sora and Riku weathered the attack, Ansem put some distance between them and unleashed a murky fog. With a mocking smile, he turned to make his exit.

“Wait!” Riku shouted as he raced to catch Ansem.

But then a voice called out, “Where are *you* going?” and suddenly Dark Riku was on him again. Ansem looked back with a smirk, then moved out of sight as Dark Riku sent Riku crashing to the ground.

“Riku!”

Glowing bolts fired from Xigbar’s Arrowguns harried Sora as he ran to his friend. Sora shielded Riku from the stream of projectiles using his Keyblade.

“Hey, let’s speed it up! Keep the line moving!” Xigbar taunted. Now it was Sora versus Xigbar and Riku against Dark Riku.

It was all Sora could do to keep up with Xigbar’s unpredictable movements. *Riku will be fine*, he told himself. *That guy may look like him, but he doesn’t*

even come close.

Sora devoted all his attention to Xigbar, countering his arrows with blasts of light from his Keyblade. When the crafty villain was briefly thrown off-balance, Sora quickly closed the distance between them and got some hits in.

The cycle repeated for several rounds before finally, Xigbar couldn't take any more.

"Figures. If I had a Keyblade, it'd be different..." he muttered. A black miasma began to rise from his body, just as it had when Luxord, Marluxia, and Larxene had fallen. This was what happened when Nobodies met their end.

There was also a certain sadness in Xigbar as he knelt on the ground.

"Like *you're* actually worthy to use one," Sora said skeptically.

"Oh, I *am* worthy," he shot back. Using his Arrowguns for support, Xigbar pushed himself back to his feet.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"The old coot promised to bequeath me his. Why else do you think I would ever put up with all his nonsense?"

Is he talking about Master Xehanort? I don't believe for a minute that a guy like Xigbar could ever wield a Keyblade.

"It'd be wasted on you."

"As if."

With a defiant grimace, Xigbar vanished in a swirl of darkness. Sensing someone watching him from above, Sora looked up to see that he had teleported to the top of one of the stone walls. He then slowly staggered backward and toppled from the opposite edge.

His Arrowguns remained for a time, but eventually they, too, dispersed into dark mist.

"You can't stop me!" Dark Riku roared, bringing Sora back into the moment. Riku and his dark version were in the midst of a fierce exchange. Sora hurried over to assist his friend with Keyblade at the ready.

“How about this!” Sora shouted as he battered Dark Riku with a series of attacks, while Riku followed up with more of the same. The two of them moved with almost telepathic coordination as they pummeled Dark Riku.

Finally, Riku delivered the coup de grâce and sent their foe flying.

Dark Riku rose on unsteady feet as black vapor began to seep out and shroud his form in darkness. “You’re not...real,” he said, faltering.

Riku inhaled sharply.

“I’m...the real one...,” Dark Riku said again. His breathing was labored, and he seemed on the verge of losing consciousness.

“Aren’t you my past self? From when Ansem possessed me?” Riku asked in surprise. He expected Sora to answer, but the answer came from someone else.

“No, you beat Ansem, and you’re still here. This guy...is me!” came a voice.

After all, Riku Replica and Dark Riku were identical, right down to the darkness they wore.

Oh—I can sense it. It’s that guy Riku knows so well, the one who helped him on the Dark Margin when the darkness almost swallowed him up. The guy he spoke to on the Destiny Islands.

It’s the Riku Replica inside his heart.

The Riku Replica moved swiftly to his dark twin and pressed a hand to his chest. Dark Riku let out a howl as darkness began to spiral out from the point of connection, until he appeared to be wearing a black coat with the hood up.

“I knew it. It’s a Replica. A soon-to-be empty vessel. I’ve been waiting for a chance like this.”

Darkness swirled around Riku Replica and Dark Riku once again. After a moment, Riku Replica flew out with Dark Riku under one arm, leaving behind only the empty Replica in a black coat.

“Hey! What are you doing? Take the vessel!” Riku shouted.

“No.” Riku Replica smiled back at Riku. “The world already has you. There’s someone else who needs the Replica more. You know who I mean.”

The empty Replica slumped to the ground.

Riku suddenly realized something. “Naminé. You’re saving her.”

Riku Replica looked down at him with a smile, still holding Dark Riku.

“Good luck,” he replied, and with that, the two of them vanished, his white light mixed with the darkness of his old self.

She was special to me.

And now I can finally be my own person. Me, and no one else.

The two boys couldn’t hear the words, but they could feel them.

Riku and Sora observed the fallen Replica in the black coat.

“Is that a Replica—for Naminé?” Sora asked.

Riku thought for a moment before he answered. “Yeah. Wish we could help her now. But first...”

“I know,” Sora agreed. *We’ve got a bigger priority right now.*

“I’m going after Ansem.”

He may have run off somewhere, but we can’t just ignore him.

“Okay. I’ll go help the others.”

Sora knew there were others who still needed help up ahead, so he hurried off to find them.

Now by himself, Riku looked down at the Replica.

“Just wait a bit longer. Once this is all over, I swear...,” he said, sounding almost as though he were asking for forgiveness.

And then suddenly, Riku wasn’t alone anymore.

“Hey, I thought you’d be gone by now,” the new arrival said.

“You’re...the Organization!” Riku brandished his Keyblade at the man in a black coat approaching from a dark portal.

“Whoa, chill out. I’m not here to fight, I promise. Listen. Name’s Demyx,” the man said with a shrug. He seemed entirely too laid-back given the present

circumstances. “It’s a long story, but I’m sorta on your side... Oh right, here. See?”

He produced a Gummiphone from his pocket, hoping to dispel Riku’s suspicions.

“All the cool kids have one, right? Zex...er, lenzo got me this. Enough proof for ya?”

“Why are you here?”

The Gummiphone wasn’t enough to make Riku put away his Keyblade.

So Demyx leaned in close to his ear and began to whisper. “I’m on a top secret mission. Apparently, they’re looking to find themselves another Replica. I heard a rumor that I could maybe find one here from Zex...er, lenzo, so I’ve just been killing time.” He leaned down and picked the Replica up off the ground.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Riku said, finally setting his doubts aside.

“Don’t worry about it! Not to brag, but I’ve done this before.”

Demyx headed back toward his portal with the Replica slung over his shoulder.

“That’s not just an empty vessel,” Riku told him. “It’s filled with important memories. Promise me—you’ll be careful with it. Deliver it safely, okay?”

Demyx turned back to the ever-serious Riku with a grin and gave a thumbs-up. “Demyx time!”

INTERMISSION

Who are you?

BACK ON THE WORLD OF OLYMPUS, WHEN THIS whole adventure had only just begun, Sora and his friends had defeated the Heartless, Hades, and the Titans mere moments ago.

Meanwhile, an evil fairy and her henchman arrived in a now Heartless-free city on a box hunt. As he watched it all unfold, Xigbar softly whispered to himself.

“May your heart be your guiding key.”

A voice abruptly addressed him from behind.

“Picture this: A black goat stashes away a letter, then orders a white goat to search for it. What could his intentions possibly be?”

Xigbar scanned the area for the speaker and spied Luxord emerging from the Corridors of Darkness.

“Great, a riddle. Just what I need.” Xigbar shrugged, his usual sarcastic grin in place.

Luxord paid it no mind, instead producing and hiding cards in a series of sleight-of-hand tricks. “There are many possibilities. Perhaps he forgot where it’s hidden, or he’s playing a prank, or the letter has truly gone missing. I can think of several reasons offhand; guessing...is simply useless.”

“Well then, just follow your orders, plain and simple,” Xigbar said wearily at Luxord’s implications.

“Yes, that’s what I’ve always done. I followed the orders from above without question. However, I sometimes can’t help but read into my opponent’s strategy,” Luxord replied.

Xigbar snorted. “Too long on the job?”

Luxord was, first and foremost, a gambler. Any member of the Organization that came asking questions about the box would be a problem for Xigbar.

He knew very well that he was playing the part of the fool in all this, for Master Xehanort and for the entire world. He couldn't have someone start believing there was a deeper meaning behind the performance.

"If the contents of the box are so unknown, why is it of such critical importance to the Organization? Furthermore, was it Xehanort or Xemnas who gave the order?"

"Well, it's tricky," Xigbar replied, mentally gritting his teeth at Luxord's infuriating tenacity.

"All Xehanort cares about is the clash between the seven lights and thirteen darkneses. It's unlikely he would hold such an interest in this mysterious box. Which means...the order was issued by Xemnas, or the one who informed me of my task—you."

Luxord fixed Xigbar with a look he normally saved for an especially heated card game—direct and searching for any tell. Xigbar wasn't about to give anything away, though.

"As if! It musta been Xemnas."

"My inquiries suggested otherwise."

Luxord's retort gave Xigbar some pause, but he quickly adapted and incorporated his very real surprise into the act.

"Oh man...you asked him?"

"What are your intentions?"

Convincing your opponent that they have the upper hand is also important in games like this. In fact, it was an essential strategy—and that's why Xigbar turned toward Luxord and began talking like some child coming up with excuses.

"Look, I don't know what's inside the box. But it's been protected by Keyblade wielders since way back when. Aren't you curious? I heard it contains information that's vital to all Keyblade wielders—secrets."

“And where did you hear this?” Luxord inquired.

“Hmm, I don’t remember.” Xigbar looked away, feigning forgetfulness.

“I keep my eyes and ears wide open, but I’ve traveled to so many different places, it’s hard to keep everything straight, y’know?” Xigbar continued, trying to play it all off as nothing.

Luxord threw a card his way, and Xigbar snatched it out of the air just before it could slice him. “If this box is truly as important as you say, why now?”

Xigbar had no answer for that.

“I believe you discovered that others also seek it, and you need to find it before anyone else does in order to keep your connection to the box a secret from those around you. Xigbar, who are you really?”

Still holding the card, Xigbar fixed Luxord with a look from his singular eye.

In the end, it was Luxord who broke the tension. With a wry grin, he said, “No matter. It doesn’t make a difference to me. It’s all the same.”

So you’re pretending not to know either, eh?

Xigbar was in no mood to provide any answers, so Luxord opened a dark gateway and took his leave.

“The question is, who are you, Luxord?” Xigbar asked, tossing the card away.



Chapter 16

THE SKEIN OF SEVERANCE

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AFTER LEAVING MICKEY TO GO DOWN THE LEFT-HAND path, Aqua and Ventus soon found Terra—or rather, Terra-Xehanort—and Vanitas.

“Terra!” Ventus shouted, but Aqua stopped him.

“Look closely. That’s not Terra.”

That’s Xehanort, and he’s just wearing Terra’s form. Any slipups here could spell the end of us.

“Maybe not, but I’m still going to keep calling his name. We have to light his way home,” Ventus protested as he looked at his silver-haired friend. He was so sincere about it, Aqua wasn’t sure how to respond.

But then Vanitas stepped forward and put an end to the moment. “Hey, guys. Feeling a little left out here.”

“Vanitas. You’re coming home, too,” Ventus informed him, summoning his Keyblade.

But Vanitas wasn’t through. “Huh? But my home is in you. You know what’ll happen, right? I’ll just disappear inside of you forever. Don’t you have any love at all for your own brother?”

“We’re not brothers. We’re the same,” Ventus declared.

Laughter rang out from inside Vanitas’s helmet. “You believe that? Then you really are naive.”

“Huh?” That wasn’t the response Ventus was expecting.

“This may come as a shock to you, but we’re not the same like you think. I was just hidden deep inside of you for a really long time. All Xehanort did...was tear me right out of you.”

But no matter what the truth was, it all came down to the same thing.

Ventus thrust his Keyblade out at Vanitas. “Then go back to where you came from!”

“Hmm... Make me,” Vanitas taunted.

“If it’s darkness you’re looking for, Ventus,” said Terra-Xehanort, “then I have more than enough to go around.”

However, this time Aqua called forth her Keyblade to stop him short. “Stop! Quit using our friend for your games.”

“A Keyblade Master wielding your key in anger? Shameful,” Terra-Xehanort sneered.

Aqua lowered her weapon. “We have unfinished business. I fell into darkness, and for ten years I wandered through the dark realm. Now...I’m finally here.”

Terra-Xehanort smirked at her grave reply.

“And I want only one thing, with all my heart. Xehanort... I’m casting you out of Terra forever!”

Aqua sprang into action, swinging her Keyblade down at Terra-Xehanort. Beside her, Ventus charged at Vanitas. Aqua and Terra-Xehanort clashed Keyblades with terrific force, while Vanitas repelled Ventus with his own key.

“Aqua! Ven!” Sora shouted as he came running into the arena.

“Sora!” Aqua and Ventus said at practically the same time. With a nod of affirmation, they turned to face their common foes.

“Leave Terra to me... Freeze!” Aqua shouted as she cast a spell that rendered Terra-Xehanort immobile. Sora tried to cast magic of his own, but Vanitas got in the way.

“I’m the one you want!” Ventus shouted as he came at Vanitas from behind with his Keyblade. Vanitas blocked the attack without even turning around and then engaged Ventus in an intense back-and-forth that moved the two of them away from the rest of the combatants.

Vanitas raised a hand into the air, summoning a pack of Keyblades that he then jumped onto. Ventus leaped up after him. He was on his own for now, though, because Sora and Aqua had their hands full with Terra-Xehanort.

Ventus focused his attacks on Vanitas's armor. When their battle brought them back closer to the others, the combat took on a confused, frantic pace, with Sora helping Ven and Aqua in turn as the situation dictated. How long could such an intense fight rage on?

Eventually, a particularly fierce blow from Ventus struck home, leaving Vanitas incapacitated and his helmet full of cracks.

The breath caught in Sora's throat as he saw Vanitas's face. He ran over to Ventus.

"Your face...!"

While Aqua and Terra-Xehanort were still busy trading blows in midair, Vanitas laughed softly. "I'm the piece of Ventus that was taken away," he said. "And you're the piece Ventus needed to be whole again. So...why shouldn't you and I look exactly the same? You define me, Sora, the same way that Ventus does. We are brothers who, together, make a greater whole." The near-mirror image of Sora's face behind Vanitas's mask was evidence enough of that.

Sora gritted his teeth. "Then why don't you stand by our side? Instead of with darkness?"

"Because I *am* darkness. And I do stand by your side. I'm the shadow that you cast. How much closer could I be?" Vanitas said with a smile.

"But I didn't—"

Ventus interrupted before Sora could say any more. "But I didn't ask for this. To be sifted apart, nice and neat. We should be free to choose. Not just light, not just darkness. *We* decide what we are."

Vanitas lowered his gaze for a moment. "But... Ventus, I *did* decide who I am. You see?"

"And what you are is darkness?" Ventus asked.

"What I am is darkness," answered Vanitas quietly, a black mist beginning to rise from his body.

"Okay," Ventus replied, but Sora couldn't understand.

Living as darkness, alone and incomplete—it wasn't right.

“How is that okay? Vanitas!”

He wanted answers, but Vanitas simply smiled and melted away into dark nothingness.

For Ventus, the end of his fated counterpart was the end of a long, exhausting fight.

“...Aqua.”

There was no time to stand around, though. Ventus turned toward his friend and ran to join her in battle. Sora wasn’t far behind.

Terra-Xehanort found himself hard-pressed to fight off both Ventus’s and Aqua’s Keyblades, and once Sora joined in with blasts of light, they were finally able to drive some decisive strikes home.

He’s gotta be wearing down now...

Black vapors began to pour out of Terra-Xehanort.

“Terra!”

“Terra!”

Aqua and Ventus rushed over to where he lay.

“Aqua... Ven...”

Terra-Xehanort clutched his head, gasping out his friends’ names through the pain.

“Terra, please...”

“Come back... Terra!”

The two of them pleaded with him, trying to help him sit up in their arms, but he shook them off and groaned in agony.

“Terra! Your friends are here!” Sora called to him. But Terra-Xehanort’s groans turned to a howl as a wave of darkness erupted from his body, turning into chains that lashed around Sora, Aqua, and then Ventus like whips and held them suspended in the air.

At the center of the chains, Terra-Xehanort continued to writhe.

“You have to fight the darkness!” Sora shouted, but the words didn’t seem to have any effect.

“You’ll never be able to break these chains. They’re our *bonds*.” Terra-Xehanort laughed as he slowly rose to his feet. The chains holding Aqua and Ventus came to life, swinging the two around and then slamming them to the ground. “You have no power over me!”

“Stop, Terra! Please, stop it!” Sora cried, but he was trapped and powerless to do anything more than that. Aqua and Ventus had apparently already lost consciousness.

“Farewell,” Terra-Xehanort stated, and then Aqua and Ventus’s chains drew them high up into the sky.

“Terra... I kept my promise,” Ventus suddenly whispered as tears began to fall from his eyes.

Terra-Xehanort was unmoved, though, as he prepared to send the two of them crashing down from a great height.



And he would have, were it not for the black shadow that caught them.

“How?!” Terra-Xehanort exclaimed as he spun around behind him in shock. There was no one there.

The one that had saved Aqua and Ventus was none other than the Dark Figure that normally stood to his back.

Cradling Aqua and Ventus in an arm, the great shadow shattered the chains that bound Sora, set the two unconscious heroes on the ground, and turned to face Terra-Xehanort.

“You fell to the dark—,” he started to say, but the Dark Figure quickly seized him by the head, rendering him silent as he fought to break free.

Behind him, the Dark Figure tore the bindings covering its mouth off and spoke in a hoarse, gravelly voice. “One day...I...will...”

That’s Terra’s voice! It’s gotta be!

Sora knew it in his heart.

“One day...I will set...this right... I will return to this land...and protect...my friends!”

Terra-Xehanort’s former guardian raised him even higher into the air.

“Terra! Now!” Sora shouted as he readied his Keyblade.

A beam of light shot from it and hit Terra-Xehanort directly in the back, just as Terra’s heart emerged from the dark figure, blazing with light. With another flash, it was drawn into Terra-Xehanort’s chest.

The man was bathed in light as his hair darkened from silver to brown, and his old appearance returned.

And then Terra was standing there before them.

“Aqua! Ven!”

Despite how recently he’d returned to the world, Terra rushed over to where his two friends lay. He propped Ventus up in his arms while Aqua slowly sat up on her own beside him.

“Terra... Is it you?” Aqua asked, tears spilling from her eyes.

“Yeah,” Terra replied. “You never stopped lighting my way back.”

Ventus stirred in his arms. “You’re here...”

“I heard you, too, Ven. You found me, just like you promised.”

Now Terra’s eyes were welling with tears, and Ventus wasn’t far behind. Terra pulled his two dear friends into an embrace.

“Thank you,” Terra said to them.

Smiling at the reunited trio, Sora said, “Aqua and Ventus need rest. Terra, look after them.”

“No, Sora. I’m going, too.” Ventus clambered to his feet and tried to follow, but he was still too weak. Terra reached out to steady him.

Sora turned back. “That’s what he wants. For us to make a mistake. Put ourselves in danger.”

“Sora, go,” said Aqua. “We’ll catch up with you.”

They might not be able to fight right now, but they’ll be ready soon enough with a little rest.

“Right. I got this,” Sora replied with a grin, then ran back into the maze.

Deep within the labyrinth, Axel and Kairi were locked in a face-off with Xemnas, Saïx, and another figure in a black coat.

“Well, I guess this was inevitable. Who’s the plus-one?” Axel asked, looking pointedly at the unknown member of the trio whose identity was obscured by their hood. They were about the same height as Kairi.

“Inevitable indeed. And this ‘guest’ of ours has an old score to settle with you. You are a traitor to darkness, as it is of light.”

“Well, guess I can live with that,” Axel quipped with a shrug of his shoulders.

An old score? What’s that supposed to mean?

“It is a being of whom we have no memories. A true Nobody, hailing from the edge of oblivion,” Xemnas explained.

“The being before you was re-created...from the records that were left by Vexen, and the many experiments performed by Young Xehanort,” said Saïx, taking over where Xemnas left off.

The hooded figure merely stood silent.

“It was erased from all memories, and it harbors absolutely no knowledge of who it really is,” said Xemnas, looking over at the third member of the new Organization. “Even I had forgotten its existence. But like the others, I could not recall why. Truly, the perfect pawn created for this very battle.”

Xemnas looked over at the being in the black coat.

“So who is it?” Axel said curtly.

It was Saïx who answered. “You called on one of the New Seven Hearts. You must be desperate.”

“If I’m a traitor,” Axel retorted, “then I guess Kairi here is the trump card.”

“What?” Kairi asked.

“So it’s not desperation I see in you. It’s foolishness...and lunacy.” Saïx sounded disappointed.

“Without the battle between the seven lights and thirteen darknesses, Kingdom Hearts requires the seven hearts. That is why we seek to destroy the guardians. Are you truly foolish enough...to believe you can defeat us?” Xemnas explained, his words dripping with contempt.

“What do you think?!” Axel snapped back.

“I think you’ll lose, Axel,” Saïx answered bluntly.

“Yeah, right!”

No one noticed that the silent figure in the black coat reacted to this slightly.

“...Axel,” it whispered, so softly only Saïx could hear.

“Even if you possess the strength, this being cannot be defeated by your hands. Even if...memories are lost from you both.”

“All right... Let’s find out!” Axel cried, accepting the challenge from Saïx. He summoned his Keyblade, which this time took the form of his old weapons, a

pair of flaming chakrams, and hurled it at the stranger in the black coat.

But the figure produced a Keyblade and deflected the attack—and the Keyblade was identical to Sora's.

Axel and Kairi couldn't contain their shock.

"Wait... That Keyblade..."

"It's just like Sora's."

"Are you...?" Axel faltered. "Is that you, Roxas?"

The one in the black coat softly repeated the name.

Saïx overheard again, then said loudly, "No, it's not Roxas, Axel."

"Roxas... Axel..." the stranger said, this time wavering and clutching a hand to their head. With a scream, the figure threw themselves at Axel, but Kairi stopped the attacking Keyblade with her own at the last second.

"A girl?" Kairi gasped as she saw beneath the hood for a second before pushing her away with her Keyblade. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to confirm her suspicions.

"You with me?" Axel called.

"Yep," Kairi said.

Xemnas made his exit via the Corridors of Darkness, and then the fight commenced.

The figure in black repelled an assault from Kairi and then went after her, but Axel dived in and intercepted the attack before it could hit his friend.

There was no doubt about it—that weapon was definitely a Keyblade. No sooner had Axel parried the strike than Saïx charged in with his Claymore, its blue edge clashing with the red of Axel's Keyblade. The impact knocked Axel into the air, forcing him to do a flip before he landed some distance away.

He didn't even have time to catch his breath before the stranger was upon him.

Axel and Kairi were barely holding on—at least until Sora came to the rescue.

“Kairi! Axel!”

Sora’s timely arrival brought a smile to both their faces.

“Sora!”

“Nice to see ya.”

With the addition of a third member to their team, the heroes were back in the fight—but even then, the match was only barely even. Their opponents were just that strong. At one point, they managed to drive the stranger to one knee...but then Saïx attacked again with blue bursts of energy from his Claymore. Sora dived protectively in front of Kairi.

Axel ran over to where his comrades had fallen and intercepted Saïx as he moved in to finish them off, shouting Saïx’s human name. “Stop it, Isa!”

The incredible force of Saïx’s attack drove Axel to his knees.

“I know I won’t forget you. Believe me. I try all the time.”

Saïx’s eyes glowed with a sinister light as they looked down upon Axel, who realized he wasn’t sure if his former friend even recognized him anymore.

Just then, Xemnas returned.

“There was a time when I trusted you to deal with traitors. And now, your betrayal outstrips them all. What final words do you have for your superior?” he said imperiously as he strode over to Axel.

“Well, let me think about it. How about, ‘You were never my superior.’”

“Ah, ever the rogue pawn. Knocked from the board early in the game. Utterly useless and forgotten.”

Axel glared up at Xemnas’s cruel words with defiance. And despite his situation, his voice was full of confidence. “You kidding? Do you know how popular I am? I got loads of people rootin’ for me. Sorry, boss. No one axes Axel. Got it memorized?”

With that, Axel sprang forward and swung his crimson Keyblade straight at Xemnas’s face. But the villain stopped it with one hand.

“Is this supposed to be a Keyblade? Or is it some sort of joke?” With a wave of

his hand, Xemnas shattered Axel's Keyblade. Then he extended his arms, creating a dome of glowing orbs around him that began to bombard Axel. "Our plans have been dashed by you far more times than I care to count. Now it ends. I will purge that light in you...with darkness!"

Xemnas materialized his Ethereal Blade and slowly raised it over Axel's head. But before he could deliver the final blow, a black-gloved hand seized the blade. Smoke slipped between its fingers with a sizzling sound.

The one who had stopped the Ethereal Blade from reaching its mark was the stranger in the black coat.

"Changing sides again?"

"We need him alive," said a feminine voice. "You know that."

"We only need his heart in order to forge the key. We do not need his soul. Oh...but that's right. You were 'friends.' Then...*you* take his life."

The stranger got to her feet and leveled her Keyblade at Axel.

"Who...*are* you...?" Axel asked as he looked up at her.

I know every single member of the Organization—old and new—at this point. So why don't I know her? Or what if I do know her, but I just don't remember her?

That voice—I've heard it before. It was like Kairi's, but different somehow.

Who are you?

"Don't do this," Sora said as he walked over and gently took hold of her Keyblade.

The girl gasped, but she looked away from Sora and shook his hand off her Keyblade. Then, seeming to push something down inside herself, she spun around and swung her weapon at him.

But...it seemed almost as if she was fighting herself more than Sora. She hammered her Keyblade against his over and over, and he simply weathered the storm.

"Wait... It's all right! You can stop now! It's all right..."

“Xion.”

The girl froze as the name left Sora’s lips.

He said my name—not Sora, but someone else. I know that voice. I’d know it anywhere.

Xion grabbed her head and screamed.

“Useless puppet.”

Xemnas kicked the girl away, causing her hood to finally come off.

As the girl’s face and black hair were revealed, a sharp pain lanced through Axel’s temples.

Yeah, I remember now. But why did it take so long?

“Xion!” Axel called out, crawling forward quickly to grab Xemnas’s leg before he could walk over to her. The kick had sent Xion flying back against Sora and knocked him out cold, while she lost consciousness shortly afterward when she crashed to the ground.

I won’t let you hurt them again.

“Your Keyblade is no more. And still you think you can play at being a guardian of light? You can wait your turn...*also-ran*.” Xemnas coldly dismissed Axel’s efforts, kicked his leg free, and then drove his heel down on the would-be hero’s hands. Axel could only reach out helplessly as he turned to Xion and prepared to end her with his Ethereal Blade.

But then, Sora’s body flashed. A light left his chest and was almost simultaneously joined by another beam of light shooting down from the sky. Xemnas quickly leaped away, and the beam left a dust cloud that swirled up where he had just been standing.

A voice spoke from just beyond it. “Hands off my friends.”

The dust cleared to reveal another figure in a black coat.

“It cannot be!” Xemnas blurted out in shock.

The figure responded by taking off his hood.

Axel said the name of his friend. “Roxas...”

I finally found you. And now I remember everything.

“My turn.”

Roxas brought both his Keyblades into fighting position and fixed Xemnas with a steely gaze.

“This is impossible. Where did you get a vessel?”

“Same as you,” Roxas said to Xemnas, who was trying and failing to disguise his nervousness.

“Same how...?”

“Most of the Organization’s members—they traveled here from the past as hearts. And you had Replicas ready and waiting. One for each of them.”

“Who told you?” Xemnas asked.

Roxas helped clear his confusion. “I owe my return to many. Some of them people you knew.”

“Ansem the Wise. Zexion...” Xemnas uttered the names of some of the possible suspects.

“And others, too. It seems you’re not as good at winning over people’s hearts as you think,” Roxas informed him with a Keyblade pointed his way for emphasis.

“Ah, I see...” Xemnas snickered to himself.

“There was one last thing I needed in order for me to be whole again. A connection. Sora helped me find my way back here...to my friends.”

“Roxas,” said Sora in a voice filled with hope. He was standing with Kairi.

We always knew you would come back to us.

“I don’t need hearts. I will scatter them all to the winds,” Xemnas said, then instantly teleported behind Kairi and hauled her up by her right arm.

“Kairi!”

“Sora!”

The two young Keybearers called out to each other, but darkness was already

beginning to enfold Xemnas.

“What difference does one little light make? You have others. Just as we have more darkness to replenish our ranks.”

Xemnas then vanished into the darkness, taking Kairi with him. Sora tried to go in after them, but Saïx stepped in his way.

Sora and Roxas readied their Keyblades for battle, while Axel got up and tried to join in as well.

But Xion stopped him. “Rest, Axel. Roxas will fight in your place. And I’ll fight for Kairi.”

“Yeah... When it comes to Keyblades, you’re the old hands,” he acknowledged with a grin, which got a gentle nod from Xion.

Then she, Sora, and Roxas engaged Saïx.

All Axel could do was watch how it all played out.

Do those three have what it takes to bring him down? Saïx is a tough customer on the best of days, but now he’s really lost it.

Everyone here is one of my best friends. Well, except Sora. Not that he’s not a good friend, too, but...argh, maybe it doesn’t make a difference. But Roxas—I was trying to find him again. Xion, I forgot. And Saïx—we’ve known each other so long I can hardly remember life without him. They’re all my best friends. And now, they’re fighting each other.

Maybe this is my fault.

You changed, and according to you, I did, too.

We ended up on different paths somewhere along the way, but you were always my friend. Still are.

Did I actually have it wrong?

Eventually, a well-timed hit from Sora took the fight out of Saïx. Pitch-black vapor began to billow from his body as he sagged to the ground.

Axel ran over to his friend.

“Why...so sad?” Saïx asked, looking up at Axel.

Sad...? What, you think I'm gonna cry?

"You let them reduce you to *this*?" Axel shouted with fury.

"I thought...you outgrew the marks under your eyes."

"So?"

Axel brushed one of the spots under his eyes where he used to have said marks.

"Always told you they'd stop you from crying. The upside-down tears."

Saïx's words from yesterday flashed across his mind.

"You look...like you need them...," Saïx commented in a calm tone.

"Stop it. The whole act. I thought this was all for her."

"At first," Saïx replied with a smile. "I sacrificed everything to try and track her down. You're the one who went off and made other friends. Left her and me both in the dust. It infuriated me to see how you just exited our lives." Saïx let out a gasp of pain and pressed a hand to his chest. Axel hurried to place a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I lost...all sense of purpose..."

"I didn't forget you," Axel said, but Saïx kept his eyes on the ground. The dark mist began to obscure his form.

"Yes...I know. You wouldn't do that. But...I was jealous."

"You admit it."

"Well, if I make it back...you won't get it out of me a second time."

Saïx tried to rise and was about to fall when Axel caught him in his arms. A smile appeared on Saïx's face as the darkness began to claim his body.

"See you, Isa."

"See you, Lea."

The two friends said their farewells, and then Saïx was gone. The breeze swept the remnants of darkness out of Axel's arms, and he watched it drift up into the sky. At last, he slowly got to his feet.

“You go help Kairi.”

“Right,” Sora agreed with a nod, then said, “Gotta go! Good luck,” before running off into the labyrinth.

Axel watched him go, then turned to Roxas. “All right. What now?”

Roxas merely looked back at him with a quiet smile, but then they heard a soft sob.

Tears were pouring from Xion’s eyes, and Roxas quickly rushed to her side.

“Guess I...shoulda brought some ice cream,” Axel quipped, scratching his head uncertainly. That brought a smile to both Roxas’s and Xion’s faces. Axel reached out and swept the two into a big hug.

Well, at least now we’re all crybabies.

At long last, Sora arrived at the tall platform that lay beyond the maze. Back when the labyrinth rose from the ground, this was where the twelve members of Xehanort’s real Organization XIII had stood. Now, their numbers were short by nine.

Riku and Mickey were waiting there for Sora.

“Riku! Your Majesty!”

“Sora!” Mickey called back.

“About time,” Riku said.

“Sorry!” Sora had to catch his breath as he came up before them. In that same moment, a powerful gust of wind filled with dust came at them from ahead. As it cleared, they saw that Ansem, Xemnas, and Young Xehanort now stood in their path. And then, behind the trio up on a tall column of rock was Master Xehanort himself.

“Xemnas! Where’s Kairi?” Sora demanded, readying his Keyblade for battle.

“Wait! Is she in trouble?” Riku wanted to know.

“Yeah, Xemnas took her,” Sora revealed, his eyes never leaving the villain in question.

“Settle down, boy,” Master Xehanort said with a hint of reproach.

“It’s Sora!” he shouted back.

A condescending smile crept up on the old man’s face. “The thirteen darkneses and seven lights have clashed nine times, yielding these nine keys.”

As Master Xehanort said this, nine keys appeared in a ring with him at the center.

“We are four short... But these four keys will be produced here and now.”

“Yeah, sure. And what makes you think there’d ever be any way we’d help you with that?” Sora shouted back defiantly. The confident grin never left Master Xehanort’s face.

“You forget I plan for every eventuality.”

This reminder that they had taken Kairi enraged Sora, but it was Riku who fired back. “If you do summon Kingdom Hearts, we will defeat you, and we will close it again,” he said, tightening his grip around his Keyblade.

“Perhaps. That is...if you survive that long!”

With a grand wave of his hand, Master Xehanort called forth a storm of Keyblades that rained down upon their heads.

“Urgh!”

While the three heroes were busy keeping out of harm’s way, Ansem, Xemnas, and Young Xehanort moved in for the kill. Sora knew all too well just how formidable each of them was.

Ansem rushed in and hit Mickey with his barrier of lasers, but before anyone could react, Xemnas attacked with glowing orbs from the Ethereal Blades in his hands. Meanwhile, Young Xehanort unleashed a ray of light that lashed around Sora like a whip.

The earth groaned as Master Xehanort raised his hands up to the sky, calling a storm of clouds to the battlefield.

Sora lost sight of Riku and Mickey as the ground beneath them slid up and became what resembled a huge stage. The swarm of Keyblades emerged from the clouds and wove in a stream through the air, occasionally diving down at Sora. When the clouds finally parted, Ansem, Xemnas, and Young Xehanort all

joined in the attack again one after the other.

“Sora!”

Riku came running over and drew Ansem’s attention away with a swing of his Keyblade. The two of them clashed in midair, moving away from Sora.

Meanwhile, Mickey had shown up to challenge Young Xehanort. That left Xemnas, who Sora targeted with a burst of magic. The spell caught Xemnas full-on, staggering him momentarily and allowing Sora a perfect chance to get close with his Keyblade.

The vicious struggle went on and on, and just as Sora began to wonder if it would ever end, he connected a satisfying blow that dropped Young Xehanort to his hands and knees, dark vapor streaming out of his body. Fading away like this was the fate of all the other fallen members of the new Organization, and yet he was smiling.

“What’s so funny?” Sora asked.

Young Xehanort looked up at him. “I told you. There’s a high price to pay for all of this,” he said meaningfully.

“And what price would that be?”

“I’ll go back to my time and live out my life. But, Sora, you’re done now. Your journey ends here.”

“What?”

Young Xehanort struggled to his feet. “Good-bye, Sora. Your time...in this word is—”

But before he could finish, the dark miasma swallowed him up, leaving nothing behind.

Riku had Ansem on his last legs, too, and with a final, mighty slash from his Keyblade, the Seeker of Darkness finally fell.

“Ansem...”

Ansem smiled back at Riku. “What...a journey you and I have had...”

Riku had never wanted to fight Ansem on his own, or host him in his body, of

course, but he had borrowed the villain's form at one point.

"You know, it's strange. I think I'm gonna miss you," Riku confessed.

"Your strength is vaster than darkness. I knew I never stood a chance. Part of me wanted to defy my fate...but when the others betrayed us, I found I did not care. And then, nothing else seemed to matter anymore."

Saying all this seemed to be cathartic for Ansem somehow. He leaned back to get a better look at the heavens.

"It is time to move on, boy... There is more to seek...so go forth now and seek it..." And with those parting words, Ansem, too, went back to the darkness.

That left only Xemnas.

He had driven Mickey back up against the edge of the platform. Sora and Riku glanced at each other, then rushed over to aid the king. Sora fired a volley of magic at Xemnas, who moved out of the way without even looking back. Riku used that distraction to bear down on Xemnas with a Keyblade strike that proved impossible to avoid, and then Mickey applied the finishing touch with a spell.

And with that, their last opponent was rendered unable to fight any further.

Xemnas looked down at the black miasma seeping from his hands and gasped. "Bested...yet again..."

"I know that you have a heart. What do you feel? Was it worth it?" Sora wanted to know.

As a Nobody, Xemnas had sought to learn more of the heart. But what was it that drove him now?

"I feel...the emptiness where my companions once stood. I took them for granted. And now, I have...nothing. My first surge of emotion in years...for as long as I can remember...and it's...loneliness. Do you see? A heart is just pain."

Xemnas slowly turned away from Sora and took a few steps.

"Pain is being human, Xemnas," Sora told him.

"Really? It must take...incredible strength..." Xemnas remarked softly, and

then he faded into oblivion like the rest.

That was the last of their three foes.

Only Master Xehanort himself still remained, watching them from his stony perch.

Riku and Mickey dropped to one knee, trying to recover some strength, but their eyes never left their foe. Sora was panting with exhaustion, too, but it wasn't enough to make him lower his Keyblade as he glared at the old man.

Twelve Keyblades hung in the air around Master Xehanort. Just as he had intended, three more had joined the ranks of the original nine.

“Twelve keys we have now. Leaving just one more!”

Master Xehanort raised a final Keyblade above his head and sent a bolt of purple lightning crackling into the heavens. The clouds began to spiral darkly where the bolt had passed, and before long, light began to shine through the opening.

“Now, Sora. Darkness and light's final clash.”

Behind Master Xehanort, Kairi's body rose with eyes closed, perhaps unconscious. She floated through the air until she was directly in front of Xehanort.

“Kairi!” Sora exclaimed, and he started to run to her.

“You require motivation,” the old man declared, and then he brought his Keyblade down on Kairi.

Sora could only watch as a light filled Kairi, transforming her into a crystal form that then shattered.

“Kairi!!!” Sora screamed as he dashed up the precipice. He quickly reached the top and slashed at Master Xehanort, while Riku and Mickey could hardly breathe as they watched from below.

“Why her?!”

But Sora's rage was in vain, as Xehanort simply knocked away the attack with a wave of his own Keyblade.

“I have done it,” the old man intoned.

“Why?!” Sora cried as he crashed back to the ground, tears falling down his cheeks. Though they had been too exhausted to react in time, Riku and Mickey mustered the last of their strength as they charged up the cliff toward Kairi’s murderer.

“Xehanort!!!”

Riku reached the old master first, only to be violently rebuffed as well.

“You’ll pay!” A beat later, Mickey struck, too. “Ultima!”

“Stopza!”

The spells were cast nearly simultaneously, but Xehanort’s was just a little bit faster.

Time stopped for Mickey, leaving him hung frozen in the air. Riku had been caught in the effects of the Stopza spell, too.

“Your Majesty! Riku!” Sora shouted in despair.

Then, something began to disperse the clouds overhead. The source of the light was Kingdom Hearts.

“Now...the Keyblade War will finally reach its conclusion!”

The thirteen Keyblades began circling around Master Xehanort as he lifted his hands to the sky, and both he and the Keyblades began to rise toward Kingdom Hearts.

He then held his own Keyblade aloft, and with a flash, it transformed into the χ -Blade.

“The χ -Blade is complete. Kingdom Hearts! I call upon your true form. Open now and show me the world to come.”

A black beam lanced from the χ -Blade and into Kingdom Hearts, which began to take on a dark color and grow so large it practically filled the sky. Countless comets of beautiful light streaked down from Kingdom Hearts, striking the ground below.

This is it... There’s no hope for us now.

I can't think of any way out of this.

Sora slumped to his knees as the strength left his body. He could hardly even cry anymore.

But then there were two voices, and two pairs of hands hauled him to his feet.

“Hey, don’t give up.”

“We thought ya might be able to use a couple a’ more half-pints.”

“Donald... Goofy...”

Sora’s two wonderful friends were there looking at him amid the shower of light.

“Typical. You can’t do anything without us, Sora,” chided Donald, trying to put some fight back into him.

Goofy patted him on the shoulder “Now wipe away those tears, Sora, and let’s go stop Master Xehanort!”

Sora rubbed his sleeve against his eyes. “Yeah...but...he controls Kingdom Hearts now. And Kairi...,” he lamented.

“You—worried?” The third voice belonged to Roxas.

“Guys,” Sora said as Roxas, Xion, and Axel arrived, followed by Aqua, Terra, and Ventus.

“Sorry we took so long. Had a couple of plot points that needed ironing out,” Axel said.

Meanwhile, two of the company who greatly resembled each other—Roxas and Ventus—were eyeing each other curiously.

“Master Xehanort...” Terra gasped as he looked at the spectacle in the sky with loathing.

“He did it. He opened Kingdom Hearts,” said Aqua.

“So what now?” Ventus asked her. Unfortunately, she didn’t have any good answers for him.

“We’ve still got one hope,” said someone. Mickey came flipping down to the ground with Riku as Xehanort’s Stopza wore off.

“Your Majesty, Riku, are you okay?” Sora asked anxiously.

The two assured him they were unharmed.

“We’re fine.”

“Yeah.”

“What hope?” Ventus asked Mickey.

“It’s Xehanort. During the Mark of Mastery exam, we learned that he can transcend space and time. He’s a portal. And we can use that to trap him,” Riku explained.

Portals are those gateways to other worlds Joshua mentioned when I visited the Sleeping Worlds for the Mark of Mastery exam. Joshua himself was a portal, and so was Young Xehanort, probably. That means his older self is one, too. If we can take advantage of that, then maybe we can stop Master Xehanort after all.

“But it won’t be easy,” said Mickey. “Aqua, Riku, I’ll need both your help if we’re gonna push Xehanort out of this world.”

“Understood,” Aqua agreed.

But Sora hurriedly stepped in front of her. “Wait. I’ll do it.” At their confused glances, he said, “What? Kingdom Hearts is a much bigger threat. Let me handle Xehanort while you guys keep it shut.”

Mickey mulled over Sora’s idea. It didn’t look like Sora was going to budge.

With a firm “I got this,” Sora went on his way—and Donald and Goofy fell into step to either side.

“You can’t forget about us,” Donald stated matter-of-factly.

He’s right. Of course he is. The three of us have gotten through everything together.

“Without Keyblades, it’s not like we’ll be much help here,” Goofy said quietly once they had put some distance between themselves and the others.

“Three half-pints together again,” Sora said, and the trio put their hands together as they had so many times before.

“Let’s move. The darkness is spreading,” urged Terra as he observed Master Xehanort and Kingdom Hearts above.

“Sora.” Xion walked up to him.

“Oh, hey.”

“Kairi will be all right. I can feel it,” she told him. Xion had a connection of her own with Kairi, after all.

“Thank you,” replied Sora, the flames of hope rekindled within him. He turned back to face Master Xehanort with redoubled determination, his Keyblade ready for action.

All the Keyblade wielders present—Riku, Mickey, Terra, Aqua, Ventus, Roxas, Axel, and Xion—held up their keys toward Kingdom Hearts and Xehanort.

“Do it!” Sora shouted from the center of the team, giving the signal for them all to send the light from the Keyblades into Kingdom Hearts. His own light went straight for Master Xehanort.

A portal emerged from Xehanort’s chest.

“What?!”

And then the world—and Sora—were bathed in blinding white.



Chapter 17

SCALA AD CAELUM

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Scala AD Caelum

WHEN SORA NEXT OPENED HIS EYES, HE BEHELD streets lined with beautiful white buildings beneath a blue sky.

“Whoa. Where are we?” Sora said to himself. Donald and Goofy were right beside him, taking in their new surroundings just like him.

It was a curious town.

The buildings seemed to have grown up through the clear blue surface of the water like trees—or some sort of aquatic plant life. What’s more, there looked to be several more islands like the one he was on. Each one was covered by a large, cone-shaped arrangement of small white houses stacked atop one another. Whether this was a lake or an ocean wasn’t immediately apparent, but the water separated these towns all the same. They were all connected only by ropeways.

But there wasn’t a single living soul in sight, human or otherwise.

“It’s beautiful,” Goofy commented as he surveyed the view.

Donald wasn’t having it, though. “Admire it another time.”

They were at the end of a pier extending into the water, and there was a bridge that led back into the city itself.

“Right. We need to find Master Xehanort,” Sora said, looking at the streets before him. His two friends nodded.

“It sure is awful quiet here,” Goofy remarked.

“There’s no one around,” added Donald.

The two of them couldn’t hide their nervousness once they stepped off the bridge into the town proper. The place really seemed abandoned.

Just then, something caught Sora’s attention—Master Xehanort was crossing

the street a short way ahead of them.

“Hey!”

Sora took off in pursuit of the old man. But then, he saw Xehanort again, but not where he should have been. Instead, he was partway up some stairs facing them.

“Huh?”

Donald and Goofy caught up with a thoroughly puzzled Sora.

He was just over there a second ago...so did he move somehow? No, that's not it...

“What’s going on?”

All over the streets around them, there were Master Xehanorts popping in and out of being. After a while, the Xehanorts began to take on a different appearance.

The new Xehanort floated above the ground and wore a black coat embroidered with red lines and a mask topped with three curved horns. There were a total of twelve of them arranged in the air, looking down at Sora, Donald, and Goofy from all sides.

“Are you serious?” Sora readied his Keyblade, while Donald and Goofy got their weapons ready, too.

“The Organization?” asked Donald.

“I don’t think they’re the locals,” said Goofy—just as the twelve Replica Xehanorts blinked out of view.

Sora advanced carefully, keeping an eye on his surroundings, when one of the Replicas appeared in front of him and struck. Once the blow had landed, it darted back into the air.

Sora leaped up after it to get in some hits of his own.

The Replicas teleported through the air as they fought, attacking one after the other. Meanwhile, one of their number stayed on the ground to keep Donald and Goofy busy. Sora fought back with his Keyblade, but the Replica Xehanorts

proved to be challenging opponents to catch amid the winding streets.

Eventually, all twelve of the Replicas took to the air and arranged themselves in a ring overhead. The sky grew dark as an arcane symbol formed and rained bolts of lightning down at the city below.

Once the onslaught subsided, the Replicas all charged Sora at once.

Sora did his best to beat them back with his Keyblade, while Donald kept him healed up with magic and Goofy protected them with his shield. Bit by bit, they began to wear down their foes.

“Time to end this!” Sora shouted, and then Goofy and Donald joined him in a final rush.

At last—through the combined efforts of the light from a Keyblade, the magic from a staff, and a good old-fashioned shield bash—the last of the Replica Xehanorts expired.

The sky cleared, leaving Sora and his friends panting under a bright sun. They were completely exhausted.

“Of all the places to be sent.”

That voice...

“Master Xehanort!” Sora exclaimed, Keyblade back in hand. The old man turned from his somewhat bemused inspection of a building and held his hands up dramatically, as if he were about to begin a speech.

“Behold, this town... Once a seat of power for all Keyblade wielders. It is the nexus from which all worlds spring. Here, I and my other selves can be one. United...in Scala ad Caelum.”

The twelve Replicas they had defeated rose again and turned into clouds of black energy that then flew to Master Xehanort. As he absorbed them all, his body took on a dark aura and floated into the air. The aura wove and twisted like a whirlwind.

From the eye of the dark storm emerged Master Xehanort, now wearing armor and a helmet shaped like the head of a goat.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy were ready.

“Come on!”

“Let’s get him!”

“Yeah!”

Master Xehanort waved his hand, and the world around them began to twist. The buildings suddenly jerked into motion, first turning on their sides, and then upside down. Sora fell to the ground, which had been the sky just moments ago; the city had been completely reversed like they were inside a mirror, confusing their senses so completely that it was almost impossible to tell left from right or up from down.

Master Xehanort remained safely in the air through all of it.

“We are just getting started,” he said, then shot forward with a flash and sent Sora sprawling back with his Keyblade. Goofy caught his friend before he hit the ground.

“Thanks, Goofy!”

“You okay?” the captain of the guard asked worriedly.

“Watch out, Sora!” Donald shouted from where he was bombarding Xehanort with magic.

One of the spells hit its mark, and Sora took that opportunity to lunge in close.

With a flick of his wrist, Master Xehanort moved the world again, this time ninety degrees to the right.

And Sora found himself falling straight into the water.

As he sank, he saw that the layers of buildings continued all the way down into the depths. Maybe these were other cities that had sunk beneath the waves.

He didn’t have much time to wonder, though. Donald and Goofy were paddling their way toward him.

Master Xehanort wasn’t going to let a little water get in the way of him and his target, either. Being underwater slowed Sora down. If he couldn’t swing his

Keyblade properly while he was swimming, then maybe the answer was—

“Magic!” Donald cried before Sora could say it himself. They both began to spin around in the water, firing off spells left and right. Master Xehanort was ready with some magic of his own, but luckily Goofy was there with his shield to keep them safe.

And then Xehanort was gone.

Sora swam to the surface with Donald and Goofy, keeping his eyes peeled for their enemy.

Through the water, they could see that the once stunning buildings of the city now lay in ruins.

There was rubble strewn all over, and a dim haze hung in the sky. Master Xehanort slowly drifted down from above. Sora made his way toward him, jumping from one pile of debris to the next. Meanwhile, Xehanort called up pillars of fire from the ground to chase him down. Sora dodged out of harm’s way and kept working his way closer as Master Xehanort’s laughter rang through the streets.

He fired off spheres of black energy that Sora deflected using his Keyblade. But when Sora finally got close, Xehanort took him by the throat. “I will teach you the futility of your actions.”

When Xehanort tossed him away, Sora managed to right himself in midair just before hitting the ground, then went immediately back on the attack.

The boy fought with every bit of strength he had in his soul and, at the end of a long and exhausting battle, finally brought Master Xehanort to a standstill. The old man’s armor cracked, and his Keyblade clanged to the ground. He couldn’t even stand straight.

After a moment, both his armor and helmet shattered in a flash, leaving him on his knees and defenseless.

Sora watched him angrily, his Keyblade still ready just in case.

But then, Xehanort flashed an arrogant smile and vanished in a burst of darkness.

Sora scanned the sky and found what looked like a clocktower that stood at the center of this world, facing them and almost daring them to come.

The upper portion of the tower was shaped like a T, with the clockface in the center, structures to either side, and a flat roof on the top. Whereas the rest of the city had been destroyed, this tower had been left pristine and untouched.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy raced for the final stage—the roof of the clocktower.

When they arrived, they found a perfectly square arena for their battle. Master Xehanort was waiting for them.

Sora thrust his Keyblade at him accusingly. “It’s all over, Xehanort!”

“You thought you could contain me here...knowing all that you do about connections?” Master Xehanort raised his right hand before him, and with a brilliant flash, the χ-Blade materialized in his grasp. “There is one sky, one destiny!” he declared, as if this was an irrefutable truth, then pointed the χ-Blade toward the heavens above.

The clouds in the sky began swirling ominously, while hazy light peeked through the gaps between them. It was just like the beginning of all this, back in the Keyblade Graveyard.

That has to be—

Donald tightened his grip on his staff, and Goofy readjusted his on his shield. Sora’s fingers clenched on the handle of his Keyblade.

It’s going to be okay. Donald and Goofy are with me.

Riku, King Mickey, and all my friends are fighting their hardest, too.

The gap in the clouds widened in the sky behind Master Xehanort.

We have to stop him. And we will!

Sora and Xehanort’s Keyblades came together with a loud metallic clash.

“Meteor!”

Sora joined forces with Donald to hammer Master Xehanort with magical boulders from the sky, and then he jumped onto Goofy’s shield.

“Let’s go!”

After building up momentum, the two of them rammed straight into Xehanort.

But the old master managed to stop the attack and force Sora away, then floated upward, turning to face the sky. A circle of arcane symbols appeared on the ground below and rose up after him, bringing Sora and his friends with them.

“Come, Kingdom Hearts!”

Master Xehanort held out the χ-Blade to the sky, and light flew from it into the opening in the clouds. A gigantic glowing heart began shining within.

Kingdom Hearts had arrived.

Spheres of light began to rain down on Sora, Donald, and Goofy. Whether they came from Master Xehanort, the sky, or Kingdom Hearts itself—that was uncertain.

All they knew was that Xehanort had to be stopped.

“Just let it end, boy.”

Master Xehanort returned to the ground in a column of light. Sora blocked a blow from the χ-Blade, then retaliated with several of his own.

Donald and Goofy hurried over to him and, with a nod showing they had the same idea, all got behind Goofy’s shield and barreled straight into Xehanort. Momentarily stunned, the old man floated back up into the air.

We have to beat him. And fast. Everyone’s counting on us.

Master Xehanort turned to face Sora, then pointed the χ-Blade skyward, shouting, “Enlighten me!”

When Kingdom Hearts pulsed brightly, a heavy feeling hit Sora’s chest.

Darkness began pouring over his body, and his eyes took on a crimson glow. Sora could feel the strength draining from his body all at once, and he hunched over almost like a Shadow. Despite his more erratic movements, that didn’t stop him from going after Xehanort.

With each hit that connected, light broke off from the old man’s body. Feeling

that the glimmering fragments would restore his strength, Sora kept attacking Xehanort with his Keyblade.

Is anger darkness? I'm definitely angry now, but...I think some anger can protect others.

I—

Sora's thoughts broke off as countless rays of light shot down on the battlefield. Evading them as best he could, he leaped up toward Kingdom Hearts. Still wrapped in darkness, he dropped on Master Xehanort from above with his Keyblade.

Sora's enemy came crashing down into the center of the floating symbol they stood on, and Sora landed a short distance away, now back to his old self.

As he did, tall pillars appeared around the battlefield with figures wearing black coats sitting on thrones atop them. There were thirteen of them, and they would attack, then disappear in a flash.

Blocking and countering their attacks seemed to get rid of the pillars for good. Once they were all gone, Master Xehanort floated up into the air again.

Sora aimed his Keyblade at Xehanort, firing a stream of light out at him just like when he opened Keyholes.

But the light fell short.

Master Xehanort laughed.

"It ends here and now!" he bellowed, then soared even higher with the great moon at his back. Kingdom Hearts took on a dark hue, and the beam from the χ-Blade fired straight for Sora.

Sora managed to get his Keyblade up in time, but the force of the impact sent him flying backward into the very depths of darkness.

Sora floated in the abyss for a time.

Am I...falling into the darkness...?

I... I... No. I can't give up now.



Not when I have my friends here with me. I've still got to protect everyone.

Sora was on the verge of succumbing to the darkness when two lights approached: one blue and one green.

It was Donald and Goofy—the other two half-pints making the whole.

Sora opened his eyes to see that Donald and Goofy had joined him in holding up his Keyblade against Xehanort's beam.

Three lights shone forth from the Keyblade, merging into a radiant beam that utterly destroyed Xehanort's own and sent the fallen master toppling from the sky.

Back on the roof, Master Xehanort sank to his knees and then collapsed before the three heroes.

"Why...? How...?"

"It's over now! You lost!"

And yet Xehanort still only grinned back, looking up at the sky. "No, look... You are too late..."

Kingdom Hearts shimmered overhead.

Behind Sora, Goofy and Donald were discussing the matter.

"Are we really?"

"I don't know."

"What's gonna happen?" Sora asked.

"A purge... The world will be returned whence it started," Master Xehanort answered as he slowly pushed himself up and back into a kneeling position. He seemed almost grief-stricken as he explained. "The world began in darkness. And from that darkness came light. From the light came the people, and the people had hearts. Evil burgeoned in those hearts, begetting more darkness. And that darkness spread across the world like a plague. The light, the symbol of the world's hope, was devoured by shadow, leaving nothing but ruin... An utter failure. But the first light—the light of Kingdom Hearts—it can give us a new start. An empty world, pure and bright..."

“It wasn’t your decision to make,” Sora told him. *No one has the right to choose that for the whole world.*

Master Xehanort used the χ-Blade to help himself stand. “Then whose was it?” His voice trembled with anger. “The world needs someone to stand up and lead. Someone strong to stop the weak from polluting the world with their endless darkness. Someone to dictate their destiny.”

But Sora had to tell him the error of his ways: “If so...you’re not that person, Xehanort.”

The old master scowled at Sora.

“A real leader knows destiny is beyond his control...and accepts that.”

This boy seemed to pique Xehanort’s interest. He narrowed his eyes, then softly said, “You...make me think of an old friend.”

“Look!” Goofy cried.

A Keyhole took shape on Kingdom Hearts and grew into a huge magical circle, a beautiful pattern like something in a kaleidoscope.

Several streaks of light flew out from it—and Sora recognized them.

“You made it!” Sora exclaimed.

It was Riku, Mickey, Roxas, Xion, Axel, Terra, Aqua, and Ventus—the other guardians of light.

Mickey walked up to Sora, Donald, and Goofy. “Are you okay?”

“Kingdom Hearts is closing on the other side,” Riku explained. “But we managed to follow our hearts to you.”

“Master Xehanort...” Terra turned toward the one who had betrayed him, and he was about to approach him when Aqua caught him by the arm.

But after she saw the gentle expression on his face, she him let go.

Terra walked over and stood before Xehanort. “There’s more to light than meets the eye. As I told you.”

The old man’s eyes widened in surprise at that. “You sly fox...,” he said.

Terra began to shine, and then Master Eraqus emerged from within him. He and his three students were together again.

“Now, hand over the χ-Blade, Xehanort,” Master Eraqus said quietly.

“It is too late,” Xehanort insisted.

Master Eraqus shook his head slowly, then turned to Sora. “For us, perhaps... but not for them.”

“No... I can do this.” Xehanort tightened his grip on the χ-Blade, but then Eraqus took one of the grips in his right hand. With a soft smile, he put his left hand on Xehanort’s shoulder.

“Enough. Checkmate.”

How many decades had passed since that day?

Eraqus and Xehanort, not yet masters, sat across a game board in a room right here in Scala ad Caelum. The only piece on the board was a single white king, declaring victory.

“I told you that you might be surprised,” Eraqus said, while Xehanort turned his face away in a huff.

“Yeah, you got me.”

“Huh? Really?”

“What?” Xehanort asked. He wasn’t expecting Eraqus to be so surprised.

“It’s just...you never admit it when you lose.”

“That’s ’cause I never lose.”

“Oh, come on.”

The two friends grinned and laughed, and Xehanort offered his congratulations.

“Good game today.”

“I try.”

“Maybe I won’t go as far as you.” Xehanort flicked the king on the board with a finger. “When the world needs a defender, they’ll pick you, Eraqus.”

“Y-you think?” Eraqus said in surprise, then scratched his head bashfully.

“But that doesn’t mean that I can’t be there for you,” Xehanort added.

“Yeah. And I’ll be there for you.”

The two shared another smile, then laughed.

Life had been so peaceful back then.

“Very well done.” Master Xehanort approached Sora and offered him the χ-Blade.

“Terra, Aqua, Ven,” said Master Eraqus. “Forgive your foolish teacher.”

“Master!”

Aqua and Ventus ran over to their teacher and threw their arms around him.

“Master!” Terra walked over a moment later, watching Eraqus.

“Ven, I put you through such a harrowing experience.”

Master Eraqus placed an arm around the boy’s back, and Ventus pressed his head into his master’s chest.

“And Aqua, I left you with such a heavy burden.”

Aqua could only answer with a small sob.

“Terra, look after them for me. Please.”

Terra met Master Eraqus’s gaze and nodded.

Master Xehanort, who had been watching the reunion, began to stumble, but his old friend caught him. As he lent Xehanort a shoulder, Eraqus said his final words. “Ready, my friend?”

“Yes...,” Master Xehanort said with a smile.

Light flowed over both of them, returning them briefly to their youth.

The two young men smiled at each other, then disappeared in a flash.

Kingdom Hearts bathed the world in its radiance.

“Sora, let’s close it,” Mickey urged him.

Sora nodded and held the χ-Blade up. “Everybody, help me out.”

At Sora's signal, all the guardians came to stand behind him. Sora pointed the χ-Blade up to the heavens—to Kingdom Hearts—and let the light burst out from its tip.

When the beam met Kingdom Hearts, it began to glow until its light covered the entire world.

And then they were back in the Keyblade Graveyard. They had returned from Scala ad Caelum to the crossroads among the ancient Keyblades.

"It's finally over," Mickey said with a smile.

Sora shook his head, facing away from the others. "...No."

"We'll find Kairi. Let's head back to Master Yen Sid. We can figure it out," Riku said to Sora.

"No, I know what to do." Sora raised his head again, then turned to his friends. "My whole journey began the day I lost her. And every time I find her... she slips away again. I thought we'd finally be together. But she's out there, alone."

Sora lowered his eyes for a moment, then looked back at his friends.

"Not for one more second," he said firmly. He'd made up his mind, and no one could argue with him.

Donald and Goofy walked over to him.

"We'll go, too!"

"That's right!"

Sora shook his head sadly. "Thank you, Donald, Goofy. But this time, I have to go it alone."

Mickey came over and expressed his own worries about the plan. "Sora, listen. The power of waking isn't to go chase hearts around! Even if you do locate Kairi, you might never come back to us again."

"I will. And we'll both be back before you know it," Sora assured the king with a confident smile.

"Please..." Mickey couldn't give up trying to persuade him.

“Let him go, Mickey,” Riku said, kneeling down beside the king. “His heart and his mind are made up. Now, believe in him.”

“Yeah... Safe journey, Sora.”

“Thank you,” Sora replied. Riku and all his other friends had faith in him through thick and thin, and he really was grateful for that.

And then, as everyone looked on, he raised his Keyblade to the sky.

A beam of light streaked from it, opening the way forward.



Chapter 18

R e M i n d

Chapter 18

Re Mind

A MAN IN A BLACK COAT SAT ALONE ON A BOULDER in the Keyblade Graveyard, while another similar figure walked slowly over to him.

“So?” the seated man asked.

The other man removed his hood and revealed—a younger Xehanort.

“Yeah. It wards off darkness. It’s useful,” Xehanort said, looking over the coat in question.

“Told ya! So how’d it go? The tour,” the other man asked in a cheerful tone.

Xehanort took a seat next to him. “I learned...the reason for my existence.”

The man threw his head back dramatically, then turned to peer into Xehanort’s face with interest. “Ohhh? Tell me more.”

Xehanort lowered his gaze and obliged. “All around the world, people live seemingly peaceful lives. They believe themselves to be moral and virtuous, but it’s all an act. Darkness lurks in the pit of everyone’s heart. Their light is a total farce.”

The man listened to it all intently. “Sounds like your trip around the world opened your eyes, but you got a little more than you anticipated. Must’ve seen a lot of darkness,” he commented.

Xehanort leaned back and looked up at the sky, which was thick with clouds. “Those who are weak, and who desire greater power, simply strip the strong of their power and convince themselves they’ve earned it. That’s how people become tainted by darkness. They believe what they want to believe, using hollow reasons as justification. They repeat this cycle, and their darkness grows.”

“So you’re saying the weak feel the need to justify their actions to maintain a

sense of self. Can't let that slide?" the man said.

Xehanort remained where he was. "No, it's better they be ruled by darkness." He returned his attention to the other man, then elaborated. "People carry delusions of having power, but it's a lie. They are but sheep pretending to be wolves. Though I admit I can understand why."

"Oh, never heard that one before, a Keyblade wielder willing to side with the darkness? Why not just let them be until the darkness consumes them?"

While the mysterious man seemed unconcerned with the matter either way, Xehanort laced his fingers together and lowered his eyes to the ground, his expression resolute.

"Because left alone, the world would fall to chaos. There needs to be order."

"You sure about that? Why not just sit back and watch it play out?" the man asked, standing up.

Xehanort, however, did not look up as he answered. "Understanding hearts is difficult, more so the emotions within. I simply realize that it's easy to dismiss what you don't comprehend."

"All right, all right... The world needs you, I'll grant you that one," the man said, his back to Xehanort.

"I don't know what I can do, but I will act. What comes next is too important," Xehanort stated.

Then man turned around. "I suppose letting false light dictate the future might be a pretty lousy move. So? You can make a change. You have that power. What do you want for the world?"

"Power, eh...?" Xehanort finally took his eyes off his feet, then said, "Who knows? My training's coming to an end, and the exam's not far off. Maybe I can gain some clarity then."

"You're letting the exam decide? Listen to me, the results don't matter. You believe the world needs you. Sounds like you already know where you're headed," the man advised.

Xehanort gazed down at his hands. "It's funny. Somehow, I can sense where

I'm supposed to go and what I'm supposed to do. Yes, even this coat, there's something familiar about it, as if I'm meant to wear this—"

"Hmm... No...you'll ditch it soon." The man cut him off before he could say any more, pointing at the coat.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that one day you're going to outgrow it."

Xehanort couldn't understand what exactly that meant. "How so?"

"If you truly possess great power, the darkness can't control you. You won't need a silly old coat to stay safe. In fact, you'll be the one controlling the darkness instead. Me, on the other hand, I'm too much of a scaredy-cat to ever take mine off." The man's melodramatic pantomime of fear made it difficult to take his claim seriously.

Xehanort did not play along. After all, this wasn't their first time talking together, and the man always behaved this way. "Who are you really? Some kind of fortune-teller?"

The man looked up at the sky for a moment as he pondered his answer, then turned away and said, "Well, I could lie and tell you that's what I am, when I'm actually a brilliant artist, or even a scholar. I could tell you that I dream of world peace, when I'm actually waiting for its destruction. The truth is what you see with your eyes, not what you hear."

"So your name?"

The man spun back around. "What did I just—?" he started to complain, staring at Xehanort beneath his hood.

But then...

"Never mind, I guess there's no harm. My name is ——."

After revealing his name, the man turned away again.

"I'm a Lost Master."

"Lost...Master...", Xehanort repeated softly as the man slowly walked off.

"May your heart be your guiding key," he said by way of farewell, then

vanished.

Some seventy-five years later, back in the Keyblade Graveyard...

Xehanort—now a Keyblade Master and much, much older than before—had closed his eyes in thought. He smiled. The wind danced about him, just as it had that day long ago.

“What’s so funny, old man? Mind sharing with us?”

The question came from Xigbar, who stood with Saïx beside him.

“I stand here today because of a fated encounter very many years ago, when I was still a young lad. I never learned who he was, and perhaps I never will. But I see now the truth he spoke of.”

Xehanort’s reminiscence earned a derisive snort of laughter from Xigbar.

“We don’t have time for bedtime stories. Without the kid, we’re still down a thirteenth vessel, and as for the other twelve, only three of us are here right now. Are you absolutely sure the others made their way back to their respective times?”

At Xigbar’s tirade, Saïx turned his attention to the thirteen stone columns that stood off in the distance. He teleported himself to the top of one, and Master Xehanort and Xigbar soon warped up after him to columns of their own. Saïx lifted a hand, then three of the other columns were filled by phantoms of other members of the real Organization XIII.

All this reminded Master Xehanort of something else. These pillars had been here even back then. All thirteen of them. *Could I have known the significance of that number even back then?*

“Marluxia and Larxene are both here in this time, attempting to locate the New Seven Hearts,” said Saïx. “Luxord is also somewhere about in this age, but after our last meeting, he went in search of something, per your order. Isn’t that so?”

“Oh, that! Right...” Xigbar shrugged, trying to brush off the prying question. “Well, let’s just say that what he’s doing will benefit us in the long run, but it’s really of no importance right this second. Go on.”

“Playing your cards close as usual,” Saïx commented, then looked over at Master Xehanort. The old man apparently didn’t have anything to say about Xigbar’s behavior.

“All right. The hearts of Ansem, Xemnas, Vanitas, Riku Replica, and Young Xehanort returned to where they came from and reassembled once more. Each of them is seeking a guardian of light.”

Images of all those mentioned except for Riku Replica appeared around Master Xehanort.

Xigbar looked them over, then turned to the phantoms on the stone columns again.

“So the ones who turned human and then back into Nobodies again are me, you, Luxord, Marluxia, and Larxene—that’s five. The ones from the past transferred into Replicas are Ansem, Xemnas, Vanitas, Riku Replica, and the old man’s younger self. Then we add the old man in, the total comes up to eleven. I think we’re still missing two.”

Once Xigbar had given a rundown of the state of Organization XIII, Master Xehanort took the reins. “Now we must discuss why we have assembled here today. My incarnations from past times, vessels into which I transferred my heart, my essence, were destroyed. Thus, I was restored to what you see now. For one to completely disappear, their heart and body must be restored to their original form. That is one reason why I distributed my heart into several vessels. Ansem and Xemnas originated from Terra, or rather his young form—and it, too, was restored. However, my heart was returned to me, while his is yet lost. I decided to fill this hollow vessel with my heart—indeed, the very same heart that previously resided in young Terra.”

An image of Terra-Xehanort appeared in front of Xehanort.

“So that makes twelve. Then who do we get to replace the kid?” Xigbar wanted to know.

“Twenty Replicas were created by Vexen. The first twelve were nothing more than puppets, barely human. The prototype model was the Riku Replica, and then No. *i* was made. That leaves us with six. Ansem, Xemnas, Vanitas, Riku Replica, and Young Xehanort’s hearts—five vessels, one left. Vexen and Demyx

are candidates, but backups at best. The plan for the last Replica is to give it a heart that is connected to Sora's."

An image of Vexen took form, flanked by Riku Replica and No. *i*.

Xigbar had never seen the second, smaller figure before. "Connected to Sora? Anyone in mind?"

"The second prototype that was created, No. *i*. Though erased from memory, it remained in Vexen's records. Its existence is greatly linked to Sora's memories, and thus could prove to be more than adequate for our needs."

All memory of No. *i* had been erased from the world, and Saix was no exception. But strangely enough, the records had somehow survived this purge.

"No. *i*... Any imaginary number, how fitting," Xigbar muttered as he looked at the Replica in question.

"While Young Xehanort is occupied with transferring hearts, I must go fulfill my duty. I will go and retrieve Vexen," Saix explained.

Xigbar couldn't help but smile. "Reliable as always. It sounds to me like you've got everything dependably under control. Well, I'm off to do my part." He shrugged, then stepped through into the Corridors of Darkness.

"The plan, as we agreed upon," Saix said to Master Xehanort, then made his own exit.

Now alone, Master Xehanort spoke softly to himself. "May your heart be your guiding key."

“This is...”

As far as Sora could tell, this was only his second visit to this place, this world of sky and sea. But unlike the last time he was here, Sora was whole and no different from normal.

Then, a speck of light drifted down from the sky, calling out in a cute and very familiar voice.

“Chirithy,” Sora said.

“Back so soon?”

It was indeed Chirithy—the little creature that looked like a cross between a cat and a plush toy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well...” Sora then explained everything that had happened up to that point, and about how he wanted to find Kairi.

A troubled look came over Chirithy’s face. “Even with the power of waking, you can’t just bring someone back.”

“But Kairi’s heart hasn’t been lost yet. She’s still with us, right?” Sora asked desperately.

“Maybe, but this time, I’m afraid the situation is a lot worse,” said Chirithy, its paws holding his head.

Sora had seen Kairi’s physical body shattered with his own eyes—but that didn’t mean her heart was done for, too. “Hey, I’ve already restored six hearts. What’s one more?”

“But that’s not how it’s supposed to work at all. The power of waking is meant to be used to wake and restore sleeping hearts, not to restore them after they’ve completely faded away from existence. You’ve done that six times before, and as a result, you’ve managed to greatly alter the course of history itself. You’ve broken a nature taboo.”

“Taboo...?” Sora repeated the unfamiliar term.

“A forbidden act. Break a taboo of nature, and you’ll end up paying an

extraordinary price.”

“You’ve paid the price. And it lies at the bottom of the abyss.”

Young Xehanort had said something similar in San Fransokyo, back when Sora was tracking down his friends’ hearts. It was like an omen.

“I’ve heard that before... So what’s the price?”

“You’ll lose your powers. You won’t be able to use the power of waking,” Chirithy warned him.

Sora smiled. “That’s all? No problem.”

Not like I haven’t already lost the power of waking once before. All I need to do is go learn how again.

Chirithy still had a grave look on his face. “But that’s not all. You yourself...will vanish from this world. And without your powers, you can’t return to the world you came from.”

That gave Sora pause. But he soon fixed Chirithy with a determined gaze. “I don’t care.”

“What?!” Chirithy squeaked in shock.

“There’s a lot I don’t understand, but I know that this is all I can do right now. I have to do everything I can to get Kairi back. That’s the whole reason behind my journey.” *I know what I feel about this, and nothing will change it.*

“...I can’t stop you, can I?”

“Nope, I have to follow my heart,” Sora said back with a grin.

“Hmm... Well, then this really is good-bye, so listen carefully to me.”

Sora indicated he understood, then allowed his Keyblade to open the way forward.

As he traversed the roads of time, Sora thought back on what Chirithy had told him.

“You’ll return to the past again, but you won’t be able to rewrite it this time. No matter what happens, you have to accept it and move on.”

Sora found himself standing in the Keyblade Graveyard back when all nine of them had just arrived, right before Ventus spotted Terra.

Chirithy's advice continued to run through his mind:

"The heart you have now—it already existed during that time. It went back into that past earlier. Nothing can change that fact. The place where you'll return is the tear in the fabric of that time that was created when you changed your destiny, then changed it once again. In order to not stray too far from the true power of waking, you'll enter and pass through the hearts of the guardians until you reach Kairi's heart."

Terra arrived, and Ven ran over to him.

"Every emotion that each of the guardians felt...sadness, anxiety, fear, kindness. Everything they saw, and everything that they felt then, you'll clear a way through it, traverse across their hearts, and dive ever deeper inside."

Then Aqua, who had been wary of Terra from the moment of their reunion, took Ventus by the shoulder.

This was another scene from the past Sora had witnessed firsthand.

"I can't be sure what's waiting for you at the end, or what you'll actually be able to do, but by following the connection of hearts, you'll come to discover a greater truth—one that's sure to help you."

Terra's hair turned silver, revealing that he was Terra-Xehanort all along.

"But...in this flow of time in the past, you'll only have up until the moment you left for this place, so you'll have to find and restore Kairi's heart before then. That's all the advice I can give you. Beyond that, I can only say 'May your heart... be your guiding key.'"

Up until that moment, Sora had been inside his past self, but when Terra-Xehanort struck Ventus with his Keyblade, he made his exit. And as he did so, he noticed a small glimmer near his chest.

"This...is Ven's heart..."

When Ventus lost consciousness, his heart had come here. Sora tried to speak to the light, and he found himself in a dark, dark place. A place that greatly

resembled the one he had dreamed of before his journey began, in fact.

“Ven! Ven!” Sora shouted desperately.

No, leave him be.

The words hadn’t been spoken aloud, or even directly into his mind, but Sora somehow still knew them.

“What?!”

He’s too pure...and a pure heart can be most careless.

“Who are you?” Sora asked the source.

...Darkness.

“Darkness? ...Vanitas?” Sora called, but darkness surged up from below him.

When Sora came to...he was standing alone on the wastes of the Keyblade Graveyard. None of his friends were there for some reason.

The darkness that had overtaken him was gone, too—but not for long. This time, it flowed into a vortex that gradually transformed into a Heartless with swords in each hand—Dark Inferno χ.

Sora blocked its first attack and shoved the swords away, then delivered a blow of his own with his Keyblade.

What...what is this thing?

Sora didn’t let that question bother him too much, though. While Dark Inferno χ put up a tough fight, Sora was still able to defeat the monster. It left this world just like a normal Heartless would—in a flash of light.

Then Sora himself was overtaken by the light, and he could hear faint voices speaking.

“That’s it!”

“Axel!”

“No! Sora!”

“Donald, don’t!!”

“Zettaflare!”

“Ven...”

The last voice Sora heard clearly—it belonged to Aqua.

Suddenly, Sora was back where it all began, in that dark place inside the heart.

“Is this...Aqua’s heart?” Sora said as he looked around. While Ventus’s heart had been peaceful, Aqua’s...was full of fear. Still inside Aqua’s heart, Sora found himself back on the wasteland.

“This can’t be real.”

I’m talking to myself.

“Pull it together, Sora! We haven’t lost them. They still have their hearts. But we have to protect them,” Riku said as more Heartless appeared. This was another scene from the past.

Aqua looked up at the Demon Tower and whispered, “It can’t be... No...”

The terror within her poured into Sora, and through the eyes of her heart, Sora could see an army of anti-Aquas flying through air.

I get it now. Aqua had to fight the Heartless over and over and over down in the realm of darkness, and that created fear in her heart. And then it came back again—that’s why she couldn’t do anything.

“So...this is the fear and despair that Aqua feels... And now...I feel it, too.”

The Demon Tide swept over both of them, and then...Sora and Aqua stood on the Dark Margin. The anti-Aqua with eyes of glowing gold lunged for him.

So this is what the fear in her heart looks like. I have to get rid of it!

Sora caught the terrifying anti-Aqua’s attack with his Keyblade, then fought back with spells and strikes of his own.

Before long, anti-Aqua lay defeated, and the light overtook him and the real Aqua again.

This was when the despair got to me, too—when I lost my friends and completely broke down. After this, I met Chirithy and went to go find everyone’s hearts, right?

“Terra! We found you!”

“Terra, please say you’re in there.”

“What gives, Aqua?”

“I know that you’re not him. Now, let our friend go!”

Once more, Ventus spotted Terra—or the one he believed was Terra.

Oh yeah... I was already back when this happened.

But when Sora opened his eyes, all he saw was that same dark space. *I know this place, though. This is my heart. Did I pass through the tear...?*

Sora was still wondering what was going on when a light drew near, gentle and peaceful. He soon saw that it was actually a girl.

“Sora?!”

“Naminé?!”

Yes—it was Naminé.

“What are you doing here? Have you lost yourself like I did?” she asked, hovering in Sora’s heart.

“Well, it’s a long story. But tell me, why haven’t you returned to Kairi’s heart yet?”

“Today is the day you all lose.”

Sora heard Terra-Xehanort’s declaration from somewhere outside this dark place. The pale light of this realm illuminated both of them as he spoke to Naminé.

*“Because...I’m still not able to. But...I’m calling out to Terra’s heart, and I brought *him* here.”*

“Terra?”

“No, Terra’s heart is too steeped in darkness. Instead, I’ve brought out Terra’s most personal and powerful thoughts. This is Terra’s sadness, anger, lament...”

“Terra’s thoughts...?”

“How I’ve waited for this moment.”

Beyond the dark place, the Linging Will had made its entrance on the field of the Keyblade Graveyard. It was the manifestation of those powerful thoughts of Terra's, and Naminé had led it here.

The Linging Will stopped Terra-Xehanort in his tracks.

"Wretched spirit!" Terra-Xehanort spat.

The Linging Will responded by holding out its Keyblade. "As long as Master Xehanort resides within you, you're a threat to Aqua and Ven."

"How noble. You would give your life for theirs?" Terra-Xehanort sneered.

"You must be removed from existence...at all costs."

The Linging Will charged, Terra-Xehanort did the same, and the two came together with a vicious clash.

As Sora stood beneath the pale light with Naminé, he could hardly stand to just watch.

"Naminé, can you call out to Terra?"

"No, his rage is too strong. He won't respond to me," she answered, unable to conceal her own anxiety.

"No matter who gets hurt, it's bad for Terra," said Sora. "Either way, you have to leave. Go to the world of ocean and sky."

"And you?"

Sora turned back to Naminé and flashed a grin. "I got this."

"Begone!" Terra-Xehanort shouted. In the same instant, the Dark Figure rose up behind him and seized the Linging Will by the head, trying to crush its helmet.

That was when Sora returned to the world in a blinding burst of light—and just in time, by the look of it.

Sora charged in at lightning speed and knocked the Dark Figure away with enough force to scatter it into mist.

"How can you be here?!" Terra-Xehanort exclaimed as he regained his balance.

Sora smiled. “Hey, I can travel to different times, too, you know. Did you think you were the only one with that power?”

“You dare...!”

The flippant explanation had Terra-Xehanort trembling with rage. He hurled himself at Sora with ferocious speed.

Though he wore Terra’s body, his moves and skill with a Keyblade were all Xehanort. His Keyblade met Sora’s with terrible momentum, enough to drive Sora to one knee. While Terra-Xehanort had his attention, the Dark Figure suddenly rose behind him, taking him into its clutches. Sora was helpless as Terra-Xehanort rushed in to deliver what would most certainly be a fatal blow.

But then, he was shielded from the attack.

The fatal blow meant for Sora shattered the Lingering Will’s helmet, and the rest of the armor fell to pieces that vanished in a brilliant burst of light.

“Terra!”

“Seeing that you have also taken the forbidden path, you too must be ready to make the ultimate sacrifice,” Terra-Xehanort said with an arrogant smirk, then swung his Keyblade toward Sora, creating a dark wave.

Sora withstood the attack, and when it dispersed, there was Terra-Xehanort right in front of him.

With a laugh, Terra-Xehanort struck Sora with his Keyblade and sent him flying back. But as soon as he landed, Sora quickly jumped back up and got right back into the fray.

Sora was about to land an attack of his own when the Dark Figure intervened.

“Outta the way!”

Sora fired off a spell, taking the Dark Figure out of the picture and allowing him to focus on Terra-Xehanort.

The battle didn’t last much longer. Terra-Xehanort staggered back, exhausted for the moment—but not entirely.

He let out a roar, calling the Dark Figure forth again to attack Sora.

“Darkness awaits you!” he shouted with rage as the Dark Figure grabbed Sora and lifted him off the ground. Sora could see the darkness billowing upward from his enemy’s body.

What happened to us after that? Oh yeah, we went into that labyrinth, and then we split up.

Me and Riku beat Xigbar and Dark Riku, and then I took down Marluxia, Larxene, and Luxord with Mickey. After that, I fought Terra and Vanitas with Aqua and Ven—but wait, didn’t that thing behind Terra end up saving us?

The one I was fighting just a moment ago?

I’m pretty sure I lost back there, so why am I here alive now?

Sora was slowly sinking, sinking down into water that was terrifyingly dark.

What...happened to me...? I leaped out of Terra’s thoughts... And we fought Terra-Xehanort together...

Sora looked in the direction he was sinking and saw that there was light below.

That’s it! This is Terra’s heart... He must’ve protected me!

Sora slipped into his own heart and went back to Terra, Aqua, and Ventus.

He watched as the three of them were united once more, then went off to meet Kairi and Axel. They were facing Xemnas, Saïx, and one other person—a girl he didn’t recognize.

“It’s all right...”

Xion.

Sora already knew the name he was going to say there, but he wasn’t the one who said it. That was someone else inside of him—Roxas.

There inside his heart, Sora encountered Roxas’s heart.

Roxas’s heart... The light it gave off fluttered away like birds, flying free to go wherever they wanted. He was surrounded by Roxas, Axel, and Xion’s most treasured memories.

Roxas’s voice had made everyone remember again.

Sora tried to open a Keyhole, but for some reason, it wouldn't appear.

"Why...?"

Sora...

That was Roxas's voice.

I need your help...

There's...something me and my friends have to reclaim, something that connected our hearts.

That's what's binding me to this world...the last key.

I need your help to get it back.

"Got it. I have an idea. Wait for my signal," Sora answered in a firm voice, then set Roxas's heart free with his Keyblade. This time, it worked.

Sora was returned to his past self, and Roxas had made the journey back with him.

Then came the moment Sora had been waiting for throughout the entire fight. *Kairi was taken away...right after Roxas came back. I'm sure of it.*

"Roxas! Now!"

Sora swung his Keyblade at Xemnas, who parried the attempt and swatted him to one side. That was Roxas and Xion's signal to leap into action. Saix tried to intercept them, but Axel stepped in to keep him occupied. Roxas hammered Xemnas with his Keyblades, and then Xion did the same with hers. She spun around to one side to continue the offensive, but that gave Xemnas a moment to get his Ethereal Blades up and knock them away.

And then Kairi came down from above with her Keyblade raised to strike.

Xemnas was able to avoid her blistering series of attacks with a quick backstep.

Brambles of dark energy emanated from his hands and bound Kairi in place, and when Sora tried to help her, he was entangled, too.

"Now watch...as your friends slowly vanish into nothing," Xemnas said, his eyes on Axel, Roxas, and Xion. "These useless pawns must be cleared from the

board!” he shouted.

Saïx rushed at Roxas and the others. Sora hung unconscious in his bonds, but a small orb of light left his body, carrying his heart to Roxas.

“Looks like we’re gonna have to do this the hard way... C’mon, Isa, snap out of it!”

Roxas and Xion ran to engage Saïx at Axel’s prompt. After a grueling fight, Axel’s flames finally brought the battle with his onetime friend to an end.

“Roxas! Xion!” Axel yelled, and they nodded back. “He’s got something that belongs to us!”

The three of them hit Xemnas at once.

He clutched his chest, groaning in pain, as something that resembled the letter X emerged from within him.

The symbol split into three, with a piece each flying to Roxas, Axel, and Xion.

“Is this...is this the sigil?” Xion asked as she watched the X-shaped light go into her chest.

“Yeah. That’s the mark Xemnas gave us. It’s what connected us from the start. It’s the...foundation...of the bond we all share,” Axel explained. It was a sigil shared by all three of the former Organization members.

“The mark will disappear along with Xemnas, and that’s fine. I just wanted to reclaim it for myself. It’s how our bond came to be,” Roxas added.

“This... This is the connection we needed,” said Xion as she looked at her sigil fondly.

“That’s why I needed Sora’s help. So that we could end this battle once and for all!” said Roxas, as Sora and Kairi’s bonds fell away along with the barrier around the battlefield.

Sora’s heart left Roxas and returned to his own body.

“I don’t need hearts. I will scatter them to the winds!”

But only a moment later, Kairi was taken away by Xemnas once again.

Then Saïx fell, and Sora returned to somewhere even deeper within his heart.

I've visited the hearts of five guardians—Ven, Aqua, Terra, Roxas, and myself. I should be able to find Kairi if I can make it to the other two.

Question is, when's the right moment...?

The battle wasn't over yet; as before, Sora faced Ansem, Xemnas, and Young Xehanort atop the platform that lay beyond the maze.

But Kairi's body shattered just as it had the first time.

I can't watch this happen again... Why...? Why?!

No. I knew this part of the story. I'll have my chance. I know I will.

Again, Master Xehanort froze time with a spell, and Kingdom Hearts appeared in the sky.

...Sora.

A voice called out to him.

"Your Majesty...?"

It's me! I'm glad my voice is reaching you.

Mickey was speaking to him somehow.

"Your Majesty! Kairi's..."

I know, but we can still save her.

All the heroes gathered around to discuss the dire situation, while Sora continued to listen to Mickey speak deep inside his own heart.

"What's happening?" Sora asked the king.

Master Xehanort's got a lot of tricks up his sleeve.

Kairi's one of the seven hearts, which is why he crystallized her—so he can use her as insurance until Kingdom Hearts is opened. She's his last resort."

Mickey and Riku explained as they had in the past, telling him about Master Xehanort being a portal.

That portal...

This was when Xion told Sora something very important.

“Kairi will be all right. I can feel it.”

But that still didn't tell Sora how exactly to get Kairi back. *So the final battle ended, and Kairi didn't return. Even if I continue to search with my past self, I won't find her. What should I do...? Kairi, where are you?*

Then Sora realized something.

He had jumped through Master Xehanort's portal back then. If he was going to find Kairi anywhere, it was probably in there.

“That's it!”

Sora launched himself into the portal even faster than his past self. He knew what lay ahead of him. It was that city—Scala ad Caelum.

Sora arrived just where he thought he would, only before his past self and the others.

He headed into the city streets, and before long, he spotted Kairi. When he chased after her, he came upon a pack of Nobodies and Heartless, one of which was glowing with an inner light. He made sure to catch it.

A brilliant crystal rose from the Heartless once he defeated it and flew into Sora's palm.

“I can feel Kairi's heart...”

Now that he had a piece of her with him, Sora proceeded farther into the city in search of more images of Kairi. All kinds of puzzles and Heartless awaited him among its avenues, but one by one he found the shards of Kairi's heart. Most of them, anyway. *Let's see...*

“That's five... How many more?” Sora asked himself.

“There are two more,” a voice answered.

Sora spun around and found Master Xehanort standing there.

“Why are you here...?!” Sora called his Keyblade to his hand, but Xehanort merely smiled.

“I am the one who hid the fragments of Kairi that you seek. Of course I am here. No matter—did you come alone?”

“Yeah.”

Master Xehanort chuckled. “Are you prepared to pay the ultimate price?”

“Enough! It’s only two! I’m saving Kairi!” Sora yelled in frustration.

Xehanort looked out over the city. “Unfortunately, you’re a little too late.”

“Oh no...”

“It appears you have failed to retrieve Kairi in the time to come. So here you are, once again, in times already passed. However, now that the other ‘you’ has arrived, you’re doomed to repeat the same fate.” Master Xehanort laughed at the worry on Sora’s face. “Whatever can you do? You are nearly out of time.”

Sora watched his other self approach the city. His only option here was to merge with his past version again and fight. And merge with himself he did, holding his Keyblade.

He was facing twelve Xehanorts—or rather, Replica Xehanorts.

“Ready?”

After the battle with the Replicas, Sora returned to the depths of his heart.

Okay, so I fought in my own body this time, but what am I supposed to do next? If I don’t figure this out now, I’ll never get Kairi back. Two more fragments... Just two more...

Wait! What if...? What if I can trace the hearts of two more guardians...

But how...? Everyone always told me to just follow my heart, but... Follow my heart...? Hearts are all connected... Maybe I can just follow the connection...

“That’s it!”

Sora raised his Keyblade skyward. The hearts of the last two guardians...Riku and King Mickey.

Back in the Keyblade Graveyard, the eight remaining guardians held their Keyblades up at Kingdom Hearts, firing eight lights into it.

“Everybody, be strong!” Mickey called out to the others, who all acknowledged him a bit anxiously.

“So...if we can’t stop him, what happens?” Axel asked.

“I don’t know... But...there’s no question in my mind that that’s not the true Kingdom Hearts. I can’t...imagine what’ll happen if he succeeds,” Aqua said.

“If we hold it back, it might vanish,” Ventus said.

“No,” Terra corrected. “Only the χ-Blade has the power to stop it.”

“But...,” Ventus said dejectedly.

However, Riku remained calm. “We all need to trust Sora.”

“That’s right!” Mickey agreed with a smile.

“Look!” Xion said loudly, directing everyone’s attention toward the darkening Kingdom Hearts. They all dismissed their Keyblades for the time being, deciding to wait and see how this change played out.

“Do you...see that?” Axel asked.

The words had hardly left his mouth when twelve Master Xehanorts—the Replica Xehanorts—came streaking out of Kingdom Hearts like black comets.

“Get ready!” Riku warned, but suddenly a dark tornado swept them all up into the air.

Kingdom Hearts was pitch-black now, and the sky around it filled with Keyholes.

Axel finally managed to right himself. “Whoa, whoa, this is some serious trouble.”

Nearby, Xion was almost carried away on the wind into one of the Keyholes until Roxas caught her hand.

“Xion!”

“Thanks, Roxas!”

The twelve Replica Xehanorts had the eight guardians surrounded in midair.

“We’re trapped!” Ventus cried.

“Come on! We all have to work together!” Terra called out to him.

“Trust our bond!” Aqua added encouragingly.

Mickey asked, “Riku, are you ready?”

“Yeah...we can do this!” Riku answered, and then the battle was underway.

Guardian and Replica swooped through the sky in a chaotic melee, constantly switching opponents. Even the guardians who had only just met fought with the teamwork of old friends.

As Riku bore down on several of the Replica Xehanorts, blocking their combined attack with his Keyblade, Sora was in his heart. Together, they turned the tables on their foes.

A sixth fragment of Kairi fell into Sora’s palm.

But eventually the Replicas managed to send each of the guardians into one of the Keyholes in the sky, until Mickey and Riku remained in the end.

“Oh no, the others!” Mickey tried to catch his friends, but one of the Keyholes was pulling him in...

“Mickey!” Riku flew over and pushed him out of the way, and Sora moved from Riku’s heart into Mickey’s just as Riku was dragged into the Keyhole.

Now all alone, Mickey collapsed. He wasn’t ready to give up just yet, though.

Mustering the last bit of fight left in him, Mickey got up again. He was one with the light, and with Sora.

“No...I can’t give up!”

Mickey took up his Keyblade and stumbled toward the Keyhole. The Replica Xehanorts didn’t make it easy for him, but he blocked and rebuffed their attacks as he pushed his way forward.

One step at a time.

All the Replica Xehanorts joined together to create a laser attack.

“No matter how far...the light will connect our hearts!” he shouted as he bore the brunt of the onslaught on his Keyblade. Sora popped out of Mickey from behind and helped him hold off the beams, and then threw them back on the Replicas.

“We are—all of us—together!” Sora and Mickey said in unison.

With the Replica Xehanorts vanquished, the king was at last able to fire light into the Keyhole.

As he began to fall from the sky, utterly drained of strength, Sora reached out and lent him a hand.

“Sora... What are you doing here? Is it...really you?”

“I traced the connection—from me to Riku, then Riku to you.”

The last fragment of Kairi floated free from Mickey, and Sora claimed it.

“That’s seven—all the lights I needed, including yours. I’ll handle the rest.”

And with that, Sora flew into the Keyhole.

Sora floated in a night sky filled with hundreds—with *thousands* of Keyholes.

“Where am I...?”

A brilliant streak of light raced by Sora as he tried to get his bearings. It arrived at a Keyhole, then abruptly shifted directions and headed for a different one. The thread of light repeated this process again and again, binding several of the Keyholes to one another.

“That light... It’s the king’s light!”

The light was streaking toward Sora, and when it collided with him, it pulsed brightly for a second before fading away.

Sora noticed that there was now a Keyblade in his hand.

Somehow, I know what to do. I need to open the Keyholes and connect them with the light of this Keyblade—and that’ll bring back hope for all of us.

Sora took the Keyblade in both hands and released a particularly powerful stream of light that passed from Keyhole to Keyhole, tracing out constellations across the whole sky.

At last, Sora’s light passed through the Keyholes the guardians had fallen through and connected with them on the other side.

The guardians regained consciousness, summoned their Keyblades in hand, and released their own light.

The seven fragments of Kairi, shaped like pink flower petals, appeared before Sora's chest, and the light from the guardians converged upon them, swelling brighter and brighter as the crystal fragments merged to form a single flower.

The crystal flower flowed up into the heavens, causing one last larger Keyhole to take shape.

Once more, Sora released light from his Keyblade to unlock it.

There was a flash, and then someone slowly drifted free.

"Kairi!"

"Sora!"

She flew toward him, her arms open wide. Sora reached out for her, too, and the two pulled each other into an embrace beneath the stars.

I finally found you.

Now, let's end this battle once and for all!

They had barely been reunited when darkness began swirling into a storm above them. Sora turned around.

"Kairi, are you ready for this?"

"...Yes."

Sora and Kairi leveled their Keyblades at the black bolts of darkness.

The clouds converged and materialized as a new foe wearing a goatlike helmet, while a platform composed of arcane symbols took shape beneath their feet.

Sora and Kairi moved forward to confront Xehanort, who had twelve identical Keyblades at his back and a thirteenth in his hand.

"Vanish!" the armored Xehanort roared as he shot down from the sky at the two heroes with his Keyblades. Columns of flame erupted from the ground like gouts of lava and chased them around the battlefield.

"Darkness consumes you!" Xehanort roared as he summoned a giant Keyhole in the sky that belched forth blackness. Kingdom Hearts and the moon gleamed brightly above as huge meteors came hurtling down toward Sora and Kairi. The

armored Xehanort roared with laughter.

“Insolence!”

“You’re going down!” Kairi cried, but she was knocked away by one of the meteors’ impacts.

Sora reached out for her. “Kairi!”



Their hands linked, and they rose into the sky together.

“Light!” Sora and Kairi shouted as one, and their wishes were manifested as great, glowing wings.

Hands still clasped, they flew at Armor Xehanort.

Kairi’s hand was warm and just a little sweaty. Sora looked into her eyes, and they both smiled. The two let go of each other and raised their Keyblades overhead. As their Keyblades crossed, there was a brilliant pulse of light.

Seven Keyholes opened in the sky. Each released a glowing orb that danced through the air and transformed into a person above Sora and Kairi. It was the guardians—Aqua, Terra, Ventus, Roxas, Xion, Axel, and Riku.

Riku stepped away from the others as he spotted Mickey falling, wreathed in light, and reached out to grab him.

Finally, they were all together again.

The assembled guardians touched down on the platform in the wasteland, and they all held their Keyblades aloft. The light each key produced came together to make a blinding beam that flew into Armor Xehanort.

“My friends...are my power!” Sora shouted.

The radiant flood swept over Armor Xehanort, leaving no trace of him behind.

With the fight now won, Sora and Kairi disappeared in a burst of light.

Suddenly, Axel had a realization. “Where are Sora and Kairi? They were here.”

“They were, but as long as they’re together, they’ll be all right,” Riku told him with a smile as he looked into the sky. Kingdom Hearts was fading away overhead.

“Now, let’s go follow Sora’s heart!” said Mickey.

A gorgeous circle of symbols like a kaleidoscope appeared in the air, with a giant Keyhole at the center. The guardians—Aqua, Terra, Ventus, Roxas, Axel, Xion, Riku, and Mickey—all transformed into orbs of light and flew inside.

Their hands linked together, Sora and Kairi landed in the realm of sky and sea.

"It's so pretty...," Kairi whispered as she looked at the shimmering horizon, where the two blues became one. Sora examined the palm of his free left hand. For a brief second, it looked transparent, just as it had when he first visited this world, but then it was back to normal.

Sora closed his hand into a fist and turned to the girl next to him. "Kairi. Come on. Everyone's waiting."

"Okay," she agreed.

We have to go back home. Everyone's waiting.

"Oh!" Sora then exclaimed and let go of Kairi's hand.

"What's wrong?"

"Well... My friend should be here, but... Heeey! Chirithy!"

Chirithy appeared not from the sky this time, but right next to him.

"Whoa!" Sora yelped. "Hey, why didn't you say something?"

"I was just trying to give you some privacy," a miffed Chirithy retorted.

Kairi examined the creature curiously. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh, likewise! I'm glad you're okay." Chirithy looked away shyly.

"Chirithy, we're heading home," Sora said. "You should come with us."

"Whaaat?" Chirithy hopped back and shouted.

"Take it from me, it's not enough to wait for someone you care about. It's true that hearts are connected wherever you are. If it's impossible to be together, then all you can do is wait. But if it's possible to be together, then that's how it should be."

Kairi looked over at Sora quietly as he explained.

"Sora...," Chirithy murmured.

"You know, this really is a beautiful place. But you'd enjoy it so much more with someone you care about. Before, when I was looking around with Kairi, I remembered how important it is...to share moments with friends. That's why you're coming with us. I'm taking you to see your friend, Chirithy."

Chirithy finally nodded, now on the verge of tears.

Sora extended a hand to him.

“Okay! Let’s go!”

Light swept over the world, and over Sora.

Now back in Disney Castle, Mickey, Donald, Goofy, and Jiminy were welcomed home by Minnie and Daisy, and one very excited Pluto. Yen Sid arrived a short time later with Chip and Dale on each shoulder, and fireworks burst in the sky above the castle.

Holding hands on one of the battlements, Sora and Kairi watched the display as Chirithy bounced around happily to one side.

Next was the Land of Departure, restored to its former glory.

Master Eraqus’s Keyblade, the Master’s Defender, had been plunged into the ground with a wreath of flowers hanging from it. Aqua, Terra, and Ventus stood before it, each holding their Wayfinders.

Chirithy observed from some ways away, slightly nervous. But when Ventus caught sight of him, Chirithy ran over and jumped into his outstretched arms. Aqua and Terra called him back over, while Sora and Kairi watched happily.

Axel and Roxas watched the sunset from the clocktower in Twilight Town. Neither of them wore their black coats. Xion arrived and sat down beside them, and she was wearing new clothes, too.

Soon after, Saïx showed up carrying four bars of ice cream. He handed one each to Roxas and Xion, then sat next to Axel.

But then Hayner, Pence, and Olette joined the party. They had brought their own ice cream, too.

Up a little higher than everyone on the clocktower, Sora and Kairi also enjoyed the Twilight Town specialty as they watched the sunset.

The Gummi Ship cast a shadow on them as it passed overhead.

In the laboratory of Radiant Garden, Naminé was sleeping in a white chair while Ienzo looked on. Ansem the Wise and Vexen were busy working on

something in front of a monitor.

Sora and Kairi were nearby, too. Sora pressed his Keyblade to Kairi's chest, and light flowed out of her.

Finally, Naminé woke up, and Dilan and Aeolus led her out of the laboratory.

The Gummi Ship landed outside the castle, and Riku reached out a hand to her as flower petals fluttered through the air.

After a moment, the Gummi Ship took flight.

The last stop was the Destiny Islands.

Riku, Terra, and Ventus raced one another to the docks while Aqua and Mickey watched them. Elsewhere on the beach, Lea, Isa, and Roxas tossed a disk back and forth between them. Xion and Naminé were collecting thalassa shells down along the shore. Hayner, Pence, and Olette built a sandcastle with Donald and Goofy on the beach.

Riku looked up for a moment.

On the small island across the bridge, Sora and Kairi sat holding hands on the limb of the paopu tree.

Mickey, Donald, and Goofy followed Riku's gaze, and soon everyone else was watching the two of them.

Sora was saying something to Kairi, and a tear slid down her cheek.

And then, Sora was gone.

Gone, as if he had melted away into the sunset.

Sora was no longer part of the world.



C o d a

Coda

BACK AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE KEYBLADE GRAVEYARD, a single Keyblade fell from the sky and stuck into the ground upright. A man was there to pull it free from the soil, as if he had always known where and when it was going to arrive. The Keyblade was the one that Master Xehanort had once used.

The man wore a black coat, and behind him was a black box.

“Finally, back where it belongs,” the man muttered. Four paths led from the crossroads, dust swirling up in the distance.

From the cloud emerged four figures, wavering like mirages on a hot summer day and growing more solid the closer they approached.

They wore masks—a unicorn, a snake, a bear, and a leopard.

The man in the unicorn mask was the first to speak. “Did you summon us back?”

“Yep,” the man in the black coat replied.

“Is that you, Luxu? You look different.”

“Haven’t heard that name in a long while,” the man in the coat replied as he removed his hood, revealing a face with a patch over one eye. “These days they call me Xigbar, but hey, whatever suits you,” he added.

“Is it...really you?” the woman in the snake mask asked.

“Yeah, but some time ago, I had to cast my old form away. Been through plenty more semblances since, but it’s still me underneath it all.”

“What happened? Why are we here? You tell me,” the man in the bear mask demanded.

“I had a role to play. And after all these years, it’s done.”

“What role?” the woman in the snake mask asked.

Xigbar, who had once been known as Luxu, stopped and looked around him.

Two other figures stood watching the scene unfold from atop a cliff.

“I guess Ava didn’t make it after all,” said Xigbar.

“Meaning what?” the young man in the leopard mask wanted to know.

“I told her, clear as day, what it is I had to do.”

“And is that why you decided to exclude her?” the leopard-masked man asked back.

“As if. Ava had her own mission, and she carried it out.”

Frustrated, the man in the bear mask growled, “I’ve heard enough! Luxu, what was your role?”

Xigbar looked at the black box by his feet and said, “I hope you like *long* stories.”

...On that window seat in Scala ad Caelum, the young Xehanort and Eraqus sat across a game board from each other.

“Oh, right.” Eraqus cleared their old game from the board and arranged seven new pieces atop it.

“What’s this?”

“I heard about this new game.”

Xehanort looked at the setup, confused. “Seven black pieces. And?”

“Just watch...”

Eraqus put a single white king piece on the board.

Sora awoke in an unfamiliar city, surrounded by dazzling neon lights. He had never seen anything like this before.

Riku, too, woke to find himself in a strange city. The streets around him were lined with towering buildings, light twinkling out from their windows.

Atop one of the tallest of these buildings, a lone boy was watching the streets below.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, a man wearing a black coat surveyed

the streets and buildings glittering in the moonlight.

In the Land of Departure, Riku and Terra stood facing each other in the grand hall of the castle, where Terra had once undergone the Mark of Mastery exam.

“Well, look at you,” Terra said warmly, and the praise made Riku stand up a little straighter.

“Thanks. I finally fulfilled my promise to you.”

“You did. Now there’s nothing left for me to teach you. You’re a true Keyblade Master, not to mention a great leader to those around you. You’ve even found the strength to save your friends.”

Riku shook his head. “It’s not enough.”

Terra placed his hands on Riku’s shoulders. “The very fact that you were able to make your way here proves just how strong you are. That is why I called for you.”

“That’s the reason?”

“You expected more?” Terra said, slumping with embarrassment.

“Yes,” Riku replied frankly, and the two of them burst into laughter.

Aqua and Ventus entered the hall.

“Hey, you two, what’s so funny?” Ventus asked.

“It’s a secret,” Terra answered with a grin.

Ventus wasn’t too happy with that. “Aww, come on, tell me!”

Aqua watched them happily for a moment, then turned to Riku.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Yes, but don’t worry. I’m not alone this time,” she replied.

Terra and Ventus nodded.

The three stood together, then donned their armor and set off into the Lanes Between.

“Good luck,” Riku called to them as the gateway closed.

A year had passed since then.

Riku was visiting a small house located in a corner of Radiant Garden, and a group of familiar faces were there with him.

“But if we still remember him, then he must still be with us,” said Aerith.

“Yes, that would stand to reason,” Leon replied.

“But we’ve been searching everywhere for Sora,” said Riku, “and we haven’t found a single clue. If he’s really out there, don’t you think we would have found something by now?”

Yuffie put a finger to her head. “Hmm...”

“Cid’s been looking into the data for a year now. Aren’t the people at the castle doing the same thing? No one’s found anything yet?” asked Leon.

Riku turned to Cid, who was sitting at the computer. “Well...it’s outside their field of experience.”

“Come on, Cid! Can’t you throw us a bone here, please?” Yuffie begged.

Cid spun to face her. “Be quiet!” he barked. “I’m tryin’! I’m this close to somethin’, I know it!”

“Cid, you are a million times worse than a broken record!” Yuffie’s comeback got a chuckle from everyone.

“By the way, how are the others?” asked Leon. Apparently, this had been bothering him.

“Well, Mickey, Donald, and Goofy are searching for clues in every past world that Sora’s been to. Terra, Ven, and Aqua went to the realm of darkness. And the Twilight Town gang are studying Roxas’s and Xion’s memories.”

“And what about Kairi?” asked Aerith with concern.

He lowered his eyes. “Kairi... She believes her heart might hold a clue about Sora. For a year, she’s been sound asleep while they search her heart.”

“So there’s been no progress...,” Aerith replied, seeming disappointed as well.

“What in the—? What in the world is this?!” Cid suddenly exclaimed and jumped to his feet.

Riku and the others peered around him at the screen.

“What is it?”

“This computer, the one in Twilight Town, and the one in the castle are all connected to the same network. They sent me all of their data and I merged it with the stuff I already had, and lookee here,” Cid answered and leaned into the screen.

There, in the monitor—was a very familiar face.

“Sora?!” Riku leaned in closer.

“Sora’s inside the computer?!” Yuffie asked.

“No, no. That’s just the data I constructed based on Sora and his fightin’ abilities,” Cid replied, plopping back down into his chair.

“So you gave us a heart attack for nothing?” Yuffie complained.

“No, that group Sora was fightin’...you know...Battalion somethin’? Well, I re-created their data, too.”

As Cid described, several gateways opened before the Sora on the monitor. There were thirteen of them.

“The real Organization XIII... Maybe their data will lead us to where Sora is...,” wondered Aerith.

“Well, it crossed my mind, but I must be better at this than I thought ’cause their data...it’s so powerful that I can’t access any of it,” Cid told her.

“Can you use Sora’s data to gain access?” Leon suggested.

“Oh, good idea. Worth a shot,” Cid said, quickly typing away at the keyboard.

“Yeah...let’s try,” Riku said as he watched the version of his friend on the screen.

Sora ran through one of the gateways and fought the Organization member beyond. He defeated all thirteen of them, but...

“No sign of the boy,” said Cid, and Yuffie was equally disheartened.

“What a bummer.”

Suddenly, there was a flicker of light behind them.

The unexpected arrival was the Fairy Godmother, the very one who had used her magic to help Cinderella.

“Fairy Godmother!” Aerith cried with surprise.

“Oh-ho-ho, I hope I didn’t startle you,” she said cheerily.

“Not at all. What brings you here?” Leon asked the fairy.

“Well, dear, I was asked to come by Merlin and Yen Sid. Now, where is... Oh, Riku! Yes, Riku is his name,” she replied, looking around the room.

“Here,” he said, walking over to her. “I’m Riku.”

“Why, it’s nice to meet you. Now, I’d like you to tell me about the dreams that you’ve been having, dear,” Fairy Godmother said with a smile, her magic wand in hand.

“Huh? My...dreams?” Riku thought for a moment.

Were those dreams...?

“There’s one... It was dark...and I was surrounded by tall buildings. I was looking around for Sora when I felt someone watching me from way up high.”

“And?!” Yuffie prodded.

“And that’s all I remember.” Riku shook his head.

That’s all I’ve got. It’s just a dream about a night in a strange city I’ve never seen before.

“Ugh. But what happens next?!”

Cid may have been let down, but Fairy Godmother seemed to understand quite well. “Oh, I know.”

“Why Riku’s dream?” asked Leon.

“Oh, because Master Yen Sid was worried. You weren’t having any luck finding Sora. And because Riku had been in Sora’s dreams before, he thought perhaps Riku may just be the key. That’s why he and Merlin asked me to come here and look into his dreams, since of course dreams are my specialty,” Fairy

Godmother answered.

“So Riku’s dreams might...hold the key?” Aerith wondered.

“Yes, dear. I’m sure there’s something there that leads to Sora.”

“In my dreams...?” Riku said softly.

Fairy Godmother chuckled. “And...the other two,” she added with a wink.

“This place...”

Sora was back in that world of sea and sky—only the sky wasn’t clear anymore. Night had fallen over the world. He couldn’t tell if the dark sky was reflected on the water, or if the dark water was reflected on the sky. Were the stars above him or below?

The one thing he was sure of was the moon up high.

“At least...I’m all here,” Sora said as he checked himself over. He stood up and tried calling out. “Heeey! Is anyone out there?”

No response.

He tried again. “Hellooo!”

This time there was a soft sound. It could’ve been the water—or footsteps coming this way.

“Hey...”

Sora broke into a run as he heard what sounded like a faint voice.

Someone’s here!

“Over here!” Sora called out. In the distance, he could see them, and he hurried as fast as he could.

“I see you,” the person said, standing illuminated by the starlight.

“Hey, aren’t you—?” Sora knew this guy. He’d never actually met him, but he had seen him before.

“You know me?”

“Yeah, you’re Yozora, right?” Sora replied. He’d seen him in that game back in Toy Box.

“How do you know that? Who are you?”

“I’m Sora. And actually...there’s something I have to ask you—” Sora remembered that he had heard that name somewhere else once before.

But as soon as he introduced himself, Yozora had questions. “Sora? You’re Sora?”

“Huh? You know who I am?”

“Sure, I’ve heard of you.”

It seemed that Yozora was familiar with Sora, too.

“If you’re here, then this can’t be the real world, can it? But wait, that girl, she told me about you. Maybe you are real after all,” Sora thought out loud.

“Are you done? No, this isn’t the real world, and I am here. But this isn’t what I really look like. How’d you recognize me as Yozora?”

“Huh?” Sora said, unsure of where this was going.

“Why are you using Sora’s name?”

“Because...I *am* Sora.”

“If you are who you say, and it was fate that brought us here, then...my path is clear.”

Yozora made a fist, and suddenly he was holding what looked like a sort of ranged weapon.

Sora closed his eyes and braced himself.

When he opened them again, he found himself somewhere he had never seen before. Or...maybe he had. In a dream.

Streets lined with buildings, and buildings lit with neon.

Oh, maybe this is the world of Yozora’s game—the one I went into back in Woody’s world. Or maybe not...? Everything looks so different.

Man, I’m lost.

“I accidentally wandered into this place and went through some trials. Then, I was told to ‘save Sora.’”

“Huh?! Then what’s with the weapon?” Sora asked.

But Yozora only called a glowing red blade into his other hand. “Time to end this,” he said, then swung the sword. Sora summoned his Keyblade so he could block the attack.

But the fight was over before it began.

“But how...”

Yozora’s attack tore through Sora and dropped him to his knees.

“Sorry, but I don’t lose,” Yozora said as Sora began to glow and turn to crystal.

He laid a hand on Sora’s frozen form and said softly, “I will save you.”

A light swelled from the crystal and engulfed the world—and then Yozora was standing back in that realm of nothing but sea and sky.

He closed his eyes quietly.

When he opened them again, he was sitting in the back seat of a car.

“Commander! Commander!”

Yozora’s eyes drifted to the one speaking to him from the driver’s seat.

“Impressive, is it not?”

Yozora looked out the window of the car.

I’ve been having these weird thoughts lately...like, is any of this for real or not?

None of this...makes any sense to me.

Was that his voice or Sora’s?

All he could see beyond the window was the sprawling cityscape.



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