

Temerity

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Temerity

by [Natterina](#)

Summary

In the end, Kairi's the one who catches him leaving.

Or, AU where Riku realises he's in love with Sora and leaves early for his mission to find Aqua. Post 3D.

Realm of Darkness

Kairi's the one who catches him leaving.

It's the middle of the night, far too early to be conscious let alone *cognisant*, but Riku has been awake for hours pondering if this really is the right decision to make. The rucksack has been under his bed for days, packed with rations and bandages and potions, and he's managed to keep it well hidden from Sora. He's made an effort not to seem like he's acting odd, throwing himself into every activity the brunet has suggested, because he knows they will be the last ones for a long time.

And so Riku spends nearly an hour in his bed, looking across the room at Sora sleeping, the younger man so exhausted from their sparring that he's snoring loudly into the room. One arm is slung over his face, shielding his eyes from the dim light of the paopu nightlight.

Riku finds him utterly beautiful, even as he drools into the pillow and snores worse than Donald. It's part of the reason he is leaving: being near Sora is becoming increasingly painful, especially now that Kairi has taken up residence in the tower. He loves both of his best friends, and he would spend a lifetime in the darkness to keep them safe, but his feelings for Sora had changed when they had stood on opposite sides of the Door to Darkness. He both loves and is in love with his best friend, his other half, the opposite side of the same coin. They do everything together, bar the hour that Sora spends with Kairi after dinner, and it's becoming increasingly difficult for Riku to think of anything other than the heavy beating of his heart whenever Sora steps a little closer, when his skin brushes against his own.

It is nigh on impossible, in the middle of their sparring, not to lean across and kiss those lips that twist up in a grin every time Sora manages to disarm Riku.

After he'd dove into Sora's heart, Riku had finally faced up to the fact that he is madly, desperately in love with Sora, and watching him spend so much time alone with Kairi is beginning to kill him.

And so he's leaving. The mission Yen Sid aims to send him on was originally planned to start three weeks from now; no one knows of it, except for Riku and Mickey. There will be no goodbye, lest Riku be tempted to open his mouth and say something stupid. He loves both of his best friends, and the bitterness he is feeling for Kairi sets flames of guilt alight in his soul, and the jealousy is souring every interaction he has with Sora.

So Riku packs the bag over the space of a week, as Yen Sid schools him on the history of the last three keyblade wielders, and after hours of contemplation whilst sat in his shared room, Riku forces himself to his feet and makes the bed. At the desk he writes a note, nothing more than a neat *'I'm sorry.'*

He folds it carefully, before he walks over to where Sora lays asleep. The hand curled over his stomach is open, and Riku gently places the folded card in between Sora's splayed fingers. Sora shifts in his sleep, his snoring halting for one terrifying moment before it

resumes, and Riku stifles a laugh. He will miss them both, Sora and Kairi, but he cannot face a goodbye that would surely ruin their friendship.

Hoisting the bag up onto his shoulder, Riku leans down and presses a feather-light kiss to Sora's forehead before he turns, forcing himself to leave before he can change his mind.

He doesn't notice Kairi at all, when he slips out the door and takes a full ten seconds to close it quietly, the latch not even making a scraping sound as it lowers. It is only when he turns and looks up, greeted by the sight of the most ridiculous pair of bunny slippers he has ever seen, that Riku spots her. He jumps nearly a foot in the air from fright, and stares at the woman from where she stands several steps up the next level of stairs.

"Kairi, you should be asleep." It's dark enough that he can barely make out her features, but not so dark that he cannot see how her arms are crossed tightly over the tie of her woolly dressing gown.

"I could say the same to you." Her voice is barely above a whisper, but Riku is hyper aware of Sora sleeping in the room, and he has no wish to wake him. He heads down the stairs, knowing that Kairi will follow. She does, ridiculous slippers barely making a sound on the wooden steps.

"You can't be serious, Riku."

"I have to go." He half hisses into the silence between them, and once they reach the circular hall at the bottom of the staircase she leans across and grabs the bag.

"And it can't wait until morning? You can't just *leave* in the middle of the night."

Riku turns to look at her, her features now visible in the light from the table lamp.

"How long have you been stood outside my door?"

She hesitates, and the little furrow on her brow tells Riku that she's been waiting there since they went to bed.

"Long enough." Kairi mutters cryptically. Riku raises a brow at her, and her grip on his bag tightens. "Riku *please*. You can't leave without saying goodbye to him, not like this. It'll kill him."

"Get off me, Kairi. I need to *go*."

But Kairi tugs on the bag as he tries to head towards the door.

"Riku *no*. You can't do this to him, you're his best friend-"

"He has *you*. It's better this way, trust me."

Kairi tugs on the bag again, and Riku spins on his heel to look at her directly.

"What do you want me to *say*?"

"I want you to think about what you're doing! You can't just leave Sora, he'll be miserable."

Riku breathes out heavily through his nose, and Kairi's hand moves from the bag to his bicep.

"Kairi, if I say goodbye, we'll *all* be miserable. I can't-" Riku stops, choking on his words, and something in Kairi's gaze softens. "I can't stay, and I can't say goodbye. I need time. I can't be here and be happy for you both when I feel like *this*."

Realisation flitters across Kairi's face, but instead of the pity or anger he expects, she looks only sad. The hand on his bicep tightens whilst the other reaches up to brush his hair out of his eyes, and she shakes her head.

"Oh, you beautiful fool. You both are." And, completely unexpectedly, she stands on her tiptoes and pulls Riku down to place a gentle kiss on his forehead. "Perhaps this will spur him into action."

Riku cocks his head at her, wondering what the *hell* she is talking about, but Kairi shakes her head and plants both her hands on his shoulders.

"Just, be careful out there, okay? I'll break the news to him in the morning, but please stay safe."

Riku nods, swallowing thickly in the face of Kairi's acceptance and complete understanding, when he has just confessed to her that he is in love with her boyfriend. She gives him a pat on the cheek, a typically-Kairi gesture when one of them is about to leave on a mission, before she hugs her arms around herself and heads to the foot of the staircase.

Riku watches her until she reaches the part of the spiral staircase where he can see her no longer, and gives one last look to the visible door of his and Sora's bedroom. He glances at it only for a moment, before he forces himself to push down the door handle and exit the tower.

Yen Sid stands outside, with Mickey's own gummi ship hovering several inches off the grass. The King himself is standing beside it, bleary eyed from the early time, but eager enough to be off. He smiles up at Riku, though there is a hint of sadness in his eyes.

"Did you say goodbye?"

Riku shakes his head. It is in this moment, of all moments, that he is grateful that his relationship with Mickey is closer than Sora's. Had Sora been the one sneaking out in the early hours, Riku has no doubt Mickey would have found a way to make sure Riku would be awake to see it. As it stands, though Mickey does not agree with Riku's decision not to say his goodbyes, he keeps quiet.

Riku climbs into the gummi after Mickey, and mere minutes later they've left the Mysterious Tower.

They've left Kairi and Sora behind, and Donald and Goofy, but Riku begins to feel a little lighter even as his heart aches for Sora, still sleeping unaware.

Sora wakes at seven-thirty, on the dot, as he does most mornings.

He wakes with a niggling feeling in the back of his mind, like a tiny thought knocked loose and allowed to bounce around for hours, that something is *wrong*. He rolls over, having tossed and turned for most of the night, and opens his eyes to take in the rest of the room.

Riku's bed is empty and made, not an unusual sight at this time of the morning: Riku often wakes at seven and stares at the ceiling for ten minutes before he hauls his ass out of the bed and heads for the adjoining bathroom.

But something still seems *off*. Riku's side of the room is meticulously tidy, as *per*, and there's nothing amiss that justifies the frown tugging at his lips. A book on the bedside table is closed and bookmarked, and the paopu-shaped nightlight is still plugged in and switched on (because Sora cannot sleep in the total darkness, not anymore, and Riku doesn't mind having it near him if it helps Sora to sleep).

Sora's frown deepens and he rolls back onto his back, staring at the star shaped stickers on the ceiling and wondering what seems so *amiss*.

The room is quiet and still, not a single sound penetrating the air, and Sora chews his lower lip because *what is wrong*-

Sora sits up in bed abruptly, biting down onto his lip as he does so and making it bleed. *The shower*. The *shower isn't running*.

"You're awake."

And Sora yelps, because *holy shit what the fuck* is Kairi doing curled up in the chair at the base of his bed? He'd thought she was the pile of *clothes* he had left on there, but a second glance confirms they are on the floor and the bundle of pink and red is actually one of his best friends. Sora pulls the sheets up to his chest, despite the fact that he has a bed shirt on, and Kairi rolls her eyes.

"Wh-what are you doing in *here*? What's going on?"

Kairi sighs and sits up, unfolding pyjama-clad legs in order to cross one over the other as she leans on the arm of the chair.

"Riku's gone." She says it bluntly, though her face is full of pity, and she truly looks as though she cannot find any other way to soften the blow. Sora cocks his head.

"*Gone*? What do you mean *gone*? Master Yen Sid sent him away early?" Sora lowers the duvet, no longer ridiculously concerned about Kairi being in his bedroom. "Why wouldn't he say goodbye?"

Kairi pinches the bridge of her nose at this, before she rubs at her eyes with the heels of her palms. Sora watches, confused, and Kairi eventually sighs and looks at him with that look of pity again.

“Because he didn’t want to see you; he couldn’t say goodbye.” Sora’s eyes lower to his hands clutching at the duvet, and his frown returns with sadness mixed into it. Kairi’s eyes soften.

“Why wouldn’t he want to say goodbye?”

“Because you’re a pair of fools.” Her words are not harsh, and her expression does not harden, but Sora furrows his brows at the words anyway.

“Excuse me?”

“I thought you two were reluctant to admit it, I didn’t realise you were both *oblivious*.” Her smile falters a little, from exasperation more than anything, but Sora tries to remember that he is clearly not the only one Riku has just upped and left with no explanation.

Except, looking closer at Kairi, there is something *guilty* there in her eyes, and Sora stares at her until the realisation hits home.

“You saw him leave. You let him *go*?”

“His mind was made up, Sora!” Kairi pauses and sits up straighter, and this time she levels Sora with a look that will accept no argument. “He couldn’t say goodbye to you because he loves you, and he didn’t want you to know. He wants to move on.”

Sora feels as though his world comes to a screeching halt. Kairi sits there before him, unmoving. Her words are meant to inspire him into action, but instead he feels them spearing through his chest with all the force of Xaldin’s lances. It must show on his face, he thinks, because Kairi gets to her feet and sits next to him on the bed, one hand running through his hair in comfort.

A part of him is sad, that after everything they have been through Riku *still* feels like he cannot come and *talk* to him. Another part is angry, because how *dare* Riku up and leave without a goodbye? After everything they have been through, does Sora not deserve more than to wake up to an empty bedroom?

He laughs dryly, a habit picked up from Riku, when he realises that he is beginning to sound like a jilted lover. The creased piece of paper that Riku had deposited into his hand during the night brushes against his leg, the corner sharp, and Sora *knows* what it will say before he even reaches for it.

His eyes run over the neat writing, the elegant ‘I’m sorry’ that looks like it could have been written by Minnie herself, before he crumples it up and throws it viciously at the wall. Kairi watches it bounce off the wall and land on the floor, before she rubs his back gently and tries to coax him out of bed.

“There’s more, Sora. Since Riku and the King have left, we need to leave too. I’ve got to go to Radiant Garden, and Yen Sid is going to send you out on your mission too.”

“But... but I still have some friends I was supposed to say goodbye to.” Sora looks down forlornly, but a moment later his sad look turns into a grin.

“Perhaps I can say goodbye to them on my way! And hopefully, I can find Riku too, and kick his ass for *leaving* again!”

It takes two and a half months to find an entrance to the dark realm.

It's two months of routine, of Riku spending six hours at the helm of the gummi before switching with Mickey, for six hours sleep before they land, or keep flying, or pen letters. It's two months of Riku missing Sora and reading books late into the night, trying to distract himself. It's two months of Riku sitting at the helm with his hands on the controls but not really *seeing* (and that hadn't been fun, trying to explain to Mickey *why* they'd hit a meteor), of his heart aching in his chest.

But his heart is strong, no matter how much he misses Sora, and Kairi, and Riku has never been one to sit and mope. Run around the worlds on a mission looking like a broody teenager? Yes, that he has done, but *never* has he sat around wishing for Sora to appear, even in the hardest depths of Sora's long sleep.

And finally, after so long with no progress, they end up in Radiant Garden on a whim and bump into *Ienzo* of all people. It's awkward at first: Riku remembers with vivid detail how Zexion had repeatedly tried to crush him with the darkness in his own heart, and Ienzo remembers the strong hands of the Replica wrapped tightly around his throat, teal eyes boring into his own. But they are older now, and wiser, and Ienzo simply nods his head in Riku's direction politely before he brings them to the lab hidden beneath the castle.

It takes a lot of persuasion, and some of Mickey's most honest reassurances spread out across two weeks, but Ienzo agrees to reopen the entrance to the Dark Realm that the original apprentices of Ansem had opened all those years ago.

The smell of the darkness is almost overwhelming, when Riku and Mickey step through the portal. It closes behind them, taking the last of the light with it and sucking away the air around them like a vacuum. Riku twitches beneath his jacket, lined with thick black seams to protect him in this world: the darkness closes in around him, wraps around his shoulders like the comforting arms of a lover, and Riku briefly wants to shrug into it like a well-worn coat. But the moment passes, and the loving arms turn cold and distant; the smell rises like a tidal wave, and he suddenly wants to vomit into the nearest ravine. Mickey matches his discomfort with a small frown, but Riku knows the King has no idea how familiar and comforting that dark blanket had felt, even for a moment.

Riku has no idea how long it takes to find Aqua. He hates this realm, hates how he can walk for hours and never feel tired, never feel hunger pangs or the urge to do something as simple as *piss*.

All he knows is that he's killed at least a thousand heartless in what seems like mere hours, without any of his muscles aching, only to quite literally *run* into Aqua when he turns to escape the reaching grasp of a Guardian. The blue haired woman grunts in pain as Riku slams into her with all of his body weight and zero coordination, and the hand swipes overhead, close enough that a few strands of Riku's hair are ripped out.

They are both warriors, however, and they are on their feet in moments. And, if Riku had thought Sora's grasp on magic was impressive, it is *nothing* to what he sees now.

Aqua moves with a fluid grace that Riku has never seen on the battlefield. She wears her magic like a second skin, and the realm practically *erupts* in light as the woman casts spell after spell at the Guardian. Each strike from her keyblade sends out another ring of light to attack the enemies both on the field and afar, and Riku feels practically useless as she obliterates the heartless around them.

If there was any indication that the young woman before him had spent twelve years in this forsaken realm, this was it.

What Riku had predicted to be an hour-long battle is over in what *feels* like twenty minutes, he can never be sure here, and Aqua's keyblade disappears as she turns to look at them.

"What are you doing *here*? I thought you'd gotten out, that you were *safe* in the Realm of Light!"

"We did, but we're here to bring you back, Aqua." Mickey explains, but Aqua's eyes are almost hard, as though she does not believe what she is seeing. She steps forward, one hand outstretched, and when her hand connects with Mickey's ear she yanks it back with a gasp.

"You're real. You, you need to *leave*. Get out of here, while you still can."

"Not without you." Riku steps forwards this time, and thankfully is not subjected to a test of reality; he figures knocking her flat on her ass earlier counts as proof of his existence here. Her wary smile turns warm as she looks at him, her careful analytical gaze turning softer.

"You. You're the little boy that Terra passed his keyblade onto."

Riku shrugs, feeling a little awkward. He had never told *anyone* of that meeting, not even Sora, and he wonders how Aqua knows.

"Not so little anymore, I guess." He smiles at her, and she cocks her head at him in curiosity, blue hair falling into her eyes before she tucks it behind her ears.

"No, you're all grown up." Her smile fades, becomes a forlorn thing that is heart-breaking to look at. "How long has it been, since I last saw you?" Her question is directed at Mickey, though her gaze does not tear away from Riku, and the latter squirms uncomfortably. He feels as though she is looking right through him, pulling him apart in her mind's eye and seeing his every flaw. It is a strange sensation, one that has his hands seeking his jacket pockets to escape the discomfort.

"Nearly two years, Aqua."

There is no change in her facial expression, Riku notices, and he wonders if she has somehow found a way to count the time as it passes, or if she is simply used to large swathes of time passing in the realm.

“We’re taking you with us, this time. We won’t leave without you.” Riku speaks up, his voice hard and determined, and something flickers in her gaze. It softens again, as though Riku reminds her of a painful but bittersweet memory. Aqua’s smile turns wary again, as though she believes in their conviction but not in their ability, and she nods her head gratefully.

“Thank you.”

He isn’t sure how long they wander, trying to find a way out. Riku loses count after the hundredth minute and several heartless, and by the time they’ve defeated the fifth or sixth Guardian, he just wants to *leave*.

But finding the Door to Light requires *hope*, on *both* sides of the door. Aqua has no one on the other side, and Riku is having trouble trying to find any emotion other than despair as the darkness crushes against him, trying to open up the lock in his heart. He is immune to its influence now, but he is not invisible to the darkness, and it wraps around him in pursuit.

The last time he escaped the Realm of Darkness, it had been because he had followed Sora’s heart out. But Sora had been looking for *him* then, and it had provided the link he needed.

It is Mickey who suggests searching for that link again, in the hope that it will provide an exit. Riku is unwilling to think of Sora and his love for the brunet, terrified that the darkness will taint his memories, but they have been walking for what feels like *days* and Riku cannot even *complain*. The first - and only - time he complained about the passage of time, Aqua had levelled him with a tiny smirk and a look that told him to quit his whining.

Her magic crackles over her skin even this deep in the realm, and Riku wonders if she has any idea just how much *light* she gives off combined with her magic. He takes Mickey’s advice in, trusting his friend’s ideas, but if he steps a little closer to Aqua hoping to be protected in some way by her light, well, he won’t admit it.

He stands there, keyblade in hand, feeling like an absolute *idiot* as he closes his eyes and reaches out for Sora’s heart. It is unnerving, to close his eyes knowing he is surrounded by heartless who can attack at any given time, but Riku pushes through and tries to think fondly of Sora and their memories together. He thinks of their childhood, growing up all but living on the beach, constantly covered in sand and sea salt marks. He thinks of shoulders burning in the sun after afternoon swims in the ocean, of the cool wind buffering the worst of the pain until they’d return to one of their houses and lay on the cold tiled floor of the kitchen.

Through the darkness and the uneasiness, something flickers and flares to life, and Riku reaches out for it in desperation. But it is not enough, with Riku still unwilling to bring forth the most powerful emotions locked in his heart, and it sputters out like a candle.

He opens his eyes, ready to groan in frustration, but instead he simply *stares* as Aqua gasps in surprise behind him.

It is not the Door to Light. If anything, it’s the furthest possible thing Riku could have *ever* summoned aside from the fucking *Door to Darkness* itself. *It* is a dark corridor, larger than most that he has seen before, shaped into the form of a door. At first he panics, wondering if

he himself just summoned that thing. Fear settles deep into his gut, prompting a brief introspective look as Riku tries to figure out if he has let the darkness in his heart go free.

A second look at the newly-opened Corridor to Darkness has Riku frowning, and he knows he recognises it from *somewhere*. And when it clicks, he turns to Aqua and Mickey with a look of exasperation and *relief* on his face. They follow him into it, though Aqua is understandably stunned when they enter Betwixt and Between for what seems like only minutes. The other end of the Corridor is easy to spot due to the massive *size* of the portal, and the three of them appear in the middle of the Hollow Bastion research laboratory.

“Welcome back. I am afraid you *just* missed your precious keyblade wielder.”

Ienzo, standing at the computer parallel to the still-open portal, does not even bat an eyelid at their presence, nor does he look up from the computer as he speaks. Riku steps towards him as Mickey and Aqua look back at the portal, the latter looking both curious and wary.

“How did, why did you-“

Ienzo cuts him off with a wave of his hand, and Riku can *sense* the eye-roll.

“Your friend was in here interrogating me yesterday when he suddenly began to feel a little nauseous, because he thought he could feel you reaching out for him. He’s gone, but I opened a portal in case you needed to return.”

“How long has it been?”

“Three hours since your keyblade wielder left. Ten weeks, since I sent you through that portal.”

“Thank you.” Riku says, and he *means* it, and isn’t that a surprise when it comes to this particular man. Ienzo merely shrugs, before he actually looks up from his computer and nearly gawks at the sight of Aqua.

“I must confess, I had no hope of you actually succeeding.” Despite his surprise, he smooths it down and removes his glasses. Aqua nods her head politely at him, and Ienzo responds with a *bow*.

Riku thinks Mickey could abdicate and become a goddamned circus clown, and he’d be less shocked.

“Your faith in us is astounding.” He points out dryly, and Ienzo turns his gaze to Riku.

“Clearly. You need have no fear of your keyblade wielder returning here for you, however. I told him I had not seen either of you.” Ienzo pauses, and then something lights up behind his eyes as a realisation hits him. “*You* are hiding from him.”

And Riku is *not* having this conversation with a former nobody, a man who tried to kill him repeatedly and who has had Riku so splayed at his mercy that he has seen every dusty corner of Riku’s heart.

Mickey comes to his rescue, ending the conversation swiftly and thanking Ienzo sincerely for every scrap of help he has offered as Aqua looks around and Riku tries to hurry up the actual leaving. He is concerned for Aqua: there is something off with her, as she stands there uneasily and almost *sways* on her feet. She is pale, paler than she seemed in the Realm of Darkness, and for a woman with so much *light* in her heart she looks as though she is about to fade away.

Riku opens his mouth to voice his worry, but her blue eyes connect with his and narrow so sharply that he *feels* the command not to, and he presses his lips together to promise silence.

Riku's concerns about Aqua are entirely founded, it turns out, and it fucking *sucks*.

Chapter 2

Riku's concerns about Aqua are entirely founded, and it fucking *sucks*.

It is the third hour of Riku holding back the blue strands of Aqua's hair with his fingers as she vomits into the toilet of the gummi ship, the fifth glass of water coming up with bile and the soggy remains of the latest slice of bread she has tried to consume. It has been like this for hours: Aqua drinks, and then tries to consume food, and then she vomits it up into the toilet minutes later. It continues like clockwork every ten minutes, but no matter what Aqua cannot keep *anything* down. They'd had one solid hour where she only sipped the water and had *no* bread, and still her body rejected it.

Riku feels like he can confirm that he has seen every possible shade of bile by this point, and he'd really rather he couldn't because it's *horrible*.

Mickey seems rather unconcerned about the whole thing, though he is sympathetic. The King tries to cast curaga on her, but the passage of time is wreaking havoc on her body and, though she has not really *lived* twelve years in the Darkness, she hasn't actually eaten anything in that long. He says it's normal for those who have spent a longer period of time in the Realm of Darkness, and whilst Riku will admit that both times he exited he *did* feel a little nauseous, it's nothing like this.

Because this, Aqua shivering and shaking and barely able to lift her head from the plastic rim, is *terrifying*.

"Don't worry, Aqua. It'll pass, I promise you." Mickey tries to console her over the ship's intercom, but neither Aqua nor Riku can respond as her body shudders once more, and Riku tries not to wince as he scrapes her hair back again. It is *soaked* with sweat.

Mickey is correct, however, and an hour later Riku dares to roll a tiny piece of bread into a ball and hand it to the mage. Twenty minutes after that, he dares to give her more sips of water, and when that does not reappear over the next thirty minutes he decides to hoist her up from the floor.

Aqua is taller than him almost by a head, but Riku did not gain his upper body by lifting coconuts, and he manages to get her over to the painfully small bunk fairly quickly. She is awake, of course, though her eyes are heavily lidded and she is too focused on the pain lancing through her stomach from constant retching to really *speak*.

Riku grabs a small bowl from the bathroom and fills it with cold water, taking a spare bandage as he does. He dares to look in the mirror only briefly: he is pale and haggard himself, but he knows that the colour will return to his face after a good night of rest, when the effects of being in the Realm of Darkness have fully worn off.

Above all, though, he dares not look in the mirror for long in case he sees evidence for just how much he wishes Sora were here. Sora would know what to do, would know exactly the right

words to say to Aqua so she would not be faced with Riku's awkward silence. He would know how to distract her, to keep her spirits up even as her body rebelled against her.

Pinching the bridge of his nose and sighing, Riku leaves the bathroom and returns to Aqua. She has not yet been able to shower, despite her desire to do so, and Riku knows that she likely feels worse for it. So he sits there, as Aqua gives him a smile of thanks, and uses the bandage and cold water to wash her face and neck.

She is so unlike the powerful mage that had dominated the battlefield that Riku has to remind himself that they are the same person. When he is done, he places the bowl on the side and tries to get up to leave, but her hand shoots out and wraps tight around his wrist.

For a woman barely able to stand, her grip is *strong*. Riku looks down at her, head cocked to the side and one eyebrow raised, and she takes in a deep breath before that bright piercing gaze locks onto him.

"You have darkness in your heart." She pauses, trying to think, before she starts again. "I wasn't sure in the dark realm, but I can still sense it. But it's not controlling you."

It is a statement rather than a question, but Riku can still sense the query behind it.

"I tried to get rid of it. But, I realised you can have darkness in your heart as long as you don't let it control you. It's there, but with the help of my friends I managed to lock it away. Another one of Sora's miracles, I guess." He gives her a reassuring smile and, surprisingly, it seems to work. Aqua's grip on his wrist loosens, and her hand falls down onto the sheets beside her.

"That gives me hope. More hope than you could ever know."

The atmosphere changes, after that.

Riku's dark mood from so much time in the Realm of Darkness lifts, and after a few nights of sleeping in the cockpit of the gummi ship he feels comfortable enough to start piloting the ship again. Aqua manages to keep food down for longer than a few hours, and the blue haired woman recovers rapidly over the course of a week. Mickey, *somehow*, is utterly unaffected, though he *does* have the excuse of never having succumbed to the darkness before.

Aqua spends her evenings telling Riku the details he is missing from Mickey's tale. She tells him of her and Ventus and Terra, of long nights sitting in the gardens watching the stars, of training hard and falling in love and standing there, helpless, as the three of them fell apart.

In return, Riku tells her about everything she has missed in the last twelve years. She takes it well, all things considering, and Riku cannot help but tell her all about Sora and the things they have done since she last saw them both.

It makes him miss the brunet. Sora was his best friend *long* before Riku started falling in love with him, and he misses that constant presence at his side. He misses the friendship, of going to bed and complaining into the darkness and *knowing* Sora would respond. Riku misses

laying shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip on the floor, watching the stars no matter if it was those of the Islands or Yen Sid's Tower, and he misses those long evenings on the beach when he and Sora and Kairi would lay down without a care for the sand, their fingers intertwined. He misses the way their laughter would ring out along the beach, filling their air as they laughed and joked and lay in the warm sand, before they would drift off with the sunset, their hands still linked between them.

Yes, Riku may be in love with his best friend, and it may be one of the most painful emotional phases of his *life* trying to deal with it, but he still misses Sora's presence with every evening that he sleeps without having to hear the *horrific* snoring, with every morning that he wakes without Sora launching himself onto Riku to wake him up.

The easy peace shatters, however, when Riku and Aqua are forced to come to a decision on where to go next. Aqua argues that, as they have no idea *where* Ven's heart is, and no way to actually return it to him *if* they find it, they should immediately depart in search of Terra.

Riku, on the other hand, argues that they have no *idea* where Terra even is *if* he is still alive, whereas with Ventus they can at least retrieve his *body* and keep it safe.

It is with a smirk and a discreet fist pump that Riku wins out, and Aqua inputs the coordinates into the gummi with a reluctant smile.

It's four in the morning by the gummi ship's clock, when Aqua joins him in the cockpit. Mickey has chosen to rest, and the cockpit is heavy with the silence that usually accompanies such long flights. The only sound is the whirring of the machinery and the engine humming through the entire ship.

The air is stale, Riku thinks, from going for so long without opening the glass dome. There's not much to keep an eye on: this area is relatively gummi-free, and Aqua has explained that there will be no gate to get into the world because she never gave it one in the first place.

They're an hour away from the Land of Departure.

Aqua sits in the chair on his left, her feet up on top of the box of rations and crossed at the ankles. Her boots are impressively clean, he thinks idly. They sit in silence for a few minutes, Aqua beside him and fiddling with some sort of needle and craft, whilst Riku watches the stars as they speed by. Riku is fidgety, however, uncertain of what they will find in the Land of Departure *if* they find it at all, and he looks for conversation simply to fill the silence.

"Are you excited? To see your friend."

Aqua looks up from the trinket in her hand, and the small smile that graces her face is sweet.

"I am. I don't think anyone could know Ven and not be excited to see him again. Even if we won't be able to wake him up." Her voice is sadder, at the end, but the small smile remains.

"What was he like?" And Riku is genuinely curious. He has met many people during his travels, not all of them good, but he has never been able to simply *sit* and discuss others in

this way. To his mind's eye, Ventus is a blank slate with a face he does not know, and often when Aqua speaks of him he envisions Sora in his place as the closest equivalent.

Aqua laughs at his question, and her fingers return to the craft in her hand as she pierces it with a needle.

“Innocent. He would do anything for his friends. No amount of telling him to go home would get him to stop chasing Terra when he thought he was in danger. Of us all, he's the one who didn't deserve any of this. He was – *is*, so headstrong. If you're his friend, you can bet he'll be by your side to protect you.” Aqua's smile never wavers, even as she places her hand over her heart and casts her gaze to the stars.

“He sounds like Sora. Those two will get along well.” Riku observes, and Aqua cocks her head at him.

“Tell me about Sora. Not his exploits: everyone, including you, has told me what he is and what he's done. But no one says anything about *Sora*.”

Riku laughs.

“Probably because you can't describe Sora in a few words.” Aqua watches him expectantly, however, and Riku sighs before continuing.

“He's got a heart of gold, and a memory like a *sieve*. Sora's the kind of guy who will go on a one-day mission and come back three weeks later, because he just can't *help* but help people.” Riku's lips twist up in a smirk. “He's a huge dork and a lazy brat, but he'll get the job done, and you'll be glad you got to see it. We've been joined at the hip since we met when I was three.”

Aqua's smile widens, and a spark of hope lights in her eyes, but her gaze turns distant.

“He sounds lovely.”

Riku is inclined to agree, but his opinion of Sora is incredibly biased as it is, and he does want Aqua to form her own opinion. Her eyes don't leave his even if she isn't looking *at* him, and Riku summons the courage to ask her a question in return.

“What was he like?”

His words are no different to when he asked about Ventus, but the change in Aqua is immediate. The lines of her body tense, and her gaze turns even *more* distant (something Riku did not believe possible). The bundle of fabric and needle and thread falls from her hand into her lap, and Riku holds his breath as he glances sideways at her. He has a yearning to know more about the man who passed his keyblade on to him, the one who looked at Riku and saw potential, who sits in his memories as a solid figure to aspire to despite the shortness of their meeting. But Riku knows the subject is a sore one for Aqua that brings only painful memories and rubs at the wounds of her broken heart.

“Strong.” The words are quiet, but surprising enough that Riku finds himself listening with rapt attention. Aqua fiddles with the fabric in her lap for a moment, unsure how to continue. “A lot like Ven: if you were his friend he’d be there for you, but he *never* went about it the right way. He trusted those from the darkness too easily, and he yearned to always be better.”

Riku squirms in his seat, because oh boy doesn’t *that* sound familiar. Aqua remains oblivious, however.

“I failed them both. And now I don’t know what’s happened to Terra.”

“Were you and he...?” Riku trails off, physically cringing in the seat. There’s no way he can ask it without cringing, but Aqua understands anyway.

“No. I loved him, I *do* love him, and he loved me. I could see it in everything he did, but I thought we had all the time in the world, so I was waiting until after we’d both passed our Mark of Mastery exam. I used to think, if I’d told him before, would he still have fallen to the darkness?”

And Riku knows, from being the person on the opposite side of that scenario, that no amount of love from Sora would have stopped him from opening that door in the cave so many years ago. His meeting with Terra had sparked a yearning to get *out*, one that would not have been satisfied with stolen kisses and paopu fruits.

“You couldn’t have stopped it, Aqua.”

And perhaps a part of Aqua understands. He has been open with her, has told her about his past with the darkness and the hows and the whys of his descent into it. Perhaps there is a part of her that sees Terra’s personality reflected in the boy who inherited his keyblade, and perhaps it allows her to get an answer to a question that has been haunting her since Terra failed the exam.

Aqua has no doubt that when Terra meets Riku, he’ll be a very proud man. Oh, at first he’ll be a *mess*, worrying that his descent into darkness meant that Riku was doomed to the same, and then he’ll berate *himself* for allowing the darkness to take hold. But after that passes, when he sees the young man who inherited his keyblade? When he sees that Riku has faced the darkness *and won*, locking it away forever? When Terra meets Riku and sees *that*, he’ll be proud.

Aqua hopes it will give him the inspiration he needs to do the same.

Riku gapes when they arrive at the Land of Departure, as Aqua calls it. He gapes, because he is staring at *Castle fucking Oblivion*, a castle he had genuinely hoped would be lost to the darkness by now. Riku is sure he has been in *most* of these rooms, and he is certain he would *notice* if there had been a sleeping, comatose young boy in any of them.

Fairly certain, anyway.

“Please, tell me he’s not on the top floor.” Riku begs, and then pauses. “Or the bottom.”

Aqua only laughs, and he wonders if she truly knows just how big this castle is, or if she just created twenty-five floors of pure hell *and didn't even notice*.

Because that's what this castle is, to him. It's a place of twisting corridors and dark whispers in the back of his mind, of stark white rooms and Sora's floating body in a pod before him, stripped of memories. It's the place of birth of a girl he cannot remember, and the true start of his fight against the darkness Ansem had left in his heart.

But somehow, as they walk in through the grand entrance hall, Castle Oblivion doesn't *quite* look like he remembers it. Dark uninviting corridors are not nearly so imposing as they were before, and Riku is convinced that many passageways that Aqua leads them through were *not* there the first time he was here.

They don't make it much further than a *huge* room with a vaulted ceiling, before the peace shatters. The room becomes infested with nobodies within seconds, from samurais to assassins to those finicky dancers, and several of those large berserkers with their impenetrable weapons. It is as though Riku has stepped into a den of lions and *screamed*, and Mickey barely has time to shout a warning before they are descended upon.

Riku fights, longing for that second shadow in the form of Sora. Fighting alone seems strange even now, so long since he last saw the brunet; he trusts Aqua and Mickey, but they don't physically have his back like Sora does. The nobodies are tough to fight, and even Aqua struggles as she finds her magic mostly useless against some of them. The dancers are upon her, twirling around her and wrapping her in long ribbons as they pull her around. Mickey is trying to fight several assassins at once, and growing increasingly frustrated with their tendency to go underground, and Riku is surrounded by far too many dusks.

But Aqua's spells are missing her quick-moving targets, and Mickey's targets are remaining underground too much for his keyblade to be much use, and *Riku* is sick of having to *turn constantly* for what amounts to a jacked-up *onepiece*.

It is during one of these turns, in the heat of the battle, that one of the dusks sticks a leg out and Riku stumbles, falling far too quickly to the floor. He tries to steady himself with his keyblade, but the tip slides along the floor and sends him falling to his knees, one hand still on the hilt.

Vaguely, he is aware of someone casting blizzaga behind him; it makes him pause, because he can see Aqua in his periphery casting a vicious firaga spell, and Mickey can't *cast* blizzaga, so who-?

Blurring before him and then coming into his vision sharply and clearly, the black and blue blade of Oblivion comes down hard on the dusk above him, ringing out loudly as it connects with the floor centimetres from his face. Riku is yanked to his feet, *hard*, and then suddenly a back is pressed to his own. Riku strikes out at an assassin, leaping at it before falling back, and pants heavily as Sora finishes off a combo before returning to his place at Riku's side.

"Oh look, here I go *again*." Sora cuts himself off, aiming and blasting a fireball at an approaching dusk, before he continues. "Here I am, *chasing you down* across the worlds, *again*."

Riku grunts as a samurai approaches: they push off from each other, Sora leaping at it whilst Riku charges. Within two strikes its gone, and they return to their position.

“You’re going to do this *now*?”

“Gee, Riku, maybe if you didn’t keep *running off* into the night without warning, I’d wait. How do I know you’re not going to run?”

Another wave of nobodies arrive, and for a moment they fit together seamlessly again; Riku takes Sora’s keyblade and swings it round in an arc, hitting several at once before he passes them both to Sora and erects a shield to protect his back. Sora swings them twice before slamming them both into the ground (and Riku would be lying if he said the sound of his blade hitting marble flooring didn’t make him *wince*), and a wave of light pans out and disintegrates the two dusks and the samurai before them.

It’s as though Riku hasn’t spent the last five months learning a completely different fighting style; they combine their blades, Riku’s left hand and Sora’s right gripping the handles, and then suddenly the room is a blur and they work around each other, smacking and eliminating every enemy in their path and *barely* avoiding Aqua as she cartwheels out of the way. They come to a stop, Sora’s left arm still hooked in Riku’s left to stop them separating, and Riku steadies them whilst Sora casts another blizzard.

“So, why’d you leave?”

Riku grits his teeth.

“*Really* not the time.”

Sora pauses then, and turns to look at Riku with a flash of irritation on his face. Riku shoots him a look, before bringing down a hail of meteors to hit the samurai creeping up behind him.

“It’s *never* a good time for you, Riku!”

Riku grabs his shoulders and spins him, forcing him to attack and finish off the samurai with a beam of light.

“Sora will you just *focus*...”

Riku trails off, seeing Aqua lower her keyblade somewhere behind Sora. The room is almost silent, the difference in noise level from the sound of spells casting to the end of a battle startling to his ears in the large hall. Riku glances around, seeing Mickey lowering his own keyblade and Donald and Goofy (and when had *they* turned up?) strapping their respective weapons back onto their backs.

Oblivion and Way to the Dawn disappear from their hands, but Sora is not done trying to get an explanation out of Riku. The silver-haired man, however, is watching Aqua, who is standing before a giant door that had *not* been there before. Sora follows his gaze, before he turns to look at Riku.

“Are you in love with her?”

Riku’s gaze tears away from Aqua so quickly that his neck hurts, and his teal eyes narrow down at Sora.

“What? No! Damnit Sora don’t be ridiculous!”

“I was just *asking*!”

Riku rolls his eyes hard enough that he nearly gives himself an aneurism, but Sora’s stance becomes more solid as he stares up into Riku’s face. “So, *why* did you leave then?”

"Sora this is really not the time."

And Riku snakes a hand around Sora's neck, causing the other boy to freeze in surprise before Riku plants that hand over his mouth to keep him quiet. But despite Sora's anger, or perhaps even because of it, the brunet licks the palm of his palm.

Riku yanks his hand away immediately, and Sora crosses his arms and sticks his tongue out.

"Ugh, you're disgusting!" Riku wipes his hand down the side of Sora's jacket sleeve, but before the brunet can respond they are both distracted by what Aqua is doing to the door.

A giant keyhole has appeared, right in the centre of the door above their heads, and Aqua aims her keyblade at it with both hands. There is something painful on her scrunched up face, a hope that dare not exist and a fear that makes them unable to move as they watch the familiar beam of light shoot out of her keyblade.

The unlocking of the door is unlike anything they have ever bore witness to in their adventures. The entire castle shakes with the vibrations, as the sound of two heavy metal doors scraping along marble flooring fills the air. Goofy stares up at the doors in awe, whilst Donald and Sora clamp their hands over their ears at the screech. Riku takes a step forward, curious, and nearly knocks Mickey over as he does so.

Aqua is the first to step through the doors as they open fully, and Riku follows close behind, eager to see the interior. Sora is close on his heels, and Riku feels the younger man place a hand between his shoulder blades as he follows, though whether it is to hide behind him or to encourage him onwards Riku is not sure. The room is bright and white, decorated with repeated sigils which neither boy recognises, but which bear a strange similarity to the nobody sigil.

Whilst Sora is busy looking at the walls and the ceiling which much cover at least three floors (and really, how Organization XIII had failed to find this room is truly baffling to him considering the size of it), Riku's eyes zero in on the slumped body in the throne at the back of the room. They are roughly ten metres away from it, when Riku stops where he stands.

"Oh *shit*."

"Huh?"

Sora, walking backwards at this point with one hand still on Riku, knocks into him and turns, but Riku cannot tear his gaze away from the boy on the throne. Sora pulls at the sleeve of his jacket, likely as confused and horrified as Riku looks.

"Whoa, Riku...how?"

Aqua, torn between running to Ventus and investigating why Riku looks like he has seen a ghost, decides to ignore them both. She reaches Ventus before either of them, and Sora watches with interest as she immediately takes the unconscious boy into her arms, one hand ruffling through his hair automatically as she does so.

Riku approaches carefully, utterly baffled, because *why the fuck* is Roxas sitting there, unconscious and *corporeal*?

It's a myriad of questions running through his brain: why does Ventus look like Roxas, what does that mean for Sora, does that mean there's a link between the two other boys in the room?

Donald, Goofy and Mickey stand at the rear, uncertain as to why Sora and Riku are so shocked by the sight of Ventus. Riku wishes he had their ignorance, wishes he had no memories of ruining a boy's life only to be faced with another boy who is practically his *clone*.

Unexpectedly, just as Riku thinks that, the blond boy's eyes flicker open and Riku can *feel* the weight of Sora cringing away. The stare is unblinking and unregistering as it zeroes in on Sora, and Riku is fairly certain that despite the eeriness of the look, Ventus is not actually *seeing* them.

"Why the *fuck* does he look like me?!"

Riku *actually* pulls the muscle in his neck as he jerks away to look at Sora, who is standing there looking angry and confused *and not like Sora*.

"*Roxas?*"

Whatever spell has taken Sora passes, for the brunet blinks twice before his eyes refocus in on Riku, and he looks only confused. Something stirs in his heart, but whether that is Roxas or something *else*, he cannot say. He only looks at Riku, confused and angry because of Roxas' own feelings.

Riku notices that Sora is still cringing away from Ventus, and he also notices that Ventus' unnerving gaze does not tear away from Sora. Aqua is beginning to look worried, as she shakes the lifeless body wrapped in her arms, but she gives up quickly and Riku gives her a questioning look.

"I had hoped he might have regained his heart, after so long."

And somehow, despite the confusion and the lingering anger and the general *creepy* factor of this entire situation, it clicks in Riku's mind before it does anyone else's.

“Sora has his heart.”

The boy in question flinches, looking taken aback, before he turns to look at Riku.

“What?”

“His heart, Sora, his heart is in *yours*. Just like Kairi’s was. Do you remember when we were little and on the beach, and you said you could feel a heart reaching out to yours? That has to have been when Aqua said Ventus lost his heart. And it explains why Roxas looks like him. And, er, why he's staring at you.”

“Gee, Riku. They certainly look alike, but don’t you think that might be a bit of a stretch?” Mickey pipes up, and Riku realises he had almost forgotten the King was there. Sora looks like he is inclined to agree with Mickey, and Riku shakes his head vehemently.

“None of you ever saw Roxas, not really. But I did, I spent nearly a year tracking him down and following him. Ventus doesn’t just look *like* Roxas: they’re identical. They’re wearing the *same damned clothes*.” Riku’s eyes flicker back over to that piercing blue gaze that isn’t really looking, unmoving and still fixated on Sora.

“But if his heart is in me, how do we get it back?”

Riku frowns: they’ve hit an obstacle none of them had ever accounted for. The whole point of Sora’s Mark of Mastery was to gain the ability to unlock sleeping hearts, in order to wake Ventus up. But none of them had actually accounted for the heart being *in* Sora.

“We need help.” Mickey interjects, the voice of reason amidst the rising emotions in the room, as Aqua’s frown deepens with the revelations being laid out before her.

Please don’t say Ienzo, Riku thinks desperately, hoping they will not have to rely on the nobody whose presence makes him feel uncomfortable. Riku does not like being looked at as though he is transparent, and Ienzo is capable of giving him such a gaze in droves.

“I think we should take this to the apprentices of Ansem the Wise.”

Riku closes his eyes, trying not to blurt out a *no*, and even Sora looks a tad uncomfortable at the prospect.

“I guess no one knows the heart better than those guys, huh?” Sora’s tone is light as he rubs the back of his neck in discomfort, and Riku sends a glare his way. *Traitor*.

Aqua gathers Ventus into her arms and lifts him from the throne; at the movement, his eyes slip shut, and Sora visibly relaxes beside Riku. Goofy steps forward, to take Ventus from Aqua, but even as she hands him over the blue haired woman watches the dog with every step he takes.

Once Ventus is gone from the room, Aqua moves behind the throne he had been sleeping in, and points her keyblade at it. Riku watches, uncertain of what other tricks she has up her sleeve, and the bolt of light that shoots out of her keyblade is nearly blinding. The moment it touches the keyhole, however, Castle Oblivion *turns*.

Riku cannot explain it: it is like sitting inside the bud of a flower as it blooms. The room falls away, the ceiling unfurling and shattering, fading into dust as the walls disappear. They are replaced by tall yellow and blue walls, with intricate designs decorating it, a colourful difference to the stark white walls covered in strange sigils.

The night sky becomes visible through a hole in the ceiling, something he had once never thought he'd see again whilst in this wretched place, and the floor beneath their feet shimmers. The stark white marble fades to an old, painted wooden floor that creaks beneath their feet, and even the throne transforms from cold metal to dark wood. The false lighting is sucked from the room, leaving them in a dimly lit room that is *still* more inviting than Castle Oblivion ever was.

The decrepit castle they now stand in is a far cry from Castle Oblivion, and Riku wonders how Aqua had managed to change it so drastically.

Sora turns to him, his gaze suddenly hard and unyielding even in the low light, and wraps a hand around his bicep. Riku feels the pain as Sora grips it hard, fingers digging in, and he is tugged in the direction of the doorway.

“Outside, *now*.”

“Get off of me!”

Riku yanks his arm from Sora's grip, nails scratching across his bicep as he does so, and Sora takes a step back, crossing his arms as he does so. He stares at Riku, expecting *something*, but Riku only stares back in stubborn retaliation.

“Why did you leave?”

“This is *not*-“

“Oh for- Riku, if you tell me this isn't the time, I will tackle you to the *floor*.”

Riku looks around; they're stood at the top of the marble steps into the castle, and he does not quite fancy being thrown down them. Sora is still looking at him expectantly, and Riku matches his stance.

“You know why I left.”

“Ok yeah, maybe I do. What I *don't* know, is why you need to keep *running off* without talking to me! Jeez Riku, would it *kill* you to talk about things?” Sora steps closer, anger vibrating through his body as he stares up at Riku. The older boy glares right back at him, indignant and so sure his decision was the *right* one.

“And what good would that have done? What would you have liked me to say? ‘Hey Sora, I know you're having a happy relationship with Kairi, but just want to let you know I'm in love with you and I can't be *near* you without wanting to kiss you. Hope this doesn't change anything!’ Yeah Sora, that would have gone down *like a fucking lead balloon*.”

Riku unconsciously takes a step forward, hands clenched into fists, and he knows his sarcasm is lancing into Sora but he can't *stop*. Sora himself is taken aback; the words hurt, but he is more surprised at how easily that confession of love had come out of Riku. It had been one thing for Kairi to tell him about it, and quite another to hear it from Riku's lips. The fact that it is spoken with such anger and self-loathing puts a bit of a dampener on it, however.

"Argh, you are such an asshole!" They are closer now, close enough that Riku can feel Sora's breath on his neck as he breathes heavily with anger.

"Yeah, I am. What's your point?"

"I'm not in a relationship with Kairi, you *idiot*!"

Something in Riku falters at that. He takes a step back, but Sora follows.

"That doesn't make any difference. I left because I wanted to get over you--"

Sora cuts him off with a wave of his hand, and Riku is *mortified* to see him wipe at his cheek with the back of his hand. He's not made Sora cry in years, and damn if it doesn't make him feel like a bully.

"This is why you should have talked to me! Damnit Riku, I could have told you I wasn't *with* Kairi, could have told you that I..." Sora trails off, his voice cracking towards the end, before he shakes his head. Riku feels helpless as he watches, and he reaches out a hand to touch the other boy's shoulder. Sora jerks away from him, and it stings. Something burns in his eyes, something that doesn't sit right with Riku and makes him want to wrap the other boy in his arms and *beg* for forgiveness.

"Sora, I--"

"It doesn't matter." Sora gives him a smile that is only barely there, not quite reaching his eyes, and Riku can see right through it of course. "I hope you got what you wanted. I hope you're not hurting anymore."

Sora shoves past him before Riku has another chance to speak, one shoulder pushing against his own in anger as he storms down the steps. Riku watches him head over to one of the two gummi ships, helpless and unable to speak, and tries desperately to forget that look of *grief* in Sora's bright blue eyes.

What he has forgotten, however, is that whilst Mickey, Donald, and Goofy had returned to the gummi ships with the weakened Ventus, Aqua had stayed to wander the remnants of the Land of Departure. He hears her boots on the wooden slats of the castle floor as she approaches, and when he looks up she is staring after Sora in what looks to him to be absolute wonder. Her eyes are wide, her hands crossed loosely over her chest, and her boots go *tap tap tap* on the wood as her lips part in surprise.

Her gaze moves slowly from the disappearing Sora to land on Riku, and he almost flinches away from those eyes that are so *similar* to Sora's. He has no doubt that she has heard the entire conversation, but when she speaks that wonder is in her voice.

“He is in love with you.”

Riku snorts.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Aqua shakes her head, blue hair falling in front of her face before she tucks it behind her ears.

“You’re both so young, you can’t *see* it. Don’t make the same mistake I did, and choose not to look at what’s there in front of you.”

Riku turns to look at the gummi ships just as one of them fires up. The sound of the engines whirring is caught up in the wind produced by them, and both Aqua and Riku watch as it hovers, briefly, before it ascends. Riku can faintly see Sora in the pilot’s seat as it rises, before it breaks the atmosphere of the Land of Departure.

One second it is there, the faint sounds of the engines gathering power still able to be heard in the quiet night, and the next it is gone, a distant star travelling away from them and towards Radiant Garden.

Their own journey back to Radiant Garden is uneventful. It is Mickey’s turn to pilot the ship, and so Riku and Aqua try to get a few hours of sleep in the bunkbed.

The keyword, Riku thinks, is *try*. Because with nowhere to put Ventus, he’d been gently placed into the chair in their room, and Riku can’t sleep because he keeps imagining that he’ll open his eyes to find Ventus’ stare locked on him. He can’t roll over and ignore it, either, because then he is even more uncomfortable. He wonders, briefly, if Aqua would be offended if she woke up to find he’d stuffed Ventus into the bathroom.

They arrive at Ansem’s laboratory to find a waiting Ienzo and Aelex; the taller man takes Ventus from Aqua’s arms and leads them down to the room that used to be Ansem the Wise’s office. Sora, Donald and Goofy are already in the room, with Sora lounging back in the chair, and Ienzo directs Aelex to lay Ventus onto an examining table.

“Well?” Riku asks into the room, when no one speaks after Ventus is laid onto the table.

“Your hypothesis was correct.” Ienzo is the one that speaks, and Riku tries not to clench his teeth. “The heart of this keyblade bearer is trapped inside the heart of *your* keyblade bearer.”

Sora will not look at him, Riku notices, though he does not have long to wait to understand why.

“How do we get it back?” Aqua asks, one hand hovering at her throat in anxiousness. They are close, Riku thinks, and he knows that she is too scared to be hopeful. Ienzo indicates to Sora.

“His heart will need to be opened in order to set it free.” Riku frowns, not liking where the conversation is going. “And *you* will need to be the one to do it.”

“*What?* I can’t unlock Sora’s heart; the last time I pointed a keyblade at it I nearly killed him.”

Sora gets up from the chair, finally looking at Riku, and shakes his head. Riku knows, from the look on his face, that his mind is already made up.

“You have to do it, Riku. You completed the Mark of Mastery, and I haven’t taken it again, not yet. You woke me up when the Organization had me; I know you can do it.” His words are kind, for someone who is supposed to be angry at Riku, but he is not convinced.

“But I don’t know how to unlock a heart, Sora! I didn’t even really unlock those worlds, because I was in your heart the whole time.”

“C’mon Riku, it’ll be easy for you!” Riku pinches the bridge of his nose, as Sora smiles confidently.

“Trying to appeal to my arrogance isn’t gonna work, brat.” Riku heaves a sigh. “What if it goes wrong? What if I don’t unlock his heart and accidentally *take* it?”

“We have safeguards. At the very least, if you do turn him into a heartless, he won’t be able to leave the room.” Ienzo speaks dryly and with all seriousness, and yet Riku thinks that *must* be a joke. He’s going to point a keyblade at Sora’s heart, and the very best they can offer is that Sora’s heartless won’t be able to *escape*?

“And what if we recreate another Roxas? Or what if we release Roxas *and* make another one? There are too many possibilities and ways for this to go wrong-“

Riku is cut off from speaking by Aeolus, who looks up from where he stands at the examination table.

“Act quickly. The magic from Castle Oblivion has kept him alive, but time will catch up to him unless you return his heart.”

Riku runs a hand over his face, disbelieving that they’re actually going to *do* this.

“Please, Riku. We have no choice.” And Sora, in all of his bleeding-heart glory, simply cannot see the insanity of this. His heart is geared to help, to try everything no matter the risk, as long as someone is helped and their pain removed. Riku knows that if he doesn’t do this, Sora will likely just turn the keyblade on himself, and didn’t *that* go so well last time.

“*Fine*. But damn, I want to be able to concentrate *fully*. No one in there with us except Ventus, and the door guarded in case it goes wrong.” Riku feels his stomach churning as he agrees to what he believes is utter *madness*. The very thought of aiming the keyblade at Sora makes his hands sweat from fear, but Sora stands before him without a single worry evident on his face.

Ienzo nods in acquiescence, and Riku sighs into his hands. He *cannot* see this plan going well.

“There is one other thing.” Ienzo speaks up before they begin to leave the room. He speaks to them all, but his eyes are on Aqua. “I was not sure, last we met, if you were aware of the location of your armour. It is in the Chamber of Repose, in The Castle that Never Was. Xehanort’s nobody would often go in and speak to it, or so I was told.” And with that, Ienzo places his reading glasses back onto his face, and turns to examine Ventus.

Riku looks at Aqua: she looks as though she is both relieved, at the location of her armour, and as if she has been slapped in the face. He wonders if the latter has anything to do with the idea that the possessed body of her best friend has apparently been speaking to her armour for years.

Before she can say anything, however, they are motioned out of the room, and Aqua waits until Mickey, Donald and Goofy are out of earshot before she turns to the two younger boys.

“There is something else you should know. Ven merged with Vanitas, and I don't know if returning Ven’s heart will mean that Vanitas will return as well.” She chews her bottom lip in worry, but Sora only grins.

“Don’t worry, we’ll handle it.”

But Aqua shakes her head, worry on her face, and she reaches out her hands to cup the chins of both boys. They are young men, too young for facing challenges such as these, but then again they *all* are, twelve years in the realm of darkness notwithstanding.

“Don’t underestimate how dangerous that boy is, if he comes back. Just, be careful, will you?”

They both nod, and Aqua releases them. She leaves them in the corridor, knowing they have their own demons to be rid of before Ven can wake up.

“Look, we *do* need to talk.” Sora says, as Aqua turns the corner at the end of the dark corridor. Riku turns to look at him, beautiful Sora who will allow Riku to turn a keyblade on him without a shred of fear, who *still* looks at him as though Riku is something to *aspire* to, and thinks *fuck it*.

The kiss is seamless. Riku moves forward, one hand sliding along Sora’s jaw and into his hair as their lips connect, and there is no hesitation on Sora’s part. His hands grip the front of Riku’s jacket as he stands on his tiptoes, lips a firm pressure on Riku’s until the other boy’s mouth opens beneath his, and he worries he might *melt*.

Sora is panting when Riku pulls away, his face flushed and his eyes dazed even as his hands still clutch at Riku, and Riku laughs at the sight of Sora looking so undone.

“Sorry, I figured I may as well, in case this goes south.”

And Sora grins, leaning in to rest his forehead on Riku’s collarbone.

“*Finally*. I didn’t think you’d ever do it. I owe Kairi twenty munny.”

Riku hums in response as he rests his chin on Sora's head, one hand still resting in the soft brunet spikes, before Sora's words actually register with him.

"You placed a *bet*?" His voice is indignant, and Sora lets out a laugh that echoes through the corridor. It is a joyful sound, considering what they're about to do.

"Yep. And I lost, *damnit*. Hey, do me a favour, and tell Kairi I kissed you?"

And Riku can only roll his eyes, because of *course* Sora would just forget the huge fight they'd had, and the fact that Riku had upped and left for nearly six months.

"Only if you split the munny with me." And that gets another laugh, before Sora lifts his head and looks up at Riku.

"No more running away, okay? Stop being such an asshole and just *talk* to us."

In the end, waking Ventus goes much smoother than any of them had dared to hope for.

Sora and Riku enter the room pushing the examination table between them. Ventus is, unfortunately, chained to the damned thing, something which Aqua had insisted on in case Vanitas was the one to emerge.

The door is locked and bolted behind them, and the room itself has no windows or other exits. It is perfect, in case things go wrong, but Riku doesn't want to think of that. He and Sora stand there facing each other, the examination table behind them, and Sora shrugs.

"Might as well get it over with, huh?"

Riku must wince, because Sora shakes his head.

"No, no self-doubt allowed. You can do it, I know you can. I trust you."

Whether or not Sora knows it, those words make Riku feel sick, because he's not sure he trusts his own ability to do this. Sora is too trustworthy at times, and this is one of them.

Riku summons Way to the Dawn, its weight heavy and familiar and *comforting* in a time such as this. Sora gives him an encouraging smile, one that shows no hint of fear, and Riku takes aim.

Trying to resist the temptation to close his eyes is difficult, but Riku manages to keep his gaze locked with Sora's as he pours all of his concentration into the keyblade. The beam of light that shoots out comes out slowly, and Sora's heart reacts to it almost immediately. It lights up like a homing beacon in his chest, and Riku focuses on unlocking the heart without taking it.

The beam of light connects, and Riku dare not move in case anything goes wrong. Sora does not flinch at the contact, which gives Riku some hope, and somewhere in the depth of Sora's heart Ventus' awakens.

It is the same as when Sora had stabbed himself with the keyblade to save Kairi: two small spheres of light erupt from his chest and hover in the air above him, but Sora is not *flinching* and that is confusing to Riku, because only *one* should be hovering there if Sora is still conscious. Sora breaks their gaze to look at the orbs in confusion as they float there, almost *uncertain* at their freedom.

Riku breathes in a gasp when one of them whizzes through the air towards the wall, fully expecting it to bounce off the metal, but instead it simply disappears through the wall. The second sphere seems to watch it for a moment, as though contemplating following, before it gently floats over to Ventus' body.

It hovers above his chest for only a second, before it pushes its way through and consumes Ventus' body in light. When it recedes, the orb is gone, and Ventus opens his eyes.

Sora and Riku give each other a look, and at Sora's nod Riku focuses on retracting the beam of light his keyblade is producing. It comes back slowly, but the moment it is no longer near Sora's heart Riku commands the blade to disappear.

"You okay?" Riku asks, moving close enough to place a hand on Sora's arm. The brunet nods, and both of them quickly make their way to Ventus.

Awake and looking around, Riku is even more surprised by how much he looks like Roxas. Those blue eyes are even eerier when they lock onto him and *see* him, and it is Sora who speaks up first as Riku is stunned into silence.

"What's your name?"

The blond turns to look at him, before his eyes travel down to the restraints that keep him from being able to sit up.

"Ventus... wh-where am I?"

Riku searches those sky blue eyes for any hint of deceit and, thankfully, finds none. He leans over to the padlock on the first chain and unlocks it, looking down at *Ventus* as he does so.

"You're in Radiant Garden, in the laboratory of Ansem the Wise."

Sora gets to work on the other chain, as Riku releases the wrist straps. His lower legs are still strapped to the table, and Riku wonders with a flicker of fear *what* exactly Aqua had expected to wake up in place of this boy. Ventus tries to sit up, and Riku releases the strap over his abdomen and chest so he can do so.

"Ansem the Wise? What am I doing here, I was in the..." The body beneath the straps tenses up as Ventus' memory comes back to him, and Riku and Sora stop what they are doing to make sure he is okay. "I was in the Badlands. How did I get here? How did I?" He trails off again, words coming faster in a blind panic, but before Riku and Sora can start panicking themselves they hear the sound of the bolt being drawn across the door.

It opens loudly, scraping across the floor, but Aqua rushes in the moment the gap is large enough for her to squeeze her body through. She collides with an upright Ventus so hard that the table moves backwards by several inches, and the confused Ventus is wrapped up in her arms so tightly she is almost smothering him.

“Ven!”

“Aqua!”

Sora’s smile is watery as he undoes the leg straps, and Riku suspects he sees tears in his eyes when Ventus laughs in *relief*. His entire body relaxes, as Aqua releases him and cups his face in her hands. She plants a kiss on his forehead, before she crushes him to her chest again, but this time Ventus’ arms wrap around her just as tightly.

“Oh Ven, I’ve missed you so much.” Aqua laughs and hiccups as she buries her face in Ventus’ hair, and Riku turns away when he sees a tear rolling down her cheek. To his surprise, Sora is looking at them with a tear on his own face and his bottom lip quivering, though he punches Riku in the arm when the silver haired boy gives him a *look*.

“Why am I here, Aqua? Where’s Terra?” He releases Aqua, who lets go of him in turn, and looks over at Sora and Riku. “And who are you guys?”

“Ven, this is Sora and Riku. They helped me wake you up.”

And the response that Ventus gives is so *Sora* in nature that Riku thinks he understands why Ventus’ heart sought refuge in Sora’s. The boy gives them a grin, even in his disoriented state, and inclines his head to them both.

“My name’s Ventus. Thanks for helping me.” He turns back to Aqua, wide smile not lessening in the slightest. “But where’s Terra? Why was I asleep?”

The blue haired woman reaches out to stroke his cheek, not bothering to wipe the tears on her face.

“Ven, there’s a lot you missed, a lot that *I* missed. But let’s get you out of here first, and I promise I’ll explain *everything*.”

Ventus nods at her, eager to know and figure out what he’s missed, still unaware of how long he’s been asleep. And for someone who has been sleeping for twelve years, he is remarkably steady on his feet when Aqua helps him down from the table and out of the room.

Riku looks over at Sora, who is wiping at his eyes after the scene before him, and laughs.

“You total fucking *sap*.”

The gummi ships are packed and ready, lights on but engines inactive, and Sora and Riku watch them from the balcony of Radiant Garden’s castle.

“We gotta tell Lea.”

Sora turns to look at Riku in surprise.

“Do you think? What do we say?”

“I don’t know, ‘we watched two hearts come out of Sora’s and we think one might have been Roxas’, but we don’t know where it went?”

Sora laughs, and bumps his shoulder with his own as they lean against the railing. “I didn’t think Axel had cared all that much, if I’m honest.”

And Riku feels a sadness come over him, because Sora hadn’t *seen* it. Sora hadn’t watched as Axel fought tooth and nail to get to Roxas in Twilight Town, hadn’t been there to see Axel’s face each time he was expelled from the virtual town, or each time Roxas didn’t recognise him. Axel had cared alright, *far* too much considering he had been led to believe that nobodies had no hearts: it was Axel’s heartbreak in the face of losing Roxas that made Riku realise everything he’d been taught about nobodies was wrong.

“He loved him. And Lea still does. So someone definitely needs to send him a warning about Ventus looking like Roxas. We can’t break his heart again by letting him see Ventus only to find out he’s not Roxas.”

Sora only nods, understanding that the situation regarding Roxas and Lea is still one that Riku looks back on with heavy regret and sadness.

“I can’t believe we’re being split up *again*.” Sora says into the heavy silence between them, and Riku smirks.

“Yeah well, we wouldn’t be if *someone* had finished their training, instead of hauling ass outta there the moment Phil’s back was turned.” Riku watches as Sora turns on the balcony, leaning back against it so he can look up at Riku.

“I know, but you get to travel with the keyblade wielders! You get to travel with these two heroes who were *there* when Xehanort kicked all of this into motion.” He stops, uncertain if he should continue. “And I feel so bad for Terra. But, I hope that if you manage to rescue him, he sees you and realises that a little darkness isn’t so bad.”

Riku scoffs, more inclined to disagree after everything the darkness in his own heart had put them through, but Sora is hopeful and so he keeps his mouth shut.

“I’ll be sure to leave some of the bad guys for you. That is, if you don’t finish your training before we find Terra. Which you might, since we don’t know where he is.”

Sora smiles, but worry comes over his face anyway.

“Be careful in the Castle that Never Was. We don’t know for sure if it’s empty.”

And Riku heaves a long-suffering sigh, playful and so *thankful* that they’re back to normal.

“I’ll be safe, *mother*.”

“Don’t call me your mother when you had your tongue down my throat ten minutes ago.”

Riku has the grace to blush at Sora’s words, whilst the brunet bursts out laughing and moves closer, resting his head on Riku’s shoulder.

“I’m gonna miss you.”

“Of course. At least you get to say goodbye this time.” Riku quips, but he flinches at Sora’s glare. “Too soon?”

“Yeah, you asshole.”

“I’ll miss you too, for what it’s worth.”

Sora leans up to place a lingering kiss on Riku’s lips, one hand resting on his chest for balance.

“You better. Now go, you’ve got some star-crossed lovers to reunite.” At Sora’s words, Riku cocks his head in confusion, looking down at the younger man whose lips are only inches from his own.

“How did you know about them?”

“Have you seen the way she looks when she talks about him? When she was telling Ven and I what happened to Terra, she looked *devastated*. Also, Ven told me.” Sora observes, and Riku raises an eyebrow. Ventus has only been awake a week, but he and Sora have gotten along like a house on *fire*, and Sora was allowed to sit with Ventus when Aqua was relaying the events of the last twelve years. They have been joined at the hip, and Riku imagines that this is what it would be like if Sora had been raised with a twin.

“I’ll see you soon, yeah?”

“Yeah, now go. Tell Ven I said ‘bye.’”

And Riku nods, leaning down for one last quick kiss before he picks up the backpack by his feet. There is no lingering, sappy goodbye: Sora turns to look over the balcony as Riku disappears through the doorway, still feeling like he is missing out on a journey with two Keyblade Masters and a well-known keyblade hero. He watches them, Ven, Aqua and Riku, as they board the gummi ship with Mickey, knowing he needs to head down soon to return to the Olympus Coliseum.

Riku might have the better job, tracking down Terra with Aqua and Ventus and trying to find a way to separate him from Xehanort, but Sora’s got plans of his own. Ones that may *not* be strictly approved of by Mickey, but which Ienzo was more than willing to help him with. He grabs his backpack as the sound of the gummi engines firing up fills the air, and heads down to meet Donald and Goofy in the castle entryway. He leaves a note for Ienzo, with the request to send Lea after him as soon as his training is finished.

And then Sora grins, hoisting the backpack over his shoulder, and looks over at Donald and Goofy with a laugh.

“C’mon, we’ve got a nobody to find.”

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