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1 - Keyblade vs Keyblade

Sora and Kairi walked along Destiny Islands' beach, telling each other the events that happened during their time apart after the destruction of their world to the fight against the Organization leader Xemnas. Sora was still clueless on what happened between after defeating Xehanort and waking up in Twilight Town.

"Hmm... I guess I must have gone into a coma or something then." Sora guessed, "But... how? All I can remember is walking up towards a weird looking castle."

"You probably just forgot, Sora. It's no big deal." Kairi assured him.

"Hmm ... I guess you're right!" Sora answered, they both continued their conversation as they walked along the beach. Suddenly, Sora tripped and fell face first onto the sand. He got himself onto his hands and knees and spat out a load of sand from his mouth. "Damn you, Riku!" He shouted as he turned his head. There sat beside him against the stone wall was Riku, his long silver hair blew with the slight breeze as his head lifted up. His left leg was crossed while his right was stretched out and his arms were also crossed.

Riku began to grin, "Oi, lazy bum, watch where you're going next time." He said.

"You did that on purpose, idiot!" Sora shouted to him as he got up from the ground.

"No need to get angry, Sora." Riku leapt up from the ground onto his feet.

"Show off as always." Sora mumbled.

"Anyway, I was just thinking, we haven't has a sparring match since (well... it wasn't really a sparring match) our fight in Hollow Bastion."

"That wasn't really a fair fight then as Xehanort had control over your body. And I think our last fight was in The Land of the Dragons..." Sora replied. "But I see where you're getting at; you want me to spar with you to see how much I've improved."

"Yep, although I already seen some of your moves before anyway." Riku replied.

"Yeah, that's true ... but not all of them." Sora said.

Riku and Sora strode to both ends of the beach. Kairi shook her head, "They never change."

She sat on top of the stone wall to watch the fight. Tidus, Wakka and Selphie ran up towards Kairi, Tidus asked "What's going on?"

"Sora and Riku are having a sparring match." Kairi answered. The three of sat on the wall beside Kairi to watch the fight.

Both Riku and Sora lifted their right arm in front of them and grabbed their Keyblades that suddenly appeared in front of them, Sora's being the Kingdom Key and Riku's being The Way to the Dawn. "Let's go!" They shouted to each other, and so they charged, clutching onto their Keyblades.

Sora jumped into the air, raising his Keyblade above his head, holding it with both his hands. He cut down toward Riku with his Keyblade, but Riku was ready for it. He jumped into the air towards Sora and blocked his attack with his Keyblade. They both began to do a flurry of attacks to each other while still being in the air, but none of their attacks inflicted any damage as the both blocked them. Sora kicked both his feet off Riku's chest, making him fly even higher towards the sky and causing Riku to fall to the ground. Sora flipped and turned upside down, he pointed his Keyblade towards Riku. "Firaga!" He shouted. A large ball of fire was released from his Keyblade and bulleted towards Riku.

"Hah! Nice try!" Riku shouted. He recovered himself from falling and threw his Keyblade towards the Fireball. The Keyblade collided with the Fireball, the Fireball exploded and smoke covered the air, making it hard for both Sora and Riku to see anything.

Kairi, Tidus, Wakka and Selphie watched in amazement as the battle raged on. "Who do you think is going to win?" Selphie asked.

"Hmm... To be honest... I think Sora will." Kairi answered.

"Why?" Tidus asked.

"Look at him, he's become a lot stronger than before, and has a lot more confidence in him. But Riku has also gotten stronger... so this is going to be a close match." Kairi said, wondering how it might end. Still hovering in the air, Sora closed his eyes as the smoke continued to fill the sparring area. He listened to any trace of sound from Riku. But Riku was way ahead of him; he jumped above Sora and did a low cut with his Keyblade while doing a back flip. The Keyblade smacked Sora on the back of the head hard, sending him tumbling to the ground. He hit the sand as he appeared out from the smoke. Kairi gasped. Sora steadily and weakly got to his feet. Still holding his Keyblade, Sora put his hands on the back of his head where Riku hit him and groaned to himself "Oooowwww... my head. Did not see that one coming..." Suddenly Riku flew towards him as the smoke disappeared, holding his Keyblade on the back of his hand and in front of him. Sora dodged Riku just in time, causing Riku to collide into the sand. Quickly, Riku jumped back, readying himself for Sora's next attack. Sora lifted up his Keyblade slowly, he shouted "Trinity Limit!!!"

Everyone's including Riku's eyes widened. "Final Form!!!" Sora bellowed as he slashed his Keyblade diagonally down. Light appeared all over Sora as he stretched out his arms and legs, clenching his Keyblade in his right hand. Riku and everyone else covered their eyes due to the dazzling light. Once the light had disappeared, Sora had transformed. Sora's clothes had changed its colours into black and white with more texture on it. Not one... but two Keyblades was floating in the air either side of him. Both were Ultima Keyblades, but the left was from his first adventure (Kingdom Hearts I) and the right was from his second adventure (Kingdom Hearts II). Sora began to raise high into the air, his arms wide apart and the Keyblades spinning around him. Golden lines began to draw around the beach; Riku suddenly couldn't move his body. He noticed he had been trapped by Sora's gaze. The lines finished drawing and so left a detailed pattern. Sora quickly raised his arms in the air above him and the Keyblades stopped spinning and rose above him. Riku mumbled "Damn..." as he was stuck in the trap of the attack. Sora threw himself like a rocket to Riku, and so did his Keyblades. He stopped suddenly above Riku, still locked his piercing eyes on Riku's. The Keyblades pierced into the sand either side of them. Sora began to do many consecutive flips and spins about three meters above Riku. Instantly, he then stretched his hands above him. He threw them down and a bright explosion expanded from where Riku was standing, filling the whole island. The four sitting on the wall closed their eyes once again so they won't get blinded by the light.

After the light disappeared, Riku and Sora stood back to back, both worn out and with cuts, bruises and burns. "Never thought you could do that... Sora. Looks like you've won..." Riku weezed, and then fell to the ground, out cold.

"I think... I used... too much... power on... that attack..." Sora gasped, also falling unconscious.

2 - Heartless Revenge

Sora opened his eyes, he noticed the palm trees reaching high above him, swaying in the direction of the wind, the sky was as clear as the ocean, clouds were nowhere to be seen and the sun was as bright as it could ever be. Sora stretched out his arms and legs, closing his eyes and yawning. He could feel pain throbbing in most areas of his body. But he felt relaxed and that he could stay like this all day. He rested his hands behind his head like a pillow, crossed his legs and began to sleep. This was very short lived. Suddenly from out of nowhere, a coconut had smacked him on the forehead, "Ah!?" he shouted. He sat up and rubbed his newly formed bump on his head. He then noticed a shadow of someone overlooking him. He turned his head around; Kairi was standing closely beside him, smiling. Sora knew immediately that she was the culprit who dropped the coconut on his head.

"Why did you do that Kairi!?" he groaned painfully.

"Come on, Sora! You would of fallen straight back to sleep if I didn't drop that coconut on your head!"

Kairi replied cheerfully.

"Ouch ... well you didn't have to put so much force into the 'drop'." Sora moaned, still rubbing his forehead, He then asked "How's Riku?"

"He's fine. If it wasn't for him though, you would have wiped out the entire island." Kairi replied, crossing her arms and nodding.

"What do you mean?" Sora asked curiously.

"He put up a limit barrier around the island before the fight began. He had been prepared from the beginning that you would try everything in order to beat him." She explained.

"Was I really that catastrophic!?" Sora questioned in shock, he then showed off a cheeky smile. "Man, I really need to control my actions better, heh heh."

Kairi sighed, "Right ... anyway, we best go and meet up with Riku and the others, you coming?"

"Ok." Sora answered.

Sora and Kairi headed back to the beach where the sparring match had taken place. Once there, they noticed Riku sitting in the stone wall, talking to Tidus, Wakka and Selphie. They headed towards them.

"How are the injuries, Riku?" Sora asked.

"Not bad, could have been worse." He answered. "I've seen you use Trinity Limit before and go into Final Form, but I've never seen you mix both of them together. Seriously, that was insane!"

"Well... to be honest... that was a first time I used that combination." Sora reluctantly admitted, bracing himself.

"You...WHAT!?" Riku shouted furiously at him.

"I ... just thought I should try it out, that's all!" Sora confessed, waving his hands innocently. "It was just an idea I thought up at the time."

"An idea!?! You could have killed us all, idiot!!!" Riku screamed at him with disgust.

"Well, I didn't think that far ahead!" Sora argued back.

"You didn't THINK AT ALL!" Riku put him on the spot. "How're you meant to save worlds if you can't control you're power and accidentally end up destroying them yourself?"

Tidas, Wakka and Selfie watched them in amusement as they continued to bicker at each other, feeling that they were more like brothers than best friends. Kairi, on the other hand, was having no more of it.

"Alright, enough with the argument! You're driving me round the bend!" Kairi shouted at them.

Both Riku and Sora had jumped by surprise; they were not expecting Kairi to raise her voice like that.

They both gazed at her in fear as Kairi stared back at them in distaste. They then, both at the same time, apologised with a "Sorry."

All she did then was nod in approval and strode off.

Tidus, Wakka and Selfie, on the other hand, went into hysterics.

About an hour later, Sora and Riku visited the cave next to the waterfall. They both felt bored and decided to look around to find something to do. Then Sora remembered something important and wanted to show Riku. They both wondered around the cave. When examining the chalk drawings on the walls; they sent memories back into Sora's mind, remembering the time he, Kairi and Riku were little, spending hours drawing them. Something caught Riku's eye, he strolled over to the end of the cave, near the door. He knelt down beside it and gazed at a chalk drawing that made him chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Sora asked him curiously. He joined Riku, wondering why he had been laughing, but then it caught his eyes. "Ah! Don't look at that!" Sora worriedly said to him. It was the drawing that Sora and Kairi had done of each other when they were little, giving each other a paupu fruit. Sora quickly covered it so Riku couldn't see it anymore.

"Well, you're not really keeping it well secretive, y'know." Riku said to him, still chuckling.

"This was drawn ages ago when I and Kairi were 4 years old, alright?" Sora told him, still worried.

"Okay, okay, don't get so worked up about a drawing." Riku told him, and then sighed "Man, I haven't been in here for ages, you two totally ruined the place with you stupid drawings."

"Shut up." Sora spoke out.

"So, why did you bring me here?" asked Riku. "Was it just about the drawings?"

"No, it's about that door." Sora pointed at the mysterious door next to them.

"What about it?" Riku asked him.

"I want to see what is behind it. I've had enough of wondering!" Sora explained.

"So do I, but what have I got to do with this?" Riku curiously asked.

"I need you to come with me, just in case something bad happens and we end up in trouble." Sora continued.

"Why didn't you ask Kairi about it instead?" He pointed out.

"I don't want her involved; it could be too dangerous for her." Sora admitted.

"Fair enough... I guess." Riku shrugged.

They both began examining the door, wondering how it would open. Then Riku remembered something.

"Hold on, we have to unlock the door from a keyhole. I remember because I saw it appear when I was a kid." He explained to Sora. "We need to use our Keyblades."

Sora nodded. With that, they brought out their Keyblades and pointed them at the door. All of a sudden, a large keyhole appeared in the middle.

"Okay, let's do thi- Oof!" Before Sora could finish his sentence, the door whipped open on its own. A storm like gust flew out of the door and took out both Sora and Riku. Everything blacked out.

Sora slowly opened his eyes; he got up from the floor and shook his head. "Arh... What happened?" He wondered. He was back at the entrance of the cave, gusts of wind still flowing through it. The sky had suddenly turned dark and cold. He then caught something moving in the corner of his eye. He turned to that direction and saw Riku unconscious beside him. "Riku! Wake up!" He shouted, shaking him. Riku finally awoke and carefully got to his feet.

"Ouch... that hurt. What's going on?" Riku asked as he rubbed the back of his head.

"I don't know..." Sora answered. "The door opened up and we got thrown out of the cave. Talk about Déjà vu."

"Sora! Riku!" A voice shouted to them. Sora and Riku turned round and saw Kairi running up to them.

"Heartless are popping up everywhere! And it ... it's not just weak ones, strong ones as well!"

"WHAT!?" They both shouted out.

"I don't know why this is happening, but the whole island is crawling with heartless!" Kairi explained shakily.

"We have to get rid of them!" Sora told them both.

Sora then immediately brought out his Keyblade and charged towards the oncoming battle.

"Sora! Wait, don't!" Kairi shouted to him. But Sora was already gone.

"We better help him out!" Riku told Kairi calmly. "He's going to need our help with this."

With that, Riku and Kairi ran in Sora's direction, ready to fight the battle.

3 - The Destiny Island Crisis

"Why are there so many of these heartless!?" Sora shouted out loud.

He continued to sweep through the hordes of heartless with his Keyblade. He was able to make it to the beach, under the bridge, before they caught up to him. He had been prepared to fight them from the beginning, but what he didn't realise was that the amount of heartless were insanely higher than he first expected. And the more he cut down, the more that appeared from the sand. The heartless began to group up closer towards him, ready to strike. Suddenly, all at once, they jumped on top of him, hacking and slashing at his body.

"Flare!" Sora bellowed.

An explosion of light formed around the bundle of heartless, killing them instantly. They all vaporized within seconds of the flash. Sora got to his feet, quickly trying to get his breath back. But that was short-lived, more heartless begun to appear, both weak and strong. He tensed his grip on the Keyblade, ready for more. Unexpectedly, Riku flanked the heartless from behind, swiftly slicing through them like they were nothing.

"Well, you took your time!" Sora yelled jokingly at him.

"Sorry, we got caught up with more of these guys a while back." Riku apologised.

As he said that, Kairi popped up from behind him. She had been holding the Keyblade she had used before in The World That Never Was.

"Kairi!? Why are you still here!?" Sora abruptly asked her.

"I wanted to help out." Kairi replied back.

"You can't, it's too dangerous for you here!" Sora refused, not wanting her to be caught up in this.

"She can hold her own, Sora." Riku backed her up. "You should have seen her; she took out so many of them!"

Sora sighed "Fine, but be careful." He told her specifically.

She nodded back.

"That reminds me, where's the other three?" Sora then suddenly asked.

"Don't worry; they left for home earlier, way before the heartless showed up." Kairi answered.

"Ok, that's go-" Sora had suddenly been caught off-guard.

A sudden earthquake shook the island, Sora, Riku and Kairi nearly lost their balance only to be saved by using their Keyblades as extra stability.

"What was that!?" Riku shouted, getting his balance back to his feet.

"I don't know, but that didn't feel like any old earthquake!" Sora answered back, confused by what it was.

He quickly scanned around, and found the reason for the earthquake. But this in turn shocked him to the core, his eyes widening and mouth falling open.

"RUN NOW!!!" he screamed at them.

Riku and Kairi gazed at him oddly; they then turned towards the direction Sora was looking at, and then saw why. The island began to split in half! An enormous crack jolted across the middle of the island and began to widen apart. Sora, Riku and Kairi quickly ran as the right side of the island began to crumble.

They halted to a stop as the crack had widened very far apart.

"We have to jump, we have no other choice!" Sora told them.

They nodded without a second thought.

Kairi was the first to jump across, she made it easily. Then Riku leaped across after her, the gap was

continuously widening as he left the floor and so he only just made it. Suddenly, the ground began to tip backwards, causing Sora to almost lose footing of the floor. The crack was too wide to get across at this point.

Sora began to think this through, "I can't use my Final Form, I haven't gained enough power back to use it again. And I need level ground to glide across! Darn! I hope luck is on my side."

Sora gulped, this was an all or nothing shot. He doubled back and readied himself for this. All in one go, he charged up the slanted floor that had used to be the beach towards the gap. He put his right foot at the edge at the right time and launched into the air with all his might. He began to glide across the gap; he flipped and landed on the other side with no trouble at all.

"And you call me a show off!" Riku mumbled, crossing his arms.

"Heh heh, I guess we all do it sometime or another." Sora admitted as he showed off his cheesy smile. He then turned serious and pointed towards the entrance to the cave. "The door in the cave has to be the reason why all these heartless continue to show up, we have to go back and close it before it gets any worse."

"Okay!" Kairi and Riku agreed.

The three of them headed towards the cave, but quickly came to a halt. This time, hordes of stronger, more lethal heartless appeared from out of nowhere. The sky, the ground, everywhere was filled with them

"We don't have time to mess around with you lot!" Sora shouted at the heartless in frustration.

He gripped his Keyblade tightly and charged at the oncoming heartless; he quickly performed a back flip that lead onto an uppercut, this had hit its target and killed several of the airborne enemies. Riku switched his Keyblade into a backhand position and used his whole bodyweight to thrust it into the sand. Instantly, a wave of negative energy spread around Riku as he released his Keyblade. The energy surged into the heartless, wounding them and killing off dozens. Kairi used her Keyblade to take down close by heartless, swiftly using light strikes. She then span into an uppercut, sending many of them into a rock wall, killing them instantly. Sora decided to quickly end the battle.

"Thundarga!" He roared as he held his Keyblade straight in front of him.

A surge of lightning struck all around the 3 Keyblade wielders, instantly vaporizing the last of the heartless. Sora sighed in relief, but there was no time to celebrate.

"Let's go!" Riku shouted to them.

But before any of them could move, a second earthquake suddenly shook them off their feet. This earthquake was different from the one before, feeling the sky jolt at the same time as the ground. Sora swiftly got back to his feet and gazed up at the sky.

"Hold on to something! Quick!!" He suddenly commanded the other two.

"Why, what's happening?" Kairi shouted back to him.

"A... A black hole!" Sora answered, pointing at the sky.

He was right; a huge, dark vortex overshadowed the island, frequently increasing in size as more objects was caught in its vacuum. Without a second thought, Kairi grabbed onto a metal pole that had been sticking from the ground nearby her. Sora and Riku twisted their Keyblades into the ground, using them to keep grounded. A second after they did that, everything on the island instantly broke apart and flew into the vortex of the black hole. Kairi put all the strength into her arm as she hugged the metal pole. Riku's and Sora's legs dangled in the air, they gripped their Keyblades as hard as they could, blood started to seep out of the palms of their hands.

Suddenly, Riku's Keyblade broke free from the ground. Riku lifted into the air and was caught into the vortex of the black hole. Sora held out his hand as Riku tried to grab it, but it was no use, he was too high off the ground.

"RIKU!!!" Sora cried, but Riku disappeared into the black hole.

Not long after that, Sora's Keyblade also broke free from the ground, he began to hover and lift into the sky. But Kairi was able to grab Sora's free hand in time.

"I'm going to get Riku back!" Sora shouted to Kairi, his eyes gleamed with determination.

"No! I'm not losing you again!" Kairi refused, wanting to stay by his side.

"There's no other way; I want you and Riku safe, and I won't go back on my word!" Sora told her with pride.

"There must be another way!!" Kairi screamed at him.

Sora dipped his head; Kairi couldn't see his face at all. A moment later; he lifted it up again, coming to a decision.

"I... I'm sorry Kairi." He told her honestly.

He let go of her hand.

"SORA! NO!!!" Kairi cried to him.

But, all she could do now was watch him as he lifted into the black hole, helpless. Sora gazed back at her; he could see tears began to roll down her face. The last thing he saw was her breaking down and screaming his name.

... And then everything went black.

4 - A World With No Heart

Sora woke up; his whole body was throbbing in pain, his eyes were blurry and for some reason he felt very thirsty. He sat himself up cautiously and began to rub the back of his neck.

"Arh... Where am I?" He groaned.

His eyes had taken their time to adjust to his surroundings; but as they did, he began to notice that he was sitting in a large, gloomy room. The room had barely any light to it whatsoever, only a few candles situated on the wall were lit up. The ceiling rose high above, so high that it wasn't even see-able through the darkness. The walls were very plain with a dark violet tone. The floor was covered with a soft, red rug, although this was very hard to tell from the lack of light. From what Sora could tell, this had to be some sort of corridor. But the only way out he saw was a door on the west side of the corridor. The door was of a simple structure, but fairly large.

Suddenly, a voice echoed the corridor, "I don't really know where we are, but I have a really eerie feeling about this place that it's a world shrouded in darkness."

Sora twisted his head round, Riku was leaning against the right wall with his arms crossed and head tilted back against it. "We need to go and check this place out." He continued, his voice echoed the whole of the room.

"We can't do that, we need to get back to the islands, Kairi's waiting for us!" Sora argued. He mind flashed back seeing Kairi in tears while he was floating away into the vortex. He felt the dread rise in his heart. He leapt to his feet.

"I would love to get us back, but that isn't possible anymore. I've lost most of my dark powers, remember, including my ability to open portals. I'm sorry Sora, but we're going to have to search the place for a way out." Riku apologised, feeling down about himself.

Sora did remember that; Riku had lost his ties with the darkness back at the World that Never Was, after Ansem's machine exploded.

"Hmm... don't worry about it, Riku. We'll just have to do this the long way." Sora joked, but he felt a slight frustration well up inside him. He clenched his chest and whispered quietly, "Kairi, just hold on, we'll be back... I promise."

"(Sigh...) Well, we best get going." Riku told him.

Sora nodded to him. They began to head to the door they could see on the west side. But, from out of nowhere, Sora felt suddenly dizzy, as if the whole world was spinning out of control. Riku turned back round and noticed Sora was standing oddly.

"Sora, are you coming or – What the-!?" Riku was suddenly caught off guard.

Enemy figures appeared around the two, jumping out of the floor and even the walls. They were Nobodies!

"Nobodies!? But we destroyed the Organization!" Sora shouted in surprise, finally recovering from the dizziness.

He quickly opened his hand and grabbed as his Keyblade appeared, Riku instantly did the same. With that, Sora and Riku stood back-to-back, clutching their Keyblades and ready for battle. The Nobodies circled around then and began to close in.

"Yeah, we destroyed Organization XIII but Nobodies are created by the bodies of people who became Heartless. Organization XIII just controlled them. Didn't Yen Sid tell you that?" Riku reminded Sora, keeping an eye on the Nobodies movements.

"Ah! Yeah, I just ... forgot," Sora admitted, feeling fairly idiotic about forgetting.

Swiftly, the Nobodies made the first move and attacked the two. In retaliation, the two dodged the attacks started the counter. Sora jumped into an uppercut, knocking a Dragoon Nobody back by surprise ... well it would have been if it had a heart. Sora spun and struck the Dragoon in the side, knocking it into the wall. Riku charged towards a group of Dusks on his side, he held out his Keyblade and dark aura began flowing around the blade, he swept his Keyblade horizontally, releasing the charged aura and in turn collided into the Nobodies, instantly weakening them. Sora placed his free hand on the opposite shoulder, his Keyblade disappeared and his whole right arm started to glow in an orange aura, his fist clenched tighter as the glow strengthened. He quickly released his free hand from his shoulder and launched his arm as if throwing an object as hard as he could; an explosion raged out of his hand and obliterated a large number of Nobodies, including the Dragoon. He dropped his arm to his side, panting and sweating. Riku threw his Keyblade like a boomerang at the remaining Nobodies on his side, but the Nobodies was swift and jump away to dodge it. They all in retaliation countered the attack by sending waves of twilight magic towards Riku.

"Riku! Watch out!!" Sora shouted, trying his best to keep up his strength as the remaining Nobodies on his own side were strike at him in every direction.

Riku dodged the attack, but a second wave collided into him, throwing him off the floor. Winded, Riku tumbled across the rug of the corridor, he gasped for air to get back into his lungs. Sora had to finish this quickly, he to all his remaining strength and ran towards the nearest wall. Instantly, he began to charge up it like he was defying gravity. He jumped off the wall and his Keyblade appeared in his clutches while airborne, he dived towards the Nobodies that had been attacking Riku. The Keyblade collided with the Nobodies, throwing them off balance. Before colliding with the floor himself, Sora pushed against it with his hands and back flipped to his feet. He quickly grabbed his Keyblade from the floor and stabbed at the dazed Nobodies, finally killing them. Sora took a second to catch his breath back, and then rushed over to the wounded Riku. Riku got to his knees, just gaining his breath back. But he then clutched his chest in agony, putting pressure on the wound caused by the Nobodies. Sora skidded to his side.

"Here, drink up." Sora told him, he passed a potion to Riku.

Riku nodded and without second thought, drank the contents of the potion. Without a second wasted, the potion had instantly healed the wound on his chest. Riku carefully got himself to his feet.

"I was careless, I should have watched out for that counterattack!" He told Sora, wincing as he stood up.

"Dusks are strong when it comes to dodging and counterattacking, we just needed to read their movements carefully before they made their move." Sora assured him. "You're just too serious with these things."

"Too Serious!?! At least I'm not a slacker like you!" Riku argued back, but then sighed, "Anyway, we need to get moving before more of them show up."

Sora chuckled, but then nodded.

Sora and Riku headed towards the door at the end of the room. Riku turned the handle and pushed the door open. On the other side of the door was a hall even bigger than the corridor Sora and Riku was just in. The hall had large, with cathedral-like windows spanning across the walls from either end. Unlike the last room, the colour of the walls were completely different, it was silvery white, almost creamy coloured. But it still had that dark, eerie feeling to it. At the end of the room was a huge, castle-like, double-door reaching all the way to the ceiling. It had to be the entrance to the building.

"I'm guessing that's the way outside." Sora said, looking rather puzzled.

"I thought there would be more rooms than this ... but now that I think about it, the other end of the last room was too dark to see anything." Riku thought out loud so Sora could hear. He then asked, "What do we do now..?"

"I'm guess we should take a look outside." Sora answered casually.

Riku nodded in reply.

They began to journey down the hall, but Sora halted to a stop. He grabbed the top of his head with both hands, dropped to his knees, and began shaking like mad. Riku noticed him drop to the floor from the corner of his eye and rushed to his aid. Agonising pain suddenly rushed through Sora's head, and various thoughts began to appear. He could see something lurking in the very shadows of his mind, it was blurry but it was there. He could feel something closing in on him, intimidating him. A voice began to call out.

"The end of the Universe... lies in you."

5 - Corruptions

Riku ran towards Sora with haste, skidding across the floor to a stop right beside Sora. He quickly knelt down and examined the situation.

"Sora! What's wrong!?" Riku worriedly asked him, clutching him on the shoulders.

Sora was shaking violently, beginning to scream in immense pain. His hands were holding tight on his head. He then suddenly lifted his head up towards Riku. Riku's eyes widened in horror; Sora's right eye was pitch-black, with the pupil of the eye turning golden yellow. Riku noticed that a dark, oozing aura began to slowly cover Sora's skin and clothes. Riku instantly jumped back, he could not believe what he was seeing; Anti-Form is attempting to take control of Sora's body. Riku had to act quickly and swiftly; otherwise Sora may not turn back to normal. He took out his Keyblade and pointed at the transforming Sora. Riku was hoping for this to work; he never tried this power before, but he had no other choice.

"Release!" He bellowed, clenching his Keyblade tightly.

A ring of golden energy circled around Sora and shot into the air. Sora's arms dropped to his sides, his head was facing the ceiling. Then, he fell on his hands and knees, coughing and spluttering. His body began turning back to normal, the dark aura disappeared and his eye was restored back to how it should be. Sora was panting heavily; sweat dripping like rain from his skin and whole body still violently shaking. Sora steadily sat up onto his knees, he took in a large amount of oxygen in his lungs and finally got on his feet.

"Are you okay now, Sora?" Riku asked him, standing by his side. "What happened?"

"I-I'm fine now, thanks." Sora answered, still breathing heavily. "I don't know how it happened, one minute I was fine then the next my Anti-form was taking over. I could hear a voice in my head, telling me ... something. It was like someone had entered the depths of my mind."

"Well, the last time you transformed into Anti Form, you weren't screaming and shaking or on your knees in agonizing pain." Riku pointed out. "Could it be that this 'voice' you heard had some kind of influence on the Anti-form?"

"I ... don't know, nothing was making sense. But I'm fine now; it might just be that my Anti-form is getting stronger." Sora assured him.

"...Right... listen, let's just get going, the sooner we get out of this place, the better." Riku concluded, curious about what's going on with Sora.

Sora and Riku continued heading towards the door at the end of the hall in silence; Sora was going through his mind, trying to remember, about what the voice in his mind said. But then something more important popped up in his mind, causing him to start worrying. Riku, on the other hand, felt that this place had many tricks and traps up its sleeve waiting to be triggered and knew they had to get out of here as soon as possible. He turned back to Sora, gazing at him curiously.

"Is there something on your mind, Sora?" He wondered.

"Huh? ... Oh, it's nothing, just thinking." Sora answered, almost lost in thought.

"What about?" Riku asked curiously.

"... About what happened to Kairi and the Island." Sora admitted drearily, feeling that it needed to be brought up.

"Kairi's a tough nut; we both know she won't go down easily. I bet she got off the island fine, and waiting for us safely back at home. Don't worry about it, hopefully we can get back soon and live our normal lives again." Riku assured him, keeping himself positive.

"Yeah." Sora nodded, cheering up.

He and Riku finally reached the door; it was tough to open and took both of their strength to push it. One done, they stood there, next to each other, gazing out in horror.

"What the..." Riku blurted out, not finishing his sentence.

Outside, the sky was blood red, pitch-black clouds covering various areas, but that wasn't what made them surprised. The reason was that there was no land in the horizon at all; no path to follow, no way of getting out. The building, realizing it was a Castle, was floating in mid-air. Sora took a step back, seeing enough.

"Looks like a dead end, we best head back." He stated, but Riku didn't move. "Hey Riku, like you said before! The sooner, the better! Let's get going!" Sora told him, but he still didn't move. "Riku ... are you ok?"

Riku then suddenly snapped out of it.

"Yeah, just blanked out there, let's move!" Riku agreed.

They closed the door shut, pushing hard for it to move. They turned and headed back to the other room. Once there, Sora opened the door and entered the room, Riku following him. Suddenly Riku stopped; he turned back and examined the room they had just gone through.

... I think we're being followed He thought.

"Riku! If we stay here, more Nobodies are going pop up!" Sora called to Riku.

"Sorry!" Riku replied to him.

He shut the door behind him and caught up with Sora. Sora took a flame torch down from the wall to light the way; Riku took another torch from the wall to use as back up. They continued along the corridor which was taking ages to get through. But as they continued, they spotted descending steps in the distance. They nodded to each other, as to say they agreed to continue, and headed down the steps. Riku heard a howling sound coming from behind him, he turned around, but nothing was there.

"It must be my imagination tricking me." He told himself, shaking his head.

"Hey, Riku! Are you coming down or what!?" Sora called out again, he was further down the steps waiting for him.

Riku caught up to him.

"Why do you keep looking back for?" Sora asked, curiously.

"I just have this feeling that something ... or someone is following us." Riku answered, having suspicions.

"What makes you say that?" Sora wondered.

"It doesn't matter, let's just get going." Riku denied talking about it any further.

Sora shrugged and continued down the steps with Riku following him.

Finally, they reached the bottom of the staircase. Suddenly, like magic, a row of torches lit up around the room in front of them.

"Woah... This place is ENORMOUS!!!" Sora shouted in amazement, his voice echoed even louder than ever.

The room was basically a large, towering dome, about 100m in radius from where they were. The floor had been extremely flooded with water, so they didn't know how deep the water is to the bottom.

Streams of water were running freely down the walls from openings high above.

"It looks like we'll have to swim to the other end." Riku suggested, pointing at the passage on the other end of the room.

"Huh!? I don't want to get my clothes wet!" Sora began to argue, not liking to feeling of having wet clothing.

"But ... you jump into the sea in your clothes all the time back at the island." Riku replied back at him.

"Yeah ... but it was hot back at the island so my clothes dry off fast. Also, it's not like we were in any danger back there." Sora continued, crossing his arms.

"There's not really any time for argument and excuses, Sora. Besides, there's no other way of getting

across this." Riku sighed.

Sora groaned. He reluctantly tried to dip his foot in the water, but he then slipped and fell. But, there had been no splash. Sora opened his eyes and gasped. He wasn't in the water but on the top of it. He steadily got up to his feet, wobbling as though he was on thin ice. Riku placed his foot on the water, and it didn't go in.

"What the..? How is this happening!?" Sora asked, confused.

"It must be the magic in this world; causing us to be able to stand on the water without any difficulty."

Riku guessed. He was intrigued by how the water was so calm when they were standing on it.

"So kind of like in Hollow... I mean, Radiant Gardens when I had first visited there, the place with the rising waterfalls below the castle." Sora suggested, feeling all powerful standing on the water.

"It could be, but now that I think about it, I'm not that sure if it is magic after all." Riku answered, feeling something else was causing the water to be like this.

Then, from out of nowhere; Riku heard a familiar voice echo the dome, calling out his name. He hastily turned round, and was shocked to see the man he hated the most stand right behind him.

"Xehanort!!!" Riku bellowed in alarm.

6 - Twilight Torture

"Darkness rages within you, Riku. Why do you resist it?" Xehanort (Ansem: Seeker of Darkness) asked him, showing no emotions on his horrid face.

"The only reason I chose the darkness in the first place was for strength and power. But I never wanted to betray my friends!" Riku answered back bitterly, starting to show his hatred towards Xehanort.

"You can't turn your back on the darkness, Riku. It's become a part of you, it will never go away!" Xehanort argued, clenching a fist at him.

"SHUT IT! I've had it with you tormenting me about the darkness! Why can't you just leave me be!?" Riku spat back at him, rage burning in his eyes. His Keyblade appeared in his grasp; he clutched it tight and pointed it towards Xehanort, who wasn't moving even though he was being threatened.

"That's it, Riku! Let the rage and anger inside you take over! Let it become your mind" Xehanort told him.

"SHUT UP!!!" Riku roared. Holding his Keyblade, he charged at Xehanort, he launched himself into the air and swiftly swiped his Keyblade into Xehanort, but the Keyblade went right through him without inflicting any damage at all. Xehanort then faded away, no trace of him left. Riku fell onto the watery ground, he instantly rolled a few times and pushed himself with his hands off the ground and landed on his feet. He gazed back at where Xehanort was standing, nothing was there. He was grinding his teeth; it has been ages since he has become this enraged. He then noticed Sora running up to him.

"Riku, what happened!?" Sora asked him curiously, noticing the commotion that was going on.

"Nothing... It was nothing." He replied with bitterness, looking away.

"It didn't sound like it." Sora sighed, hands behind his head.

"Anyway, we better hurry. We're wasting time." Riku instructed him, he then led the way towards the passage on the other end.

Sora stared at him, puzzled.

They began to journey across the dome; Sora took the lead again, but he constantly looked back at Riku to check on him. His head was dipped down with his fists clenched tightly. Sora was confused about what's been going on with him. In fact, he was confused about everything that was going on with the both of them since the destruction on Destiny Island. Then, from out of nowhere, Dusk Nobodies began to appear in front of them.

"More of them!?" Sora shouted out, caught out by the surprise.

His Keyblade quickly appeared in his hand, but before he could attack them, Riku threw his arm out in front of him to stop him.

"Riku, what are you-!?"

"Wait, look there!" Riku interrupted, pointing to the sky.

Sora raised his head up to see what Riku was going on about. His eyes widened and mouth fell open. A Nobody, the biggest of any Sora and Riku have ever seen, appeared suddenly in the sky; it fell to the watery ground, making the dome shake like an earthquake.

"Wait, I've seen this nobody before!" Sora realised, "But... I don't know when."

Riku looked at him, knowing full well that Roxas' memories were affecting his own. It was time he told Sora.

"That's ... because your memories are being affected by Roxas' memories; he had fought a Nobody that was the same type as this one. It was while you were asleep in Twilight Town's Mansion." Riku explained to him, feeling a little hesitant about it.

"Hold on ... you knew I was asleep!?" Sora gasped, being caught by surprise.

"Well-" Riku began, but was quickly interrupted.

The giant Nobody, known as Twilight Thorn, swiftly launched its fists at Sora and Riku. The Dusks used this advantage to attack as well. Both Sora and Riku leaped out of the way just in time as the Twilight Thorn's incoming fists hurtled into the watery ground. Sora took no time in bringing out his Keyblade, and as he charged, he took his opportunity to counter the Twilight Thorn. Riku, on the other hand, had suddenly been surrounded by the Dusks, preventing him to help Sora with the Twilight Thorn.

"Dark Flare!" He roared as he whipped his left arm in front of him.

A Dark aura began to charge up in his hand, growing to the size of a basketball. Riku then launched the ball of dark aura at incoming Dusks. The ball of dark aura exploded as it contacted the Dusks, killing a large amount of the Nobodies. Riku unexpectedly was thrown back by the force of the explosion, but instantly recovered before hitting the floor. He turned round quickly towards the fight between Sora and the Twilight Thorn. Sora seemed to be unscathed as he continuously struck the Twilight Thorn, but the Twilight Thorn wasn't fight back. It was just standing there. And then he realised.

"Sora! Get back, he's going to trap you!" He shouted to Sora, but Sora couldn't hear him.

Sora leapt into the air towards the idle Nobody, readying to strike. Suddenly, he felt like he got struck in the chest, but nothing had actually hit him. He was thrown back and suddenly green balls of energy engulfed his wrists and ankles, preventing his movement. Riku began to rush to his aid but his path was blocked by more Dusks.

The Twilight Thorn appeared in front of Sora, locking eyes into his, and began its attack. Sora closed his eyes and began to think quickly. As the Nobody began to launch itself towards the trapped Sora, he suddenly opened his eyes. Sora forcefully released his right hand, which was holding his Keyblade, from the ball of energy and struck the Nobodies head. The Nobody then instantly doubled back and its hands reached out at Sora. It grasped Sora around his abdomen and threw him into the air; it began to ready itself for another strike. But Sora rolled to dodge its attack; in turn, he landed another blow on the head with his Keyblade. The Twilight Thorn fell into the water, disappearing from sight. Sora landed on top of the water, he lost sight of the Twilight Thorn.

"Where did it- HUH!?"

Sora felt the floor rumble; he quickly scanned the water and spotted the Twilight Thorn. The Nobody begin to charge up a giant ball of energy in the palms of its hands. Suddenly, Sora sank into the water; he was twisted upside-down inside the other half of the dome. The area around him looked very similar to an underwater ruin. Sora began to be pulled towards the ball of energy that the Nobody was charging up. Sora quickly acted on instinct; he span his body so that he was upright and threw his Keyblade at the ball of energy. It collided, causing the ball of energy to explode. Sora and the Twilight Thorn were thrown out of the water. Sora fell and landed on his side on top of the water, the Nobody crashed in front of him, causing the dome to shake violently. Sora took no time to recover and leapt to his feet, he griped his Keyblade tightly and continuously struck the Nobody's head. Feeling that he needed to finish this, Sora leaped into the air and raised his Keyblade over his head. Gold aura engulfed around the blade of the Keyblade, Sora then suddenly shot like a torpedo towards the unconscious Twilight Thorn. He threw his Keyblade in front of him and stuck across, this then caused a large wave of golden energy that had been as sharp as a sword and collided with the Nobody. It had exploded, but only weakening the Twilight Thorn. Dusks suddenly came out of nowhere and threw Sora on the ground. The Twilight Thorn woke up and got to its feet.

"Get off me!!" Sora shouted, struggling to be released from the Dusks' grasps.

He then bellowed out "Blizzaga!"

Ice particles shot out from the sky and targeted the Dusks, causing them to release Sora as they tried to dodge the ice particles. Sora got to his feet, clenching his Keyblade with both hands.

The Twilight Thorn went in for another attack; Sora, in turn, charged towards the Nobody, ready to pounce.

"Final Form!!!" He then roared.

While he ran, a bright light engulfed his body. It then instantly lifted and so showing Sora in his transformed Final Form, with the two Ultima Keyblades floating around him. Sora lifted from the ground. He shot like a rocket towards the Nobody, but suddenly halted to a stop. He put his hands on his head and began to scream. Riku, who was still fighting the Dusks, heard Sora's scream, he spotted him shaking like mad.

"Not again!!!" He shouted out, he quickly finished of the remaining Dusks and ran towards Sora's aid, but suddenly halted in disbelief of what began to happen with Sora. Sora was engulfed in a black aura; suddenly causing a blast of wind that threw Riku back off his feet. Sora's dark aura slowly lifted. Sora's body was jet-black: his skin, his cloths, his eyes, everything was engulfed in the darkness except his pupils in his eyes that were glowed yellow. He was still grasping a Keyblade, but it wasn't the normal Keyblade ... It was Riku's Keyblade of Darkness, from when Riku was used as a host for Xehanort (Ansem: Seeker of Darkness).

"That's my... my old Keyblade..." Riku gasped, gazing in horror.

Sora abruptly began to charge towards the Twilight Thorn, with dark energy flowing behind Sora like tails. Sora threw his left arm in front of him as he closed in on the Twilight Thorn, the Nobody reacted by releasing Twilight magic at Sora. Sora began to charge dark aura into the palm of his hand; it grew larger as every second past until it was about the size of a football/soccer ball. Once ready, Sora launched it, it sucked in all of the Twilight magic, causing it to grow double in size and even stronger than before. As it collided into the Twilight Thorn's head, it exploded on impact; black lightning flew around its head, showing that it was in a daze. Sora instantly struck with an uppercut, colliding with the Nobody's head. Then as fast as the speed of sound, flew around for more consecutive attacks. After a number of attacks, Sora lifted high into the air, closer to the ceiling of the dome and held his Keyblade high above him. He then twisted himself upside down and began to fly towards the Twilight Thorn like a bullet. The whole dome began to shake as Sora shot towards the Nobody's head. And then, as the tip of the Keyblade of Darkness collided with the Nobody, a ray of light pierced the Nobody from the sky to the ground, finally killing it. The Twilight Thorn fell to the watery ground with a crash. As it lay there, black lightning surged out of the Nobody and so the Twilight Thorn disappeared out of existence.

Suddenly Sora appeared out of the Twilight Thorn when the remains disappeared and strode up towards Riku, the black aura around him started to wither away into the air as he gradually got nearer to Riku. Riku, still in shock of what had just happened, gazed at him as he got closer and closer. The entire dark aura had finally disappeared, showing Sora was back to his normal self. When his was about half a meter from Riku, he suddenly collapsed. Riku caught him before he hit the floor. He gradually laid the unconscious Sora to the watery ground. Riku knelt on the watery floor beside Sora and watched over him, still clutching his Keyblade. He examined Sora's new Keyblade, or to be more exact, the reappeared Keyblade of Darkness that was still in Sora's closed hand. A year and a half ago, Sora had certainly destroyed it by releasing the Hearts of the Princesses. So the fact that his had now appeared as Sora's own Keyblade is a mystery in itself, another added to the list of mysteries about this world. He then gazed at Sora, who seemed to be in pain even though he was unconscious. Riku then slowly said to himself,

"Darkness... is like torture."

7 - Number XV: Xaphire

Sora weakly opened his eyes, his head felt like it was on fire. He steadily got up to his feet, but struggled due to being worn out from the clash with the Twilight Thorn.

"You seriously have a problem with sleeping." A voice echoed.

Sora jumped out of his skin, he turned his head round to the source of the echo, Riku had been standing next to him with crossed arms, and he didn't look at all amused.

"Hehe ... it does seem to be a bit of a bad habit with me." Sora embarrassingly admitted, scratching the back of his head and putting on an awkward smile.

Riku sighed, but then his whole attitude turned serious "Sora... Do you know how you got Anti-Form?" He asked openly, eyes gazing at Sora.

Sora paused, gave it a bit of a thought, and then shrugged, "I don't really know ... it just sort of happened." He answered admittedly.

Riku gazed at him with piercing eyes, causing Sora to feel out of place. This was a first for Sora, seeing Riku so worried about their situation. But ... who could blame him?

Riku then took in a deep breath. "Influence." He stated, looking away.

"Influence?" Sora echoed in confusion, tilting his head sideways.

Riku nodded, "Yeah ... do you remember when you turned into a Heartless?" He then asked.

"Parts of it, yeah." Sora answered truthfully, although he wished he forget about his time spent as a Heartless.

Riku began to explain, "Well, remnants of your Heartless self is still inside you. And so, ever since the incident in Hollow Bastion –"

"Radiant Garden!" Sora corrected in interruption.

"Whatever. Your heart has been affected by it, and so causing you to change into Anti-Form occasionally whenever you change into one of your forms. But by the looks of things, its power seems to be getting stronger."

"How do you know that?" Sora asked him curiously.

"Supposedly, your Final Form should be able to prevent Anti-Form from getting stronger, but somehow Anti-Form was able to overcome it and take control over you. Another reason is that you're Anti-Form used to only use its hands like claws to attack, but now it's able to wield a Keyblade ... my old Keyblade of Darkness."

"Wait ... didn't I destroy that thing!?" Sora yelled out with surprise.

"That's what I thought at first ... but I guess I was wrong. When you released Kairi's heart and yours with that Keyblade back in Hollow- I mean Radiant Garden Castle, it must have affected your own heart and so not destroying it entirely." Riku explained as best as he could.

"I don't understand ... it's never done that before." Sora said, looking confused and worried.

"I don't understand either ... we're going to have to ask King Mickey about this mess and have it sorted out ... once we get out of this place." Riku told him, thinking the situation through thoroughly.

They then locked eyes on the passageway on the other end of the Dome.

"Ready to move on?" Riku asked.

"Yeah." Sora nodded, tensing up.

They made their journey across the Dome, having a moment to themselves. Everything in this world they were in was an enigma; Riku's hallucination of Xehanort (Ansem: Seeker of Darkness) and Sora's battle to keep control of his own body from his Anti-Form were only some of the mysteries running

through their minds. They entered through the passage and began to make their way up a flight of stairs, which seemed to be spiralling. They ascended it with caution, feeling the sense that enemies may jump out at any time. But none appeared. They finally reached another, very large set of doors. They took hold of a handle, but Riku stopped Sora from pulling for the moment.

Riku turned to Sora. "Just to be on the safe side, from now on, we must have our Keyblade's out at the ready at all times. You got it?" He explained cautiously, his Keyblade suddenly appearing in his grasp. "I have a feeling that on the other side of this door is far from pleasant."

"What, are you're darkness senses tingling? Heh heh ..." Sora joked, resting his head against his hands and showing a cheeky smile.

Riku gazed at him with dagger-like eyes and an eyebrow rose. He wasn't in any mood for jokes.

"Oh, sorry. I wanted to lift the mood a little." Sora apologised, blushing with embarrassment.

Sora opened his hand as his Keyblade made an appearance, but then Sora found himself bewildered as he noticed the look of his Keyblade. It wasn't the Kingdom Key that appeared ... but it was the Keyblade of Darkness.

"N-no way!" He stuttered in shock, mouth dropped and eyes wide.

Riku examined Sora's Keyblade, his eyes too suddenly widened.

"How is this even possible!?" Riku asked out, trying to keep himself calm. "Something or someone has to be messing around with us! If it's a joke, I've had enough of it!"

"After what we've been through since coming here, I doubt it." Sora assured him, sighing as he studied his newly formed Keyblade. "We better keep going if we're to find out what's been going on." He then explained.

Riku took another look at the Keyblade and then nodded to Sora. Both of them grasped hold of a handle and pulled, the hinges were stiff and the doors were heavy due to their size. Once open, the room they were about to enter was pitch black. Sora and Riku eyed each other with dismay; both were feeling this room was not a place someone would want to be in. But they had no choice but to push forward, they headed in and closed the set of doors behind them. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a dark voice echoed the room.

"Whenever there is light, there is darkness ... whenever there is a heart, there are emotions. But we Nobodies ... have no emotion, no heart, and no soul. We seek it, we desire it, we hope for it. And so Organization XIII was created with the purpose of gaining their own existence, but failed in reaching their goal. In the end, they were all erased ... because of you ... the Wielders of the Keyblade."

"Organization XIII!?" Sora echoed with shock.

"Show yourself!" Riku bellowed, feeling somewhat uncomfortable by the echoing voice.

Suddenly, a dim light filled the room. It was still dark but Sora and Riku were able to make out the features within the room. Once again this room was large, Sora and Riku was standing on a long bridge heading to a sort of platform. Beside them and around the entire platform was a drop that ... never ended. It was a bottomless pit. On the opposite side of the platform from the bridge were steps that headed up to a large, crystallised throne. Sitting on the throne was a dark figure, but the light in the room was too dim to see his features. Sora and Riku had their eyes locked on him as they strode across the bridge to the platform.

"Who are you?" Sora hesitantly asked to the figure, eyes locked in caution.

The figure was leaning on the palm of his right hand with his elbow on the arm of the throne. From the way he was sitting, Sora and Riku could tell he was rather bored. The light in the room had then finally brightened up, and so the throne and the platform and showed the man's features in more detail, giving Sora and Riku a sudden shock. The man was wearing the Organization XIII cloak. His hair was brown, spiky and long, with the fringe completely covering the left side of his face and his left eye, the top part of his hair was spiking up and the rest going down to the bottom of his neck. There was a scar embedded

on his right cheek shaped like a talon and his green right eye locked at them like an arrow ready to fire its target. The man then sat himself upright and began to speak.

"I am Organization XIII's Number XV: Xaphire." He stated himself, showing no emotion whatsoever. "You've been keeping an eye on us since we came here, haven't you?" Riku assumed, showing anger in his voice.

"Wait ... number XV!?! But there were only 13 members, wasn't there!?" Sora yelled out, confusing himself.

Suddenly, Xaphire disappeared in a flash, catching Sora out. He then instantly reappeared behind Sora and Riku. But with him, he was holding a Golden-bladed Great-sword in his right hand, the edge of the blade close to Sora's neck. The hilt was shaped like a pair of wings, the right part of the hilt showing a black dragon wing and the right side showing a white eagle wing. The handle of the Great-sword had been carefully wrapped with a leather coating. The sword itself was large and seemed to be heavy, but somehow Xaphire was able to hold it in one hand with ease. Xaphire was around about as tall as Xemnas was.

"Wouldn't you like to know, Master of the Keyblade." He answered in a deep, eerie voice.

Noticing Xaphire behind him, Sora swiftly spun round and swiped horizontally with the Keyblade of Darkness, but Xaphire jumped back with no effort. Both Sora and Riku readied themselves, holding their Keyblades towards Xaphire's direction. That was when they noticed that Xaphire had not one ... but two Golden-bladed Great-swords. He was Dual Wielding.

"I've got to say, you did pretty well fighting against the Twilight Thorn earlier, but will that Anti-Form of yours help you against me?" Xaphire taunted, grasping his Swords tightly.

Sora didn't hesitate at all and began to charge towards the idle Xaphire.

"Wait, Sora!" Riku shouted out, but Sora didn't stop.

Sora leaped towards Xaphire and cut across with his Keyblade, Xaphire parried it with his left hand sword and spun into a counterattack, hitting Sora squarely on the back and throwing him across the platform. Sora leapt back to his feet swung in for another strike, but every attack Sora threw at Xaphire was easily parried back by him with no effort at all. Riku took this chance of Xaphire being distracted by Sora and went in for the opening. But as he swung the Keyblade for Xaphire's side, Xaphire instantly parried with his other sword without even looking. Riku quickly leapt back in case Xaphire went for another counter.

Riku swiftly shouted out, "Dark Firaga!"

He cut the air in front of him with his Keyblade as a ball of Dark blue flame shot out, heading straight towards Xaphire. Xaphire somehow knew it was coming and so instantly blocked the incoming attack with left sword, repelling it with the flick of the wrist back at Riku.

Riku quickly noticed it incoming, "Dark Shield!" He bellowed out.

A transparent shield formed like a, preventing the counterattack from colliding into him. The strength of the attack caused Riku to slide backwards across the platform on his feet. Riku swiftly placed his free hand on the floor in order to prevent himself from going off the edge of the platform. Sora continued to strike a flurry of blows at Xaphire, putting all his strength into the attacks. But all the attacks were just being parried by Xaphire like it was nothing. Riku watched in disbelief, Xaphire wasn't even making an effort to fight. He then swiftly raced in for another strike, hoping to confuse him. Sora knew what to do; he swiftly dipped his body low and struck an uppercut at the right of Xaphire, with Riku at the same time striking down with a vertical swing at his left. But Xaphire swiftly collided both his swords against the two Keyblades. Sora and Riku took no time to think and continued to strike from every direction with a flurry of attacks. But this was no use; Xaphire was fast enough to parry and evade all of their own attacks. Xaphire then produced dark grey energy auras in his blades and swung at exactly the point of where Sora and Riku were to strike next. The energy flows in his blades were released; creating large, thin but

sharp energy waves that had collided into both Sora and Riku. The two flew different directions across the platform; Sora colliding into the steps, and Riku almost falling off the edge of the platform. Luckily, Riku was able to grab onto the edge of the platform and hung for dear life to prevent himself from falling. Sora weakly got to his feet, feeling the pain from the last attack throb throughout his body. Riku leapt up from his hanging position and landed safely on the platform.

“(Sigh) ... and here I was thinking I would actually have a proper challenge when facing you two, but all I get are pathetic, weak, low life children thinking their cool swinging around their Keyblades.” Xaphire moaned, rolling his eyes.

“Well ... you certainly are a tough one, aren’t you?” Riku joked, gasping for air. “We were just testing you; we weren’t really trying at all.”

“Oh, is that so?” Xaphire questioned curiously, showing the slight sign of interest.

“What are you talking about – Oh, right! Yeah, we wanted to see what you were made of.” Sora confirmed, only just realising what Riku was saying.

Riku’s eyes glared at him with irritation, it looked as though he was close to face-palming.

“... Anyway, I guess it’s time we step up the game a bit.” Riku sighed, flexing his shoulders.

“I’m looking forward to it.” Xaphire muttered, smiling slightly yet darkly.

Riku began to charge swiftly towards the idle Xaphire, holding his Keyblade in the usual position. Sora knew straight away what Riku was about to do, and he was needed for this attack to work. He clenched his own Keyblade tightly and charged towards Xaphire. Both Riku and Sora were now close enough for Riku to release his attack.

“Session!” Riku bellowed, launching himself at Xaphire.

Sora simultaneously launched himself towards Xaphire from the opposite direction, causing the three of them to collide. Both Sora and Riku began to strike from every direction at Xaphire, combining various moves as they strike. Xaphire swiftly dodged with ease as they struck, as though it was nothing to him. Riku and Sora knew what to do next. In sync with each other, they backed off from Xaphire and threw their arms in his direction. Suddenly, streaks of Dark Energy shot out continuously from the palms of their hands. Xaphire automatically swiped with his Blades continuously as the streams of Dark energy came into reach, causing them to explode. This was their chance.

“XIII Blades!!!” Both Riku and Sora roared within the incoming smoke.

Xaphire patiently waited for the attack to come at him, but what he did not expect was to size and ferocity of the Blades that span towards him. Sora and Riku flew around Xaphire as every Blade of Energy collided into Xaphire. Xaphire was able to just about parry the Blades with his own but the number was in the duo’s favour. Xaphire instantly changed tactics and swiftly dodged the incoming Blades. But that was what Riku and Sora wanted him to do.

“It’s ends now, Xaphire!!!” Riku roared, preparing for the final strike.

Simultaneously, Sora and Riku threw their own Keyblades at Xaphire’s direction as they leaped out of the way, the Keyblades automatically placed themselves on opposite sides of the Nobody. Within the next second, auras formed around the Keyblades, causing the whole arena to light up. Suddenly, a bright flash blinded the whole room and streams of energy collided straight into Xaphire from opposite sides. Riku and Sora quickly braced themselves as the explosion caused them to fly back. As the light and smoke cleared, Sora and Riku saw nothing left. Xaphire was gone.

“Wow ... I knew that attack was strong, but not THAT strong.” Riku joked, amazed.

“And yet ... all it inflicted was a scratch.” A voice then echoed the room.

Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Sora felt something kick him directly in the face, sending him flying into the distance. Sora swiftly recovered in mid-air, just in time as two large Blades sliced downwards from above him. Sora parried the Blades and attempted to counter with a sharp uppercut at the cloaked figure ... but was dodged. The cloaked figure was then properly in sight of Sora’s gaze, Xaphire was

unscathed, apart from his chest in which showed a small, diagonal cut.

"I must say, you two are the first to actually inflict damage upon me ... even though it is something so petty." Xaphire sneered.

Riku suddenly appeared above Xaphire and lunged his Keyblade from behind. Xaphire turned and instantly parried with his left Blade. But, just as he did that, Sora span with his Keyblade of Darkness and collided it into Xaphire. But this was pointless. Xaphire again parried with the attack his right Blade. He then counter-span and sent Sora and Riku falling to the platform, Xaphire swiftly reappeared, looming over the wounded Sora; He put away his left sword and grabbed Sora by the throat, Sora's feet lifted off of the ground. Sora struggled to get out of Xaphire's clutches, but it was no use. Xaphire's grip was like a rock. Xaphire strode over to the edge of the platform, dangling Sora over the edge.

"SORA!!!" Riku bellowed as he struggled to his feet.

He swiftly gripped his Keyblade charged towards Xaphire. But Xaphire, with the Blade he was holding, cut Riku without even looking at him. Riku collided into the sudden attack and was sent flying back across the platform. He tried to get up again with the strength of his arms, but it gave way due to the lack of energy left within him.

"Pathetic." Xaphire spat out, eyes piecing into Sora.

"Shut ... Up." Sora wheezed, still struggling to get out of Xaphire's grip.

Xaphire then gave out the slightest chuckle. He then lifted slowly into the air and threw Sora above him. He swiftly span sideways as his other Blade appeared on his left hand. Sora fell back and collided with the Blades. Within one fell swoop, Sora was sent hurtling down the bottomless pit, unconscious and helpless.

8 - Flurry of Blades

Xaphire gazed with mocking eyes as Sora continued to fall down the never-ending drop. Xaphire had no emotion in his face, just his dark, piercing right eye locked onto Sora as the body disappeared into the darkness.

"SORA!!!" A voice bellowed out.

Xaphire turned towards where the voice originated from, he noticed Riku kneeling on the floor, holding his chest tightly. Behind the long silver hair, Riku's eyes were locked on Xaphire with fury, his teeth bearing as if they were fangs.

"There's no need for you to call out to him, Sora won't be able to hear you." Xaphire told him in a low, dark voice. He then began to crack a grim smile. "All I can say now is one down ... One left to kill." He suddenly appeared close up in front of Riku; his left Blade disappeared from sight, and grasped him tightly around the neck. Riku tried to wriggle his way out of Xaphire's clutches but his strength was too powerful to escape from. Xaphire gradually lifted Riku up with ease, Riku's feet kicking out pointlessly. Riku began to choke as Xaphire strengthened his grip. In retaliation, Riku began clawing Xaphire's grasped hand. But this was no use.

"You are as pathetic as your dear friend; I continue to wonder how you two became the cause for the Organization's demise." Xaphire teased as his voice echoed the room.

"You shouldn't ... underestimate us." Riku wheezed, feeling Xaphire's grip continuously tightening.

"Tch ... That's funny; for the entire duration of this so called 'battle', I've been thinking that I was overestimating you two." Xaphire argued back, his face expressionless.

Xaphire's grip was overwhelmingly strong, causing Riku to begin losing his consciousness due to the lack of oxygen. This was now or never. Riku, with all the strength he had left in him, launched his entire leg skywards, colliding straight into Xaphire's face. Xaphire instantly released his clutches and fell back. Riku fell to the floor, smacking his back against it in the process. He began to gulp in large quantities of precious oxygen as he regained full consciousness and strength. Xaphire spat out to the side in disgust. As he turned to face Riku, blood could be seen trickling from his lip.

"So you haven't given up yet ... good." Xaphire chuckled, cuffing up the blood.

Riku leapt to his feet, Keyblade in his hand, and allowed no time to attack Xaphire. Xaphire instantly parried Riku's Keyblade like it was nothing. But Riku continued to attempt to inflict blows; Xaphire eventually brought out his other Blade and clashed blades with Riku's. They continued to clash with countless strikes non-stop, but then suddenly Xaphire released an aura of energy from his Blades as he countered Riku's next attack. Riku noticed it in time and jumped as high as possible as the energy aura shot past him.

"Dark Aura!" Riku suddenly roared in retaliation.

Riku gradually raised his Keyblade above him as everything around Riku and Xaphire suddenly turned pitch black. Riku instantly disappeared into the darkness; for a few seconds, Xaphire carelessly scanned around to try to spot him but this had been no use, he was nowhere to be found. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, Riku had reappeared flying towards Xaphire with his Keyblade pointing ready to strike the target. His speed was unbelievably fast, it was almost impossible to follow his movements. Xaphire dodged it just in time but instantly Riku reappeared from another direction shooting towards Xaphire again. Xaphire kept on trying his best to evade as Riku continued on repeating the attacks. Xaphire then halted in his tracks and readied himself for Riku to do the same attack, but Xaphire's timed this at the worst point of the attack. Riku had instantly reappeared and this time held his Keyblade sky high once

again. His body then dropped to the floor with the Keyblade's direction pointing towards it. When his feet touched the ground, he forced his Keyblade to pierce the floor. Suddenly, this caused streaks of auras to shoot from all directions of the platform. Xaphire evaded most of the sudden blasts but one collided into him, catching him off guard. Xaphire was thrown high up into the air. Riku knew this was his chance. He swiftly leaped towards Xaphire, ready to strike, but as he swiped his Keyblade, Xaphire unexpectedly recovered and parried the Keyblade. With his other Blade, he swung it round to Riku's side; the Sword collided against Riku's ribs and was thrown back. Riku had the wind knocked out of him, struggling to breathe. He collided to the platform, jolting his body. Air instantly got to his lungs, allowing him to fully recover.

"Dark Firaga!" Riku retaliated, panting and wheezing.

He quickly threw his left arm to Xaphire's direction and immediately a multiple number of dark auras shot out of the palm of Riku's hand. The blasts of dark auras sped towards Xaphire, but were easily deflected back towards Riku as they collided with the two blades. Riku quickly evaded the blasts but one caught him by surprise and sent him to the floor. He landed heavily onto his side; but swiftly got back to his feet and continued to evade the deflected blasts. After all the blasts were evaded, Riku readied himself to attack again. Swiftly, Xaphire appeared in front of him and punched him in the stomach; the impact threw Riku backwards to the floor. With the wind once again knocked out of him by the punch, Riku got to his knees and tried to recover. Xaphire didn't at all hesitate as he appeared again above Riku and dropped to the ground with his Blades aiming for the head. Riku just in time recovered and parried the attack with as much strength as he could. Xaphire leaped back as Riku struggled to his feet.

"It seems you still like to use those dark powers of yours, even though you do not reside in the Dark Realm anymore." Xaphire stated, as he had carefully examined the way Riku fought during this battle.

As Xaphire spoke, Riku suddenly noticed something about him; there wasn't a scratch or drops of sweat on his body at all, the blood that was trickling down his mouth and the cut on his chest had somehow completely disappeared. But there was also something Xaphire said was troubling Riku.

"How do you know I used to belong to the Dark Realm?" Riku questioned, closely watching Xaphire.

"Once you had entered this Castle, it had instantly copied all the important memories of you and Sora. With them, I was able to ... play about with them a bit." Xaphire explained, feeling that it didn't matter too much explaining this information to him.

"This Castle copied our memories!?" Riku echoed, caught out by surprise.

"Yeah, and the Organization gave this place a unique name ... Castle of the Eclipse." Xaphire continued. Riku strengthened his grip on his Keyblade; he suddenly got the feeling that this Castle had a similar purpose to Castle Oblivion.

"So, you were the reason why I was seeing hallucinations and Sora was being affected by his Anti-Form!?" Riku shouted out, anger burning up inside him.

"Yeah, I guess I did." Xaphire shrugged. "I found it quite fun toying with both your heads."

"Well, we'll make sure that will come to an end!" Riku roared.

He suddenly launched himself towards Xaphire and swiped his Keyblade horizontal. Xaphire leaped casually into the air to evade the attack and landed softly behind Riku. Riku swiftly turned to face Xaphire again.

"Here's a question ... what do you mean by 'we'?" Xaphire asked curiously.

"Both I and Sora will take you down and stop your meddling." Riku stated confidently.

"Is that right? Don't forget, Sora fell down the drop." Xaphire noted, pointing towards the edge of the platform.

"He may have fallen, but something that simple won't stop him from fighting back." Riku argued, grinning with confidence.

"hmph, now wouldn't that be a surprise!" Xaphire joked sarcastically.

He suddenly swung the Blades towards Riku's waist; Riku quickly saw this coming and leapt backwards in retaliation. Xaphire didn't follow after him; instead he slowly released his grips on his Blades. His Blades began to hover in mid-air on their own like they were puppets on string. Xaphire swiftly threw his right arm across, the right Blade reacted by this command and flew spinning towards Riku. Xaphire then threw his left arm across, and so the left Blade followed the right Blade towards Riku. Riku swiftly retaliated as he parried both Blades with the Keyblade. But as he did, the Swords continued to attack by themselves. Riku constantly parried and evaded all of the incoming attacks, but struggled to keep this up. One slip and he was done for. Xaphire carelessly stepped closer to Riku; feeling rather bored not doing anything.

"You Keyblade wielders are all the same; you act tough and confident about having strong hearts yet you are in fact so blind of the openings surrounding it!" Xaphire spat as Riku continued to parry his Swords. "No wonder you were so easily corrupted and your friend was unable withstand the Darkness in his own soul!"

"I've learned from my mistakes!" Riku bellowed back, almost losing his footing as the Blades kept swinging towards him.

Xaphire suddenly held up his right arm, halting both Blades from continuing to attack Riku. He swiftly threw his arm back to his side; the Blades reacted instantly to the command at the same time and stabbed from opposite ends of Riku. Riku tried his best to evade the left Blade but wasn't paying close attention to the other. The edge of the Blade sliced down Riku's back, causing Riku to scream from the immense pain. Riku fell to the floor, unable to move. Xaphire strode towards the fallen Riku while at the same time grabbed the hilts of the two Great-swords as they flew towards him. Xaphire stood towering over the wounded Riku; kicking the Keyblade out of his hand. Riku's wound was deep; the agonizing pain caused him to shake violently and very close to passing out.

"Like all Nobodies, I have no heart; but if I did have a heart of my own ... part of me would feel sorry for you." Xaphire taunted, showing his dark, eerie smile. "... While the rest of me would laugh hysterically at your pathetic self."

Riku gazed at him with droopy, weak eyes, ever so close to losing consciousness. All of a sudden, something collided into Xaphire from behind; Xaphire flew and tumbled into the distance, but swiftly recovered back to his feet.

Xaphire then pointed a Great-sword towards his surprise attacker, "You're recklessness knows no bounds!" He bellowed in fury.

Sora stood gazing with determination, his Final Form executed, ready to strike with his floating Keyblades at any moment. He was panting heavily; his right side deeply wounded from Xaphire's earlier attack. But he brushed the pain away like it was no big deal.

"I refuse to give up when my best friend's life is on the line!" Sora shouted out, fists clenched tightly.

"S-Sora ... H-How did you ...?" Riku tried to get the words out of his mouth, but the intense pain from the wound prevented him from doing so.

Sora swiftly flew towards him, "It'll be ok; I'll heal you as quick as possible." Sora hushed Riku.

"Y-you idiot ... n-no matter what y-you do ... he's impossible t-to defeat." Riku struggled.

"Heal!" Sora shouted out, his Keyblades spinning around the both of him.

But he was instantly interrupted by Xaphire's sudden kick to the stomach. Sora instantly recovered from being driven back. Feeling the frustration rise inside his body; Sora flew swiftly towards Xaphire and launched himself high up into the air, Keyblades following him. He then threw his arms out towards Xaphire's direction; his Keyblades reacted to the command and flew towards that direction. Xaphire parried both these with his own Blades. But as doing so, Sora caught him off guard by taking him out from behind. Xaphire was caught by both Keyblades, slicing both his right arm and the back of his left leg. Sora swung his leg low aiming for behind Xaphire's knee. Suddenly, Xaphire caught Sora's leg just

before it collided into him. Sora's was then launched uncontrollably into the distance. He quickly recovered in mid-air. He readied his Keyblades for the next attack. As Sora began to execute the attack, Xaphire leapt to the side. As doing so, he threw his own Blades at Sora's direction. Sora quickly retaliated by sending the Keyblade to clash with the Blades. The whole platform rumbled as the weapons collided into each other. Within seconds, all weapons were back to their wielder's sides. Instantly, Xaphire disappeared from sight. Sora was caught off guard as he was suddenly elbowed in the back of the neck. He tumbled across the floor but swiftly turned his body and leapt back onto his feet in one smooth movement. As Xaphire landed back onto the platform, he casually stretched his shoulder. "So is this all you have to offer?" Xaphire sighed.

"There more yet to come." Sora determinedly told him, showing off his cheeky smile.

"Ah! That's fantastic!" Xaphire shouted out happily, catching Sora off guard completely. But this was sarcastic.

Suddenly, a dark, horrifying voice whispered behind Sora's ears, "It's a shame that I've grown tired of you."

Within a split second, the world complete froze all around Sora. He couldn't move at all. The Xaphire in front of him began to wisp away into dark flames, disappearing from sight. At that point, Sora's chest lurched forward. Sora's head slowly dipped down, his eyes wide open and his face completely turned white with the shock. He noticed a large golden Blade poking out from the middle of his chest. The Blade had gone right through his body with no warning. Sora turned his head round to see Xaphire towering over him with a smile so grim; he might as well have been the Grim Reaper. His eyes were locked on Sora like daggers hitting the target.

"You were just another fallen pawn in this cursed Keyblade game." Xaphire stated deeply.

9 - Shattered Soul

Everything around Sora fell completely silent. His Final Form faded back to normal, and his Keyblade of Darkness disappeared from his grasp as he hung limply on the Blade of Xaphire's Sword. His face was completely white, his eyes widened and his whole body just stopped moving. His sight began to lose its focus of the area around him. His eyes slowly shifted towards Riku's position. He noticed that Riku was paralyzed in his lying position, staring at Sora in horror; it seemed as though he was screaming out to Sora ... but Sora couldn't hear his voice. He then struggled as he gazed up weakly towards the towering Xaphire, who had been grimly smiling as if he didn't have a care in the world. Sora suddenly dropped his head to limply face the floor and slowly began to close his eyes, inhaling his last breath. In his mind he remembered the time he last saw Kairi, before he was swept into the vortex. Then the area around her suddenly engulfed in pitch black darkness. Sora at that moment noticed her and Riku appear standing in front of him, smiling cheerfully. Sora caught notice a tear rolling down Kairi's cheek, and they disappeared. Sora gave out one last thought...

"Kairi ... Riku ... I promise ... I will come back for you ..."

Xaphire grasped Sora by the neck and forcefully drew his Blade out of Sora's body. He threw the lifeless body aside like it was garbage. Sora's body rolled across the platform, making no reaction whatsoever. Riku watched as the body was thrown carelessly across the platform. His whole body was still in agony but he didn't care. He had to go to Sora. He painfully pushed himself to his feet and limped his way to Sora's position. He dropped to his knees beside the body and gazed with lifeless eyes.

"Sora?" Riku quietly called to him.

No answer.

"Sora." Riku slightly raised his voice, shaking the lifeless body.

No answer.

"Sora!?" Riku then shouted to the body, shaking more violently.

No answer.

Riku was refusing to believe that Sora was gone; his own body shaking in agony while still trying to wake up Sora. But after so long of trying, he realised Sora was gone forever. Riku's head dipped, hiding his face from the world behind the long silver hair. His body shook violently. Xaphire gazed at him with a bored expression, feeling this situation was becoming a drag.

"I'll kill you ... I'LL KILL YOU!!!" He screamed in fury at Xaphire.

"Haven't you been trying to do that for the past few hours?" Xaphire teased.

"I've had enough of your provoking ... I've had enough of YOU!" Riku roared.

"Is that so? Well, it's not long now anyway." Xaphire sighed; his tone of voice went even darker than ever.

"It's not long till WHAT!?" Riku furiously shouted out.

"Sora's heart will plunge into the darkness ... and no one, not even you, will be able to stop him from creating the End of the Universe!" He explained, showing off his fake smile.

"End of the ... but Sora would never do that!" Riku argued loudly, his body still shaking.

"Yeah, that is true ... but, what about his Heartless?" Xaphire asked back.

At that moment, a dark black aura engulfed Sora's whole body. Riku swiftly leapt back in retaliation, but fell to the floor as agonising pain surged through the wound on his back. He then gazed horrifically as Sora's lifeless body hovered to its feet while it took form of Anti-Sora. As it opened its eyes, they

became completely shrouded in darkness with the pupils turning to a golden yellow colour. Out of nowhere, the Keyblade of Darkness suddenly appeared in its grasp.

"This form that you see before you is not Sora's Anti-Form, in fact it has never been ever since you two entered this dark Castle ... this is Sora's Heartless, longing to control the body as its own." Xaphire began to explain, his eyes stabbing into Riku's mind. "And now that Sora is forever dead, the Heartless shall take full control of his body."

"DON'T SAY THAT!" Riku bellowed in objection, his fists clenched to the point of them burning white.

"Sora ... was a Heartless in the past, in Hollow Bastion Castle when he destroyed my Keyblade of Darkness. He was able to release the Hearts of the Princesses from the Keyblade, but in turn caused him to lose his own heart. But he was able survived ... because of his strong will and the help of his friends. So, if he survived it then, he can be brought back now!"

"No ... not this time. My Blade went right through his heart ... destroying it completely!" Xaphire confirmed, "I made sure of it!"

Riku's eyes widened in disbelief, "I-impossible!" He shouted out, "No one can destroy a heart!"

"What a shame ... because that is one of the advantages about my Great-Swords; once one pierces the body, it instantly destroys the heart. And another speciality ... is that it can forever control the Heartless of the victim it stabbed!" Xaphire laughed.

Suddenly, Sora's Heartless grasped Riku by the neck and lifted him off the floor; Sora's Heartless showed no emotion in its face at all. Riku screamed in agony due to the stain being caused on the wound of his back. He tried to free himself from Sora's Heartless' grasp but there was no point; the strength was overwhelming! Riku started to choke as the grip tightened; his body swayed around and his legs kicking frantically, trying to do everything to release the grip ... but no luck.

"Sora had a chance to accept the darkness; this is what happens when he rejects it." Xaphire stated as Sora's Heartless tightened its grip even more.

Riku tried to think fast. Then... reluctantly, he grasped his Keyblade and struck across Sora's Heartless. The Heartless stumbled back, taken out by surprise. It then instantly recovered and swiftly stuck at Riku. Riku parried in time as the Keyblade of Darkness almost collided into him. Riku then struck back in retaliation, but the Heartless reacted instantly. It swiftly slid around clockwise behind Riku and struck with a devastating diagonal uppercut. Riku leapt forward in time as he noticed the strike and span to land facing the Heartless. He braced himself for the Heartless to make the next move. But as he blinked ... the Heartless disappeared! Within the next second, Riku was suddenly kicked in the back by the Heartless from the side. Riku flew and rolled across the floor. Riku yelled in anguish due to the Heartless had struck the back wound. As he rolled to lie on his back, the Heartless suddenly appeared above him, pointing its Keyblade towards Riku's neck. Xaphire appeared from behind the Heartless, showing his dark, eerie, fake smile.

"Sora's Heartless demonstrated the true essence of a Keyblade wielder." Xaphire stated pleasantly, "With this unique power ... the Destruction of the Universe is in sight."

"Why!? What do you hope to accomplish from something so horrid!?" Riku yelled furiously, trying to raise his head, only to be pinned down by the Heartless.

Xaphire's expression suddenly turned straight from pleasant to serious; he then began to explain, feeling it was necessary.

"It's because it bores me. Every life is weak and worthless. Seeing those emotions on their pathetic faces disgusts me to the core. I never cared for any of them. Xemnas' idea of us Nobodies becoming whole beings by creating Kingdom Hearts ... I knew it would fail from the start. "

"What about your true self? Did he not care about the lives of others?" Riku asked bitterly but curiously.

"Unfortunately, he was the complete opposite. He was always happy, emotional ... too emotional. I hated everything about him ... about myself. Just the thought of it makes my blood boil!" Xaphire raised his

voice in anger; it seemed to be a subject that affected him dearly.

"I don't get you at all." Riku murmured hesitantly.

"Thankfully, you don't have to." Xaphire answered back.

Xaphire shut his eyes and turned his back on Riku. As he did this, he raised his arms and clicked his fingers. Sora's Heartless began to raise his Keyblade into the air. As he swooped down; Riku suddenly retaliated by parrying the attack with his Keyblade, causing the Heartless to lose balance. He then swiped his leg across to trip the Heartless up, but the Heartless leapt back into the distance before Riku's foot was able to make contact. Riku leapt to his feet, in agonizing pain, and braced for the Heartless' next strike. Unexpectedly, Xaphire appear in front of him and swung both his Blades for a combo-strike. Riku parried the attack as best as he could, but after Xaphire finished his clash, he swiftly disappeared and Sora's Heartless was seen diving towards him. From an upside down position, the Heartless span swiftly upright and instantly struck Riku with an uppercut. Riku swiftly parried the strike but the force of the attack was strong enough to send him flying towards the wall outside the platform. Riku placed his feet against the wall in time so it won't collide against his back wound. Riku then leaped off the wall to return to on the platform. Once again, Xaphire appeared out of nowhere in front of him, his left Sword gone. He grabbed Riku by the collar and launched him towards the platform. Riku collided onto the floor of the platform and rolled across, almost falling off the edge of the other side of the platform. Riku, in unbearable pain, weakly pushed himself to his feet. But as he did so, Sora's Heartless appeared in a flash and, with no hesitation, struck with a second uppercut ... this time the strike collided into him. Riku was thrown into the air and crash landed on the floor. He was in so much pain; he was close to completely losing unconscious. He examined his chest; another open wound, like the one on his back, was horrifyingly deep and ran across his chest. He was lying on his back, gasping for enough air to fill his lungs.

Riku wondered in his mind, "How long left could I survive against them? It's impossible to even make a mark on them, and EVEN avoid them!"

Just then, Xaphire appeared standing over the side of Riku's body; both Blades by his sides. Xaphire span his right-handed Blade till it landed backhand. He then lifted it above of Riku close so the tip of the sword's blade was pointing at Riku's chest. Riku couldn't move at all. Nothing could stop Xaphire from delivering the final strike. Xaphire raised his Blade further into the air and swiftly lunged for the finishing strike. Riku closed his eyes tight shut and turned his head away as Xaphire made his move. Riku tried his best to escape his demise but it was no use, the pain from both his back and front caused his whole body to be paralyzed to the spot. He waited for the blade to enter through his body ... but nothing happened. Then a clash of blades was heard close above him. Riku slowly opened his right eye to see why Xaphire hadn't taken his life. Suddenly, both his eyes opened wide in disbelief of what had happened. A boy wearing the organization's cloak, hood over his head so his identity couldn't be seen, had interrupted the strike. The boy was holding not one ... but TWO Keyblades, Oblivion being held in the right hand and Oathkeeper in the other, using them to clash with Xaphire's Blades. Riku gazed as Xaphire jumped back and pointed his right Blade at the hooded being, his expressionless face fixed.

"Reveal yourself." Xaphire commanded; the sound of annoyance in his voice.

The hooded being let go of both his Keyblades as they disappeared from view, and reached to uncover the hood of the cloak to reveal his face. This took a sudden shock to Riku ... and even Xaphire. The beings hair was mild blonde; it was spiked up mainly on the right side with the rest flowing towards it. His eyes were a bright shade of blue and skin fairly pale. The boy had a strong, confident expression on him as seen with many Keyblade wielders. His body tensing up.

"I am the Nobody of Sora; the Organization's Number XIII ... Roxas!" The boy answered with confidence.

10 - The Keyblade Dual-Wielder

"R-Roxas!?" Riku shouted out in shock, unbearable pain still rushing through him.

"Well ... I never expected you to turn up so soon." Xaphire admitted, lowering his Blade ever so slightly.

"Actually, I never even expected you to be reborn in 'this Castle' of all places."

"Funny, I was wondering about that myself. But when I heard the fight going on, I just had to intervene."

Roxas acknowledged, carefully making sure he doesn't drop his guard for when Xaphire makes his move.

"Hmph. I guess it does even out the playing field ..." Xaphire began, but then he let go of his left Blade and clicked his fingertips. "... for a few seconds longer."

Suddenly, Roxas swiftly switched around, his Keyblades out at the ready and instantly clashed with the Keyblade of Darkness that swung round from behind. Sora's Heartless locked eyes onto Roxas. The Heartless then struck again by lunging his Keyblade forward. Roxas leapt to the side out of the way as the Keyblade of Darkness closed on him. Swiftly, Roxas slid behind Sora's Heartless and stuck it with both Keyblades in the back. The Heartless lurched forward but retaliated with a spinning strike. Roxas parried the incoming Keyblade and leapt away to gain distance, landing right in front of Riku. Xaphire carelessly risen his free arm into the air and clicked his fingertips once again, causing a small spark of light to erupt from the fingertips. Sora's Heartless instantly halted its attacks and stood facing Roxas and the wounded Riku.

"I've always wondered how you fought, but I should have guessed it would be similar to our fallen Sora: lousy." Xaphire commented, showing he didn't have a care in the world.

"Thanks for the input." Roxas answered sarcastically. "If it's true that you are who you say you are, then why is it that I've never seen you around during my time in the Organisation?"

"(Sigh...) Fine, I'll tell you. Before you arrived, I was the original Number XIII. That was until Xemnas decided to demote me due to an 'insignificant' attitude towards his plans. The reason why we never met was that on the day you arrived, Xemnas had me posted to watch over this Castle until my mission was complete. But when the time finally came ... The Organization was already destroyed." Xemnas reluctantly explained, sounding like it was a drag to explain.

During the time Xaphire explained his reason; Roxas carefully reached into his right trouser pocket through the gap of his Keyblade. He took out out an Elixir vial. Riku caught sight of this but Xaphire didn't. Roxas then flicked it behind towards Riku's direction, keeping fully aware of Xaphire. Riku successfully caught it, a surge of pain stretched through his wounds as he reached for it. Unfortunately, Xaphire caught notice of Riku's movement for the Elixir. Xaphire swiftly threw his arm right towards Riku's direction; a dark energy sphere was realised from the palm of his hand. Roxas instantly blocked the attack with the Oathkeeper Keyblade while the other parried Sora's Heartless' sudden incoming strike. Riku quickly gulped down the Elixir. Instantly, the wounds on his body healed and faded away, renewing Riku's energy to fight. Riku then leapt his feet and grasped his Way to the Dawn Keyblade as it appeared by his side.

"Very sneaky, to think a newly reborn Nobody would have his own stash of supplies." Xaphire commented spitefully, lowering his Blade again.

Roxas kicked Sora's Heartless away to gain some distance again, and stood beside Riku.

"Roxas, how did you get this?" Riku asked him curiously, holding up the empty Elixir vial.

"It was right next to me when I woke up in that corridor back over there." Roxas answered, pointing his thumb at the door of where Sora and Riku (and Roxas presumably) had entered.

Riku then gained a sudden flashback of when Sora executed the backflip from the wall of the room they had woken up in. Riku remembered something had fallen out from Sora left pocket.

"(Sigh ...) I told him to strap up those pockets of his!" Riku frustratingly complained, face-palming from the embarrassment. "But he thought it would be cool to leave them open."

"Really!? I thought that would be something you would do!" Roxas joked, putting on a cheeky smile.

"Although ... at least he had the decency to be prepared for the unexpected."

"... Shut up." Riku murmured as his face turned red in embarrassment, turned his head away to hide it,

"How could he of been prepared if he kept on dropping the supply everywhere!?"

"Well ... What the-!?"

Roxas had been interrupted by Xaphire who appeared right up close in front of him, holding his right Blade aiming for Roxas' neck.

"You bore me." Xaphire eerily spoke, his deep voice echoing the Throne room.

Roxas ducked down swiftly to avoid the strike and executed a counter-strike with an uppercut using both Keyblades. Xaphire's easily parried it with the left Blade as it returned at his will, and struck Roxas in the back by the right Blades guard. Roxas tumbled across the floor, but instantly leapt back to his feet. But as he did this, Sora's Heartless ruthlessly elbowed him in the side, making him fall back onto the floor. The Heartless then placed its foot on Roxas's side to hold him down, and aimed the tip of the Keyblade of Darkness at Roxas's neck, ready to strike. Suddenly, Riku struck the Heartless from behind, making it lose its balance. Making this his chance; Roxas launched his foot into Sora's Heartless' abs, the impact threw the Heartless off its feet. Roxas leapt to his feet and tensed his body. Both Riku and Roxas jumped back, landing back to back with each other.

"Have you still got a grudge on me for ruining your life after our fight under Memory Skyscraper?" Riku curiously asked Roxas, coolly smiling.

"Get real, that in the past! Besides, you are going to have to pay me back for saving your butt with the Elixir!" Roxas answered, smiling back.

Xaphire stood watching the two bicker on. On the other side of the platform; Sora's Heartless leaped back to its feet, showing no sign of injury through the dark aura engulfing its body.

"(Sigh ...) It's time to end this nonsense." Xaphire sighed in annoyance, nodding to the Heartless.

Suddenly, Xaphire and Sora's Heartless began charging at Roxas and Riku from different directions.

"I'll take on Sora, you fight Xaphire!" Riku hastily told Roxas, becoming serious.

"So we even out the playing field? That's fine by me!" Roxas agreed confidently.

They both leaped towards their opponents with weapons grasped in hand. Roxas clashed his Keyblades against Xaphire's Blades; Roxas forced Xaphire's Blades out of the way as he struck his foot into Xaphire's chin. Xaphire leapt back in retaliation, landing on his feet. Xaphire cuffed the blood from his bottom lip.

"That was a dirty move." He growled darkly.

Riku clashed his Keyblade with the Heartless' Keyblade, causing both the weapons to ricochet against each other. Riku then opened his free hand underneath the Keyblade.

"Dark Firaga." He roared.

A dark aura engulfed his hand just before he struck his free hand against the Heartless' chest, causing the aura to explode on impact. The Heartless was thrown back off its feet by the unexpected blow, soaring across the arena. It took a moment to recover, but was able to leap back to its feet the moment it collided against the platform. The Heartless' eyes then locked back onto Riku, digging into his mind. Riku leapt towards the Heartless, both hands grasping his Way to the Dawn Keyblade.

"Come on, Sora! Give me everything you've got!" Riku bellowed assertively at the Heartless.

Roxas leapt towards Xaphire for another strike, both his Keyblades by his side. But just before the two Keyblades made contact, Xaphire disappeared once again from sight. The caused Roxas to lose his

balance, hopping on left foot to try and keep himself from falling. He fell and tumbled across the platform, swiftly recovering back to his feet. Sora's Heartless also swiftly disappeared from sight just when Riku tried to strike, causing him to back off in retaliation. Roxas scanned around for any signs of Xaphire and Sora's Heartless' whereabouts. Riku did the same.

"Where did they go!?" Riku shouted out in annoyance, swiftly turned his body in every direction.

"Do you think they retreated?" Roxas wondered, cautiously tensing his body for any surprises.

"No, I'm sure Xaphire has too much pride to just randomly leave the fight." Riku guessed from his experience so far.

Suddenly, Roxas heard a sort of slicing sound from behind. Both He and Riku swiftly turned round to face the direction of the sound, but there was nothing.

"What was that!?" Riku asked out, caught out by surprise.

"Don't know." Roxas cautiously answered.

Suddenly, the same sound echoed from their right; they both turned quickly towards that direction, but there was still nothing.

"What is going on!?" Roxas shouted out in frustration.

Suddenly, the sound began to get faster and more frequent. Roxas and Riku kept turning and switching about as the sound continued to increase. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a flash of light filled the whole room, blinding the both of them. The sound kept on increasing in speed, now it sounded like some sort of tornado as it also felt like a large gust of wind spinning around them. Even though they were temporary blind, they still kept on turning about, following the sounds. The slicing sounds got louder and faster as the gust of wind got stronger. Suddenly, something cut Roxas' left arm, tearing the sleeve of the cloak and his skin. And then Riku felt a cut slice his cheek. Both Roxas and Riku began to get cut up, faster and faster, and the slices kept on becoming more painful and deeper. Riku quickly realised what was happening to them; they were being tortured by sound itself. Riku closed his eyes calmly, blocking out the sound from his mind and listened carefully for attacks heading towards him and Roxas. Then he heard one.

"Roxas, to your left!" He bellowed out.

Roxas held out his left Keyblade out swiftly, suddenly rebounding with another blade.

"Roxas! Quickly close your eyes and (argh!) listen carefully for attacks coming at you! Block everything (ah!) around you!" Riku shouted out to Roxas.

"Right! (Ow!)" Roxas nodded as he shut his eyes.

They both started to parry the incoming attacks, trying not to miss any out. They continued to parry more frequently as time flew by, but so did the incoming attacks. They began to parry without any stops or delays, spinning their Keyblades and sometimes dodging the incoming strikes. But then, everything stopped. Roxas and Riku cautiously opened their eyes, squinting due to the bright light. Roxas had shouted something out but the word had been drowned out for some reason. Then suddenly they heard Xaphire's dark, cold voice echo the arena.

"Dreaded ... STRIKE!!!" Xaphire bellowed out.

That was when Roxas and Riku panicked. They couldn't see or hear the incoming strike so it'll be almost impossible to parry, block or deflect. And then ... it began. Both Roxas and Riku were thrown up into the air by a sudden force. They hung there in the air ... prevented from moving. Suddenly, a force hit both of them squarely in the back, completely taking the air out of them. Straight after, like a whirlpool, they were struck from all around by infinite blades. Beaten up badly, both Roxas and Riku were suddenly struck in the stomachs. Everything stopped. The arena dimmed back to normal brightness, everything around them was in sight. Suddenly, both Riku and Roxas fell to the ground, agonising pain surged through their whole bodies on impact. Xaphire and Sora's Heartless strode over to their positions and towered over them. All of a sudden, Xaphire's dark cold laugh echoed the arena.

"Oh how the great Keyblade wielders fall." Xaphire taunted over them, giving out the eerie smile that got Roxas and Riku shuddering, "What happened to all that hope of yours? Did I throw it all away?"

"Th-that's enough! No matter ... how many times y-you take us down ... we'll always keep fighting!"

Roxas protested in agony, wheezing and stuttering.

"I haven't seen much improvement ..." Xaphire continued to taunt. "Face it: the Light has fallen mercy to Darkness."

"We don't bow down so ... easily!" Riku rejected, trying his best to get back to his feet.

Gradually, both Roxas and Riku struggled to push themselves to their knees and eventually to their feet.

Xaphire just stood there watching the two of them, eyes piecing into them.

"Fake determination ... how pitiful." Xaphire whispered under his breath.

"R-" Roxas began to spit out.

Xaphire raised an eyebrow in curiousness.

"Ragnarok!" Roxas bellowed, putting on a small, dark smiling.

Xaphire was completely caught out by the surprise, but was too late to evade or parry. Roxas instantly unleashed a swift, solid combo of strike with both Keyblades, rising from the platform with Xaphire as the victim. Sora's Heartless tried to intervene but Riku, who seemed fairly unharmed, prevented the Heartless from doing so, clashing blades with one another. Roxas struck Xaphire with an uppercut, sending him high into the air. Swiftly, Roxas pointed both Keyblades in Xaphire's direction. Instantly, a light orange aura engulfed the tips of the Keyblades, constantly enlarging. With enough charge in the Keyblades, Roxas executed the final section of his attack. Rays of light launched out of the Keyblades and encircled around Xaphire, prevent him from escaping. They closed in on him and exploded on impact. Xaphire was sent hurtling to the floor of the arena, tumbling to the side. Roxas strode over and stopped in front of him. Unexpectedly, Xaphire recovered and instantly swung his Blades towards Roxas. Roxas retaliated and leapt back to evade the incoming Blades, readying for the next attack.

"So you were bluffing the injuries?" Xaphire questioned curiously, surprisingly calm after the surprise attack.

Roxas spotted that although Xaphire's body had a few burns and injuries from the surprise special attack, they seemed to be healing rapidly.

"I wouldn't say 'bluffing', more like 'over-exaggerating'." Roxas corrected, smiling with confidence.

"That attack of yours won't finish me off as easily as you think."

Although Roxas had stated this with confidence, he and Riku were in fact badly wounded from Xaphire's special attack. They were only just able to cope with it due to Regen magic Roxas was able to cast just before the main finishing strike.

"Well then, I'll make sure not to hold back as much next time." Xaphire assured; no sign of pain anywhere in his voice. "It's just a shame your best friend wasn't so ... resilient weeks ago."

"Wha ... What's Axel got to do with this!?" Roxas asked out, caught out by surprise.

"That's right ... you never knew." Xaphire teased, a grim smile appeared across his emotionless face.

All of a sudden, Xaphire leapt at alarming speed, closing in on Roxas ready to strike. Roxas swiftly braced with his Keyblades, just in time as the weapons clashed against each other. Instantly, it became a battle of brute force between the two of them, trying to push against each other's weapons. Then, from out of nowhere, Xaphire's voice whispered inside Roxas' mind.

"Let me show you the truth of Axel's demise." The voice echoed eerily.

11 - The Broken Chains

Xaphire stood on top of the ridge of the tallest tower, overlooking the whole of The Castle of The Eclipse. The gust of wind blew heavily strong against him, and yet he wasn't fussed in the slightest. He gazed towards the horizon, the blood red sky and pitch-black clouds looming over him as if it was trying to intimidate him. Xaphire had been bored out of his mind, having spent over a year stuck in this Castle with no communication or updates from the Organization. That was until a Dark Realm Portal appeared to his side. Xaphire turned to take a glimpse of who would appear from the portal, but turned back straight away in dissatisfaction when the figure appeared. The Organization member hid his face behind the hood of his cloak to hide his identity, but Xaphire knew straight away who he was.

"What is it Xemnas? And why should I care?" Xaphire spat out, his back turned to the hooded figure. "There is no need to be touchy, Number XV; to speak in such a manner to your superior is ... disrespectful." Xemnas calmly spoke, unveiling his hood.

"Respect is for the weak and needy." Xaphire stated in distaste, showing no sign of emotion, "I bow to no one."

"Well, as least try to hear me out." Xemnas began to recite, hoping to grab Xaphire's attention. "Not so long ago, one of our members had decided to go cold on us and betray the Organization. Ever since then our plans have been ... interrupted by his antics."

"So, what you're trying to say is ... you want me to dispose of him." Xaphire figured as he turned his head back slightly, knowing where this was going. "Why not get rid of the guy yourself?"

"My plans are on the final stages at this moment in time, I cannot afford wasting my time with such a meaningless adversary." Xemnas answered, keeping a cool head. "This is why I'm appointing the mission to you. I know how bored you are guarding this Castle; I thought this would be the perfect thing for you to ... kill off time."

"Fine, who do you want me to erase?" Xaphire finally accepted, knowing anything would be better than having nothing to do.

"Number VIII: Axel." Xemnas answered, a dark, eerie smile appeared across his face.

Xaphire gazed at him for a moment, taking in and considering whether to accept the task. But this did not take too long to decide at all.

"Leave it to me." Xaphire nodded, no soul showing in his right eye. "Just make sure you are out of my sight by the time I've returned."

Xemnas did not speak another word; he just turned, lifted up his hood, and strode through the Dark Realm Portal. Xaphire gave one last glance back as Xemnas took his leave, just until the Portal closed up. Xaphire then gazed down the drop from the ridge of the tower, no emotion showing whatsoever. He took a step back and grasped his two Great-Swords the appeared before him. He took in a slow, deep breath and leapt off of the ridge to the abyss below. Within one, flowing motion, he opened up the Dark Realm Portal below and fell straight through it.

Upon his arrival into the Dark Realm, Xaphire took a moment to examine the scenery, since it had been a while from when he last entered the Dark Realm. It was the same as it had always been, the horrific darkness looming all around him. There were still words that ran through the emptiness of the invisible floor. And of course the feeling of loneliness that ran through every soul who entered the dreaded place. It was the perfect home in Xaphire's opinion. After a while he began to here footsteps heading closer towards him. Xaphire swiftly pulled up the hood of his cloak and hid in the darkness, patiently waiting to make his next move. The sounds of the footsteps grew louder and louder, till they came to a halt.

“What is this place?” A voice asked out, carefree and curious.

Xaphire took a glimpse of the trio who stood in the distance from him: A boy with brown, spiky long hair stood in front, innocent and full of enthusiasm. His companions either side of him were a Duck and a Dog, wearing ‘unique’ looking garments as if ready for action.

“Well, which way should we go?” The Duck asked the boy.

The boy ran further ahead and examined the area, “Riku! Kairi!” He shouted out, the hint of worry in his voice.

Where have I heard those names before? Xaphire wondered in his thoughts. But then an idea came to him; Well now, let’s add a bit of excitement into the game, shall we? He decided, feeling the need for action to take place.

Xaphire raised his arm slightly and clicked his finger-tips together; instantly, several Dusks appeared and surrounded the trio. The trio readied their weapons for the battle; the Duck grasped a magic staff, the dog gripped onto a round shield, and the boy clutched onto a ... Keyblade!?

A Keyblade!? This may actually be interesting. Xaphire admitted; a slight satisfactory smile appeared across his expressionless face.

The battle raged on for a little while, Xaphire hidden in the shadows adding more and more Dusks as it progressed.

“It’s no use!” The boy shouted out, clutching onto his Keyblade tightly.

Suddenly, another voice echoed the Realm, “Don’t stop moving, or the darkness will overtake you!” the voice shouted out.

This caught Xaphire’s attention, knowing exactly who that voice belonged to. And upon taking a swift glance, he caught sight of his target. Axel leapt into view, taking out a few of the Dusks with his Flame Chakrams.

“Get goin’!” he commanded the trio, eyes staring straight towards them with urgency.

“Why?” The boy asked back in confusion.

“Don’t ask, just do it!” Axel demanded.

Suddenly, one of the Dusks launched itself on top of Axel, sending him to the floor. The boy ran towards the fallen Axel, striking his Keyblade against the Nobodies surrounding Axel.

“Are you okay?” The boy asked out to him.

Axel leant up, “I kidnapped Kairi, but she got away from me. After that, Saïx caught her.” Axel explained, punching his fist against the floor. “He’s a member of Organization XIII: Saïx. Got it memorized? Now go save her!”

Xaphire clicked his fingertips again; You two are going nowhere ... Xaphire prevented.

Just then, another Dusk appeared from mid-air, gliding towards them to attack. Swiftly the boy turned and struck the Dusk with full force of his Keyblade.

“Leave us alone!” The Boy shouted out to the Dusks in frustration, allowing Axel to get to his feet.

Is this why you betrayed the Organization, Axel? For this wimpy kid!? Xaphire’s mind thought out, concentrating on the two of them, How pathetic.

The fight continued on; the Boy continuously swinging and executing attacks on the Dusks, while Axel swiftly throwing his Chakrams against other Dusk Nobodies. But, Xaphire issued out more and more of them, waiting for their energies to deteriorate. After a while, both Axel and the boy leapt back and stood back to back against each other. Large amounts of Dusks surrounding them.

“I think I liked it better when they were on my side.” Axel joked, keeping an eye on the enemy Dusks.

“Feeling a little ... regret?” The boy teased, smiling cheekily as he turned round to Axel.

“Nah ... I can handle these punks. Watch this!” Axel answered.

This is my chance! Xaphire’s thoughts bellowed.

Axel leaped far forward, and charged up his magic, his Chakrams floating either side of him. Fire began

to heat up as the Chakrams spun wildly around Axel's body. Axel roared out and released the energy, causing mass amounts of flames to explode around him and the whole area to light up blindly. Swiftly, Xaphire appeared from the shadows and leapt towards Axel, Blades ready in hands. Within one fell swoop, he struck Axel from behind. Everything slowed down. Axel was caught out in shock, struggling as he turned head around to find out who stabbed him. His eyes instantly widened.

"Xaphire ... you-!" Axel wheezed out, having trouble reaching his words.

"Go to sleep, Axel." Xaphire told him, his right eye piecing into Axel like an arrow.

Xaphire swiftly hauled his Blades out of Axel's body and leapt back into the shadows, disappearing from sight. Axel fell and tumbled across the invisible floor, ending up on his back, struggling to stay alive.

Xaphire took a quick glance back at Axel, who laid there motionless. He then switched his sight on the boy.

This boy, Sora ... He'll be interesting to use in the future. Xaphire concluded in his mind, a dark smile showing across his face.

He turned and disappeared into the darkness, seeing no more of Axel's last moment before fading away.

Roxas gazed into Xaphire's right eye in horror, his body shaking not of fear ... but of fury.

"So, to summarise: Axel didn't sacrifice himself ... I ended him." Xaphire finished off, his face as expressionless as ever.

Roxas' breathing rate quickened, the grip on his Keyblades tightened considerably. The fury continued to burn in his chest, so close to losing control.

"Xaphire ... you ... DEMON!" Roxas growled, trying to hold himself back.

"Roxas! Don't listen to him! He's only trying to provoke you!" Riku shouted out to him, keeping Sora's Heartless at bay.

"Is that all you have as a comeback?" Xaphire asked in an uninterested tone, but then drew back as rage filled Roxas' eyes. "Oh come on! You don't actually care, do you!? You're a Nobody! Axel was a Nobody! And everyone in the Organization was a Nobody! Why won't you lot get it into your thick skulls that you don't have any true feelings, nor even a Heart! You didn't really care when everyone in the Organization began to fade into the darkness. You didn't care about Axel's demise! And I bet you didn't even care about Xion!"

That was when Xaphire had made his mistake. Roxas suddenly broke loose of the mental chains holding him back; he lost control of his own body. He began having sudden flashbacks of his past life in the Organization ... of when he hung out with Xion. Roxas struck Xaphire with both Keyblades, using his momentum for additional power.

"Why did you even think of bothering?" Xaphire provoked deeply, his sight locked on Roxas' incoming attack.

Xaphire caught Roxas' incoming Keyblades and, still holding him, kicked him in the chest. Roxas was then thrown onto the floor; the pain was like torture for him ... but he didn't even care. Roxas instantly got to his feet and headed in for another strike. He leaped in head first and clashed the two Keyblades against Xaphire's Blades. Keyblades and Blades rapidly clashed against one another, Xaphire somehow struggling to keep up with Roxas' sudden speed and ferocity in attacks. Roxas couldn't control himself anymore.

"Do you think I didn't care about them? ... DO YOU THINK I DIDN'T CARE ABOUT XION OR AXEL!? I might not have a Heart or any real feelings, but I can tell you this ... I CARED!!!!!" Roxas roared in fury, lashing all his might into his attacks.

"Roxas! Don't you understand!? He wants you to be angry! He's leading you right into his grasp!!!" Riku bellowed out at the top of his voice, trying his best to make Roxas come to his senses.

Suddenly, Sora's Heartless swiftly changed its position to appear directly in front of Riku, the Keyblade of Darkness pointing straight towards his throat.

Roxas struck Xaphire from every direction possible, causing Xaphire to lose his sense of direction. In retaliation, Xaphire span his whole body like a propeller, swinging the Blades around him at a tremendous speed. Roxas spotted the incoming counter and evaded it just in time by bending his whole body backwards, the Blade narrowly missing his body. He then forced himself to straighten his body back, fatigue beginning to increase. But he ignored the warning and full on swung his whole body and struck Xaphire's chest. Xaphire doubled back, taking a quick glance at the wound Roxas inflicted on him. Roxas leapt straight towards Xaphire with his whole might, closing in to clash the Keyblades against Xaphire once again. But, Xaphire retaliated to this and swiftly parried the weapons with his own Blades. Turquoise coloured Sparks flew around them as they kept clashing their weapons in various combo-strikes. Then, out of the blue, Xaphire rapidly chucked both his Blades high into the air, leaped towards them, caught them by the handles, and dropped to the floor like a bird of prey catching its prey. First he was seen in the air; then right behind Roxas, holding his Blades in a crossed position. Roxas suddenly felt his body rip; Xaphire had struck him in two places, the left shoulder close to the neck and through the collar bone, and across the right side of his waste. Darkness seeped out of his wounds as he fell to his knees. Roxas released the grip of his Keyblades and instantly they disappeared from sight. He weakly turned his head and gazed up at Xaphire. Xaphire, in return, turned his head slightly to the right, his eye piecing straight into Roxas' mind. Then Roxas fell to the floor and blacked out, unconscious.

Riku brushed the Keyblade of Darkness aside, gazing straight into the Heartless' eyes.

"Sora ... I refuse to fight you anymore." Riku said.

Sora's Heartless then lowered its Keyblade. But, then instantly it span clockwise with its Keyblade flying towards Riku. Riku swiftly leapt back and lifted up his own Keyblade, preparing to defend himself against the Heartless' next attack. But that was when the voice of the one person he did not want to hear echoed the Throne room.

"Riku ... all you need to do is accept the Darkness once again, it is just that simple!" Xehanort (Ansem, Seeker of Darkness) attempted to persuade him, standing close behind his back.

"I told you to leave me alone, didn't I!?" Riku spat back, keeping his eyes on Sora's Heartless. "Why can't you just get out of my life!? As you can see, I'm not your puppet anymore!"

"... And yet you still use your dark powers in the midst of battle. If you just let Darkness become a part of you, those powers will be fully awakened and you'll be able to grow with immeasurable strength and power!" Xehanort boasted on, keeping a cool head.

"You told me that the first time ... and look how I ended up then!" Riku argued with despise.

"You were weak due to the lack of experience, and so your heart was unable to cope." Xehanort admitted to him darkly. "But your heart has grown stronger now, along with your will to fight."

"I don't care what you think!" Riku bellowed back, swiftly switching round to Xehanort's direction. But Xehanort was nowhere to be seen, only to hear his voice echo the room.

"Remember this well, Riku; you are a part of the Darkness, and the Darkness is a part of you."

Xehanort's voice finally faded away.

"Right ... the amount of times I've heard something like that before." Riku stated drearily, feeling rather gloomed upon.

Riku then turned to face Sora's Heartless again. But, as he did, Sora's Heartless was nowhere in sight. Riku scanned the area, but did not catch sight of him anywhere at all.

"Where did Sora ... What the-!?" Riku shouted out in shock, switching his gaze to the sky.

"Come on, Roxas, is that all you got?" A voice teased coolly.

"That voice, it can't be ... Axel!?" Roxas thought out, caught by surprise.

Roxas couldn't see a thing at all; there was nothing but Darkness covering the whole area around him. The atmosphere began to mentally choke him, feeling rather claustrophobic. But, in the distance a speck of appeared before him. Within seconds, it flashed with blinding light and Roxas instantly found himself in the place where he would never have thought to return to again. He found himself standing on the beach, watching the ocean in the beautiful, peaceful horizon. He found himself standing on the beach of Destiny Islands.

"There seems like no matter what conflict this island has been through, it still stands tall and proud." The same voice pointed out pleasantly.

"Axel!?" Roxas called out, swiftly switching his head around to find him.

Instantly, Axel appeared to him, causing Roxas to jump.

"Still got my name memorized I see, that's good to hear." Axel joked, putting on a smile.

"Heh heh, yeah ..." Roxas nodded cheerfully, but then fell to sorrow upon what he needed to confirm next. "Is it true ... is it true that Xaphire was the one who finished you off?"

"... Yeah, he did." Axel admitted gloomily.

"That ... heartless fiend." Roxas murmured in despise.

"Roxas, listen to me! Xaphire has just been toying with you this whole time, not even close to his true strength!" Axel explained worriedly to Roxas, he was completely serious. "You have to take Riku and get out of that horrid Castle ASAP! Got it memorized?"

"What!? But, how do you know about that!?" Roxas hastily questioned him, unable to believe this information.

"Trust me; I was on a mission with him one time before you arrived to the Organization. There was a time during the mission where we had to battle against a large mass of Heartless, all he needed to do was a flick of the wrist and they were all gone within a second!" Axel continued on, "So ... at his full potential, his plans of destroying the Universe ... will be a guaranteed 100% success! All he needs is Sora's Keyblade to unlock the door."

"But, why does he toy with us!? And, why does he need Sora's Keyblade!?" Roxas kept on pressuring Axel.

"That's because ... his strength and power are unmatched. The whole of the Organization feared him the moment he became a member, even Xemnas kept his distance." Axel hastily explained. "To be able to destroy the Universe, Sora's Keyblade is the only key to unlocking the passage to the Heart of the Universe. Once he's there, he would most likely plan on destroying it!"

"But we have to stop him before he reaches it, otherwise its game over!"

"I told you before, you can't beat him, he's unstoppable! But ..."

Before he could finish, Axel suddenly faded and disappeared from view. Seconds later, the island began to follow and fade into darkness.

"Axel? Axel!?" Roxas called out, but there was no sign of him.

The area around him had almost disappeared. That was except for the tiny island where Sora, Kairi and Riku (also Roxas, Xion and Axel) hung out to watch the sunset. Roxas instantly caught a glimpse of someone gazing over the horizon. Roxas sprinted towards that area as fast as he can, making sure he outran the incoming Darkness. Once he got there, he saw that this person also was wearing the Organization's hooded cloak; Roxas thought at first that the figure was Axel. But now he realised that figure was the exact same height as Roxas.

"W-who are you?" Roxas hesitantly asked.

The hooded figure did not answer.

"Hey, I asked you a question! Who are you?" Roxas demanded, getting frustrated.

No answer. The Darkness was getting closer at an alarming speed.

"I don't have time for this!!!" Roxas bellowed out anxiously.

He ran close up towards the hooded figure, and swiftly unveiled the hood. Roxas was then shocked to find out who was hidden behind the cloak. He noticed that the person had light brown, long, spiky hair. The motionless figure then slowly turned his head around to meet eyes at Roxas. Finally, he spoke.

"Dead By Sunrise, Oblivion By Sundown."

"Sora!?" Roxas shouted out.

Roxas slowly opened his eyes; his body was throbbing painfully all over. He had awoken back in the Throne room. Upon scanning the room, he caught sight of Xaphire perched on his throne, with his arms crossed, eyes locked on Roxas. Roxas pushed himself to his feet gradually, there was barely any strength left in his body as he stood up.

"So you finally woke up?" Xaphire called out to him, cracking his dreaded smile. "How were your dreams?"

"That's none of your business!" Roxas spat, body shaking from the tiredness. "W-why haven't you erased me?"

"That is because erasing you now would just be boring and anticlimactic." Xaphire answered, a slight chuckle escaped.

Roxas scowled at him upon hearing this, but then noticed something was off. Riku was missing! Roxas worriedly scanned the room, but there was no sign of Riku anywhere, and even Sora's Heartless.

"Looking for someone?" Xaphire asked curiously, the usual dull tone in his voice.

"What have you done with Riku!?" Roxas shouted at him, his nervousness showing.

"See, I would tell you ..." Xaphire began.

At that moment, he casually rose up from his throne, and Sora's Heartless suddenly appeared on the left of him, as if awaiting orders. Xaphire then treaded down the steps to the platform, followed closely by Sora's Heartless, eyes continuously locked on Roxas.

"... but, I would rather show you." Xaphire then finished.

Just then, Riku appeared from the darkness hovering in the air above them, arms and legs spread out. He was completely imprisoned on the spot.

"Roxas! Get out of here!" Riku commanded Roxas, struggling to release himself from his position.

"Release him!" Roxas demanded to Xaphire, his voice echoed throughout the room.

"Oh, don't worry, I will. But first I'm in need of something that he bears." Xaphire

Xaphire held out his right arm towards the trapped Riku.

"No, don't do it!" Roxas shouted out in protest.

Roxas hastily used what was left of his strength and ran towards Xaphire, not bothering to summon his Keyblades. But it was too late.

"Memory Shatter!" Xaphire roared, tensing his muscles.

Riku suddenly became paralysed, his whole body motionless. His eyes grew wide and lifeless, as if his soul had been forcefully ripped out of him. Within seconds, he fell unconscious. Roxas seized Xaphire by the cloak and rammed him against the steps that lead to the Throne. Xaphire's just chuckled mockingly, causing Roxas' anger to rise even more.

"What did you do to him!?" Roxas bellowed at him furiously. "WHAT DID YOU DO!!?"

"You'll see." Xaphire answered, smiling eerily in response. "I have all I need, so I'll take my leave."

Just then, a pool of Darkness appeared behind Xaphire's entire body. He began to descend inside the pool, eyes locked on to Roxas callously. Roxas instantly released his grip on Xaphire's cloak, preventing his chances of stopping Xaphire's escape.

"Wait!" Roxas shouted out in frustration, leaning in to grab Xaphire again.

The pool of Darkness disappeared against Roxas' will, losing sight of Xaphire. Roxas then swiftly

switched his sight onto Sora's Heartless, but only caught a glimpse of the Heartless disappearing in a flash, probably following Xaphire's lead.

"Darn! We lost them!" Roxas shouted out in annoyance, clenching his teeth.

All of a sudden, Riku was released from his trap and fell to the platform floor. Roxas caught sight of this instantly and ran to catch him just in time. Roxas laid him cautiously on the floor. He then waited for him to wake back up, sitting on the bottom of the steps that rose up towards the throne. He began to reflect on the battle and everything that had happened to him, feeling as though it was all a set up. An hour or two later, Riku finally opened his eyes. As he sat up, Roxas noticed instantly and rushed to his side.

"Riku, are you hurt anywhere? Did anything happen to you?" Roxas hastily asked.

"I ... don't think so." Riku woozily answered, clutching his head.

"Was Sora's Heartless the one who imprisoned you?" Roxas then asked him, wondering how Riku ended up trapped in the first place.

"... Who's Sora?" Riku drowsily asked back.

12 - Vagrant Dream

Kairi checked the time on her phone; it read 08:31am.

"Oh great, they're late ... again!" She sighed in frustration.

She had been wearing her normal school uniform, all set up neat and tidy as usual, with her school bag resting by her side. It had been a normal school day on a Friday; the students were beginning to head towards the directions of their form-rooms to register. Most of them had been dropped off by coaches, cars, the trains; while others who either lived locally to the area or couldn't get to school by transport preferred the option to walk. Late arrivals were now rushing in so they wouldn't get the late mark. And so Kairi, on the other hand, had been standing by the entrance of the school waiting for the two slackers for friends: Sora and Riku. Kairi had been waiting for them ever since she arrived to the school half-an-hour ago; Sora had sent a text message to her to wait for the both of them by the entrance the night before, but there hasn't been any sign of the two so far.

Kairi gave out another sigh, "I'll allow them another minute and then give it a rest. I swear, once I see them, I'm going to -"

"KAIRI!" A voice shouted out loudly from very close behind.

Kairi all of a sudden felt as if she jumped out of her skin, even giving out a small squeak, after hearing her name being called out. She swiftly switched round knowing exactly who had called out to her.

"Why did you do that for, Selphie? You almost gave me a heart attack!" She whined, her heart racing.

Kairi was right though; Selphie had snuck up behind her and shouted very close to her ear.

"Hahahah! Sorry, I just couldn't resist myself!" Selphie apologised, giving out a cheeky smile and giggling. "Why are you waiting here anyway? You'll miss morning registration."

"Sora asked me to wait here for him and Riku. But, they haven't shown their faces so far. I was just about to head off about now anyway." Kairi explained, the sign of concern showing in her voice.

"Don't go wasting your time for them; it's normally their fault that they turn up late anyway. Just chill and go to registration before you get the late mark." Selphie eased her, smiling as she tilted her head.

"I guess you're right. I'll just tell them when they do turn up that I tried." Kairi sighed, gazing back once more outside the entrance. "I'll see you at break then."

"Yep, be seeing ya!" Selphie nodded happily.

After waving bye to each other, they ran their separate ways to their classrooms.

Kairi, who had been thankful to have turned up to registration just in the nick of time, was now sitting in her first lesson of the day: Maths. And yet there still had been no sign of Sora. Both of them were normally in the same class for Maths, Sora's seat right next to her own. Riku was in the year/grade higher than Sora and Kairi. And so Kairi decided that if Sora wasn't here, Riku wasn't here!

Kairi concentrated on jotting down her work and solving the various maths equations from the textbook beside her on the desk. Every few moments, she would have quick, hidden peeks of her mobile phone for any recent texts from Sora or Riku. But there had been none. Halfway during the lesson, Kairi was just about to figure out the answer for one of the more challenging questions when the door to the classroom suddenly burst open. Kairi glanced up.

"WOAH!" A voice shouted out in alarm.

The sound of feet losing their balance and a loud thump echoed the classroom from the floor. Many of the students laughed.

"Ah, here he is." Kairi stated in a low, moaning voice.

She knew exactly who this class clown was.

"Sora, get up from the floor and wait outside the door, I'll speak with you later!" The Teacher of the class demanded in a controlled manner. "And sort yourself out, you're a mess!"

Sora had rushed to the classroom as fast as he could but tripped up when barging through the door. This was due him not checking up on his loose shoe laces. When he got to his feet, Kairi could understand what the Teacher meant when she saw how he was dressed: his shirt was creased and untidy, trousers loosely hanging with his undone belt, shoe laces loosely untied, and his school tie not done up at all, causing it to hang loosely round his neck. Even his bag that had been resting on his back was open all the way; the stuff inside just freely hanging out, some of his equipment falling to the floor. Kairi noticed easily that Sora was completely tired; he had bloodshot eyes and his hair was very scruffy. Sora lazily stepped outside the door of the classroom and closed it without any complaints. Kairi shook her head in annoyance and continued on with her writing, having to rethink her whole solution to the question as she completely forgot the answer.

A few minutes later, the Teacher stepped out the room to have a talk with Sora. Right when she closed the door; the whole class began to have a conversation with each other, lowering to volume of their voices so that the Teacher couldn't hear them. Kairi knew that they were about Sora.

"Ever since he returned to school, he's become the class clown!" A girl at a front table complained, who wasn't at all impressed by what happened.

"Got to admit though, that was hilarious!" A boy sitting towards the other end of the room confessed, trying to prevent himself from laughing.

"Something must have happened to him during the time he was missing the whole of last year."

"If he carries on like this, he'll be suspended from school!"

"He might as well not have bothered coming back!"

"What an idiot!"

Suddenly, the whole of the class halted their conversation to listen in to what was happening outside; the sudden rise in the Teacher's voice caught everyone's attention.

"You think that's a good enough excuse for turning up to class late, making a fool of yourself AND disturbing my lesson!? Well I'll tell you now, it isn't!" The Teacher's voice bellowed.

"But it is true! I am really sorry I'm late Miss." Sora voiced apologised, who sounded calm and casual, but a hint of frustration loomed.

"Ever since you've been back at school, your behaviour has dropped to the floor. Before you went missing; you were mostly on time to lessons, your homework had almost always been in on the deadline and you were always trying your best. But now you're a COMPLETE Slacker! This is the last - and I mean LAST - chance I'm giving you! If you don't change your ways and go back to how you were back then, then you will fail this Subject and others as well! You will ruin your life if you don't change your behaviour! Do you understand me clearly!?" The Teacher ranted on.

"Yes, I do Miss." Sora understood.

"Are you sure?" The Teacher checked.

"Definitely." Sora confirmed.

"... Listen, you're a good person. I hate shouting at you, so promise me you'll go back to your normal self. Before you go in, tidy yourself up, sit down, don't talk, turn to page 94 and complete the questions at the bottom." The teacher then ordered, there was a hint of sympathy in her voice.

With that, the Teacher stepped back in the room, followed by Sora. All the students in the class instantly began to work again, as if they hadn't listened in at all. Sora was fairly tidier than before but still had his scruffy hair and bloodshot eyes. He seemed fairly pale and exhausted. He strolled along the rows of tables and sat down on his seat next to Kairi, placing the equipment he needed from his bag on the table. He seemed to be aware that the other students were whispering about him and glancing back to him, but he did not seem too bothered about it. He started on the work, trying not to doze off. His head

dipped a few times, and once even thumped his head on the table by accident.

"Tch! I can't believe her! She gave me an afterschool detention TODAY! On a FRIDAY! What, does she live in the school or something!?" Sora bellowed loudly in frustration. "This is ridiculous!"

It was now break-time, after the 2nd lesson had finished. Sora was now fully awake and as healthy as always, although he still yawned a few times. He sat opposite Kairi on a bench in the school grounds. "She's right though; ever since you've returned to school, you've slacked off. And admitting to her at the end of the lesson that you didn't complete the homework that was set last week didn't help your case either." Kairi explained coolly, beginning to eat her apple.

"I did! I just left it on my desk back at home!" Sora defended himself.

"Right ... that's your excuse every time. So why were you so late? I was almost late to morning registration waiting for you and Riku at the entrance!" She complained, but then noticed that Riku still hasn't shown up yet. "By the way, where is Riku?"

"I was late because I overslept again." Sora admitted innocently as he began to eat a bag of chips.

Kairi was furious, but tried her best to keep herself calm.

"And Riku-" Sora began, about to bite on a chip.

WHACK!

"AAH!" Sora had suddenly been smacked on the head hard, which in turn made him miss chomping a chip and instead biting his tongue.

"Riku had to wait for THIS numbskull to realise he had 5 minutes to get ready and arrive to school before classes began." Riku explained as he finally made an appearance. Of course, it was he who smacked Sora round the head.

Riku seemed tidy and awake, His uniform neat and his bag zipped up. But he tried to keep his shirt loose to follow with the style of the students in the school.

"Whyth didth you do thatth for!?" Sora frustratingly asked Riku, holding his tongue to stop the bleeding.

Riku ignored him and sat down next to him on the bench.

"Couldn't you have left him there so you could get here on time? Or at least text me to say you two were going to be late. Then I would have known before registration." Kairi asked out to Riku.

"I was going to, but Sora insisted me to wait for him." Riku moaned, giving an evil glare towards Sora.

Sora glared back at him hesitantly; he let go of his tongue and put it back in his mouth swiftly so he wouldn't bite it again if he receives another whack on the head.

"When we finally left, we had no other choice but to leap from rooftop to rooftop as fast as we could. It still took us a while though with Sora dropping his things from his bag that he couldn't be bothered to zip up properly!" Riku continued irritatingly, raising a fist at Sora.

"I hope I still have everything." Sora murmured worriedly.

"You'd better hope we weren't seen on the rooftops!" Riku threatened him, shaking a fist.

Sora jumped back. Kairi giggled. And then saw Tidus, Wakka and Selphie heading up to join them.

The school day continued at a usual pace, slowly in some lessons and quickly in others; Sora receiving complaints in some lessons and detentions in others. Kairi knew he had to miss out on Lunch break due to him having another detention for Geography because he had not completing enough of his homework that was set for him last Monday. And Riku had Physical training so he wasn't going to be around. Kairi then decided to hang around with Selphie the whole of the Lunch break. Afternoon registration and last lesson seemed to drag on. But once it was all finished she felt relieved, looking forward to the weekend. Kairi and Riku waited for Sora to finish up with his afterschool detention, spending time on the computers in the IT labs. Finally, after he was released, the three of them headed home together until they reached the crossroads. Kairi then turned and waved to Sora and Riku as they headed in the opposite directions.

"See you tomorrow on the island!" Sora shouted out in a happy tone, giving out a cheesy smile.

"Yeah, don't be late!" Kairi jokingly replied, giggling.

Kairi strolled through the normal, quiet roads and paths, minding her own business. But suddenly she caught eye of something in the corner of her sight, standing in the middle of a road she was just strolling past. Kairi swiftly turned to see what, or who, had been standing there. But whatever it had disappeared straight away the moment she turned. Was she imagining things? No, she couldn't have. But whatever it had been was gone now. Kairi turned back and continued down here. But then she suddenly felt strange. She was walking as normal, but her mind was phasing out. It was as if she wasn't in control of her own anymore. It was as if she was leaving her own body. Then everything suddenly blacked out.

Kairi suddenly jumped as she woke up, she was very dazed. It took her a while to realise that she had been dreaming, or rather, having a flashback of the Friday just been. It was now a Tuesday, 3 days since the tragic incident on Destiny Island and the second disappearance of Sora and Riku (as that had occurred on a Saturday). But now she realised she had woken up in a place she had no clue about. She examined the room but it was too dark to tell what was around her. She was lying against a wall, wearing her usual outfit but tiny marks of dark red on her lap. She began to feel a painful throb in the side of her head. She weakly lifted her hand from her lap and felt the area on her head. He then examined the palm of her hand and noticed a vague amount of blood dripping down her palm. Where was she? How did this happen? She couldn't remember anything of what happened between the incident on the island, and the day of her flashback, and now. Then, she heard faint footsteps, treading towards her.

"Wh-who's there?" She asked hesitantly, frightened.

All of a sudden a flame torch above her head lit up. She squinted, not being used to the sudden light. She then saw two figures appearing from the Darkness, one beside the other. The figure on the left strode up closer towards her and spoke. Kairi was now able to see this man's detail more clearly.

"The name's Xaphire; I hope you had a pleasant nap, Kairi." The man introduced himself, giving of a dark, unpleasant aura.

13 - The White Room

Roxas drowsily woke from slumber; at first glance, he found himself sitting comfortably on plain white chair. Curiously, he began to scan around the room he was now in. The change in atmosphere made him certain he wasn't in the Throne Room of the Castle of the Eclipse. In front of him, a table stood peacefully in the centre of the room. In the middle of this table was a plain white vase, holding what were white roses, resting against the glass. Roxas began to realise where he was now; there were white walls, large white curtains covering a large window on his left, another white chair opposite him, a plain white drawer behind him, and a plain white door to his right. Everything in this room was white. He also caught sight of many drawings around the room; on the floor, on the table and stuck on the walls. Roxas felt rather out of place in this room due to his black Organization cloak and clothing. But he knew, he was not in that dreaded Castle anymore.

"This place, it's the White Room. The White Room! I'm in Twilight Town's Mansion!" Roxas confirmed, surprised and confused. "But, I was in the Throne Room a moment ago, so how did I get here? Wait, where is Riku? Is he okay? Was Xaphire the one who brought me here? Wh-what ... WHAT'S GOING ON!?" He leapt from his seat and gazed up at the ceiling, fists clenched and squinting eyes.

"Roxas, please sit down." A soft but familiar voice politely requested.

Roxas jumped out of his skin by the surprise. He lowered his head gradually; he noticed that the seat on the opposite side of the table was no longer empty. A young, blond girl in a plain white dress, the same age as he was, had occupied the seat, pleasantly watching him from afar.

"Naminé?" Roxas drew back, startled to see her.

Without a second thought, Roxas sat back in his own seat. He remembered that the last time they met in this room; they had sat on the opposite ends of the table to the way they are now.

"I'm sorry Roxas; I was the one that brought you here, I wanted to speak with you desperately." She admitted to him.

"There's no need to apologise, anywhere is better than that horrible place, especially here." Roxas happily complimented her, but it did not feel right that he was the only one who was taken here. "But why isn't Riku here as well?"

"You'll see why later on." She answered sweetly; the tone in her was somewhat saddening though.

"I'm guessing that you know about his current condition?"

Roxas nodded; he could not stop thinking about what happened to Riku after the battle against Xaphire.

"Riku, are you hurt anywhere? Did anything happen to you?" Roxas asked hastily.

"I don't think so." Riku woozily answered, clutching his head.

"Was it Sora's Heartless that trapped you?" Roxas then asked him, wondering how he ended up trapped in the first place.

"... Who's Sora?" Riku drowsily asked back.

"Wha – Are you kidding!? Sora's your best friend! You know; Spiky brown hair, weird looking getup ... the happy numbskull!?" Roxas hastily explained, caught out by the shock.

"I have no idea who that is ... Is he famous?" Riku curiously asked again, rubbing his head.

"Errr ... What about Kairi? Do you remember Kairi?" Roxas then asked him, changing the subject slightly. He began to realise the effects of this 'Memory Shatter' Xaphire had inflicted on Riku. But how powerful were these effects?

"I haven't got a clue. Are they going out or something?" Riku oddly answered, shrugging.

"Ah ... never mind." Roxas awkwardly sighed. Making this his last try, he then asked, "Do you at least know me?"

"I've never seen you before in my life. What's with all your questions?" Riku answered him bluntly, becoming frustrated.

Roxas gazed at him, bewildered by what he had just heard. Riku had completely lost his memory.

Roxas then introduced himself, "M-my name is Roxas."

"That's a cool name." Riku complimented him, pleasantly smiling. "I have a question now ... Who am I?"

"Riku couldn't recall anything from his past; His friends, his home, his past journeys, not even himself. The only thing he could remember was the ability to speak." Roxas explained to Naminé gloomily, leaning back on his seat slightly.

"Yes. But Riku has only forgotten though, his whole memory hasn't been wiped out. In other words, the Chain of Memories Riku holds have been fully taken apart." Naminé explained, still in her calm tone.

"That is only a portion of how devastating Xaphire's power can become."

"I guessed as much." Roxas admitted sullenly. "But, what I want to know is; will Riku's memory return at all?"

"Not naturally. But it is possible for me to fix it; just the same as I fixed Sora's Memory a year ago now. But, this will take a lot longer than just a year." Naminé answered, her sweet voice echoing the room slightly.

"Darn, that would take too long." Roxas calculated, feeling his hopes drop.

"I'm sorry Roxas, but I cannot fix his Chain of Memories any faster." Naminé told him, dipping her head glumly.

Roxas gazed at her; he was ever so grateful for her offering to help but he knew Xaphire would be making his move anytime soon, and Roxas needed all the help he could get.

"Don't be so hard on yourself; I'm so grateful that you want to help us out." Roxas eased her sweetly. But then something else came to his mind. "What about Sora?"

"I'm sorry to say that Sora's condition is far worse than Riku's, and chances are that he may never recover." Naminé went on sadly.

"Is it true? Has his heart really been destroyed?" Roxas questioned, not wanting to know the answer though.

"Yes, there isn't any way I know that could piece Sora's heart back." She answered him, the sound of worry in her voice. "And this will take a massive effect on everyone he knows, especially Kairi."

Roxas rose up from his seat and turned his back to Naminé for a moment, thinking hard on what to do. But then something randomly popped up in his head, something he wanted to find out about even if it would change the subject.

"Naminé, why was I able to remember Xion?" He asked her politely, switching himself back to her and placing his palm against the table.

Naminé smiled dimly, "I knew you would ask me that. The Castle of the Eclipse has effects that are par opposite to Castle Oblivion's. Instead of forgetting memories, it causes you to remember the forgotten. So that is why you were able to remember Xion." She explained to him. "That is, if Xaphire mentions that memory to you."

"So the Castle was created by Xaphire to make these effects take place?" He questioned back, taking a wild guess.

"No, what Xaphire told you was correct; he was only stationed there by Xemnas." Naminé corrected,

"The Castle was owned by the Organization itself and they created the effects upon the Castle."

"I see, but how did you know about what Xaphire said?" Roxas then wondered, realising what Naminé had just told him.

"I cannot tell you that, unfortunately." She answered back, shaking her head.

Roxas dipped his head down for a moment, but then an idea came to him. "Wait, you said this Castle of the Eclipse can make people remember. So if I and Riku head further into the Castle then his memories should gradually return." He explained to her, a moment of hope returning to him.

Naminé gazed at him, Roxas could not tell if she was smiling or not.

"I see what you mean and I even thought about this myself, unfortunately Xaphire was one step ahead of us. His Memory Shatter technique can prevent Riku's memories from returning that way. I'm sorry for telling you this." Naminé dismissed the idea.

"No, it's fine. I guessed you would say something like that." Roxas chuckled, smiling glumly.

There was a slight pause; they didn't say anything to each other. Roxas thinking had of what else could help Riku's recovery of his memories.

"Roxas, have you made a decision about whether to bring back Riku's memories or not? I do not have much time to discuss left." She wondered curiously.

Roxas gazed back at her. He could not decide what to do; he needed Riku to help him fight against Xaphire and Sora's Heartless, but with his mental state at the moment he might only be a burden to Roxas. After a moment of thought, he finally came to a decision.

"Yes, I want you to return his memories." He answered firmly, feeling this was best for Riku.

"Then I shall explain to you what you need to do in order for me to mend Riku's memories. You must enter Castle Oblivion; head to the 13th Floor towards the room where the memory pods are kept. I will guide you there." Naminé began to explain, sweetly smiling.

"I understand, but how do I get to Castle Oblivion?" Roxas questioned her, nodding.

"I'm afraid you must find out yourself. And I must warn you; please don't go through the door on the other side of the pod room when you enter." She pleaded him, a sign of worry in her voice.

"Why can't I go in there?" He asked curiously, tilting his head slightly.

"Because, it will change who you are completely." She answered, lowering her head.

"What ... do you mean by that?" He asked nervously, feeling drawn back by her answer.

"I cannot say, I can tell you this though; you do have a heart inside you Roxas." She confessed.

"Huh!? What are you talking about!? You know full well I'm a Nobody! How could you assume I have a heart!?" Roxas raised his voice in surprise, not wishing to believe what Naminé had told him.

Naminé rose up from her seat and strolled over to Roxas. She placed the palm of her hand on his chest lightly and softly. Roxas then suddenly heard and felt the heartbeats from his chest.

"Do you hear it?" Naminé asked him, gazing at him with the palm of her hand on his chest.

"C-could this be ... Sora's heart?" Roxas hesitantly wondered.

"No ... this heart was carried inside of Sora ever since he was 4 years old, similar to how he carried Kairi's 2 years ago." Naminé explained, her soft, peaceful voice calmed Roxas' mind.

"Hehe ... wonder how he had space in him to fit so many." Roxas silently chuckled.

Naminé softly giggled, and then moved slightly closer to him, causing Roxas to straighten himself up.

"Roxas, I want you to promise me." She began to demand, lowering her voice.

"What do you need?" Roxas asked, softening up the tone of his voice.

She gave in a deep, longing breath and gazed up at him; he noticed a tear beginning to seep down her cheeks.

"Please, whatever you do ... don't get erased." She begged to him.

Roxas gazed at her oddly "What do you-!?"

He could not finish his sentence, Naminé had prevented him to. The next thing he knew, she was embracing him without any warning. He could feel her smooth feminine body against his own. Roxas

embraced his arms around her. He realised what pain had been going through her mind; there seemed to be worry and regret flowing through her mind, and a small amount of hope fighting back against it. Everything fell pitch black around him; Naminé then released herself from Roxas and gazed at him, more tears were running down her face faster than before. She began to fade away from his sight. "Don't forget what I told you." Naminé deeply reminded him. She disappeared from view. Roxas felt faint and collapsed to the floor.

Roxas eyes flicked open; he instantly noticed he was back in the Throne Room of the Castle of the Eclipse. He had been resting on the platform where he fought Xaphire and Sora's Heartless. He gradually sat up and rubbed the back of his head, somehow throbbing painfully. And then he realised why Riku wasn't with him in the White Room.

"So, that was a dream, huh?" Roxas noticed in a low tone of voice, seemingly disappointed.

"Ah, you're finally awake!" A loud voice echoed the room.

Roxas turned to see Riku heading down the steps from the Throne, showing off his usual cool smile which he seemed to still have.

He strolled up to Roxas, who had just leapt up to his feet.

"Hey (What was his name again ... oh yeah!) Roxas, why's your face all red? Have you got a fever or something?" Riku wondered curiously, puzzled.

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing, I'm fine." Roxas answered to him, he realised he was blushing when he woke up.

"Right ... So, what should we do now?" Riku questioned him curiously.

"I think it would be a good idea to get out of this room first of all." Roxas told him, switching his sight towards the large double-doors. "I've had enough of the sight of this place."

"Okay, lead the way." Riku told him, nodding pleasantly.

They both set off towards the double-doors. As they strode, Roxas kept checking back now and again towards Riku, who was following him from behind, making sure he didn't go off. After a while, this began to irritate Riku.

"What is it? Is there something on my face?" He asked Roxas, pointing to his own face.

"No, I'm just making sure you don't wonder off." Roxas responded.

Riku then swiftly ran to his side, "Well wouldn't it be better if I walked beside you, then you wouldn't have to keep looking back."

Roxas gazed at him for a moment, "Err ... yeah, good idea." He said clumsily, somewhat embarrassed.

"Look, I might not remember anything from my past, but that doesn't mean I'm dumb." Riku then admitted bluntly.

"R-right, I'll keep that mind." Roxas chuckled awkwardly, feeling dumbstruck being outsmarted by a guy with memory loss.

They reached the double-doors; Roxas leaned his body against the right door and Riku did the same on the left, ready to heave to doors open. But then Riku straightened back up and turned his sight back towards the Throne. Roxas watched him with confusion and then switched his sight back to see what had caught Riku's eye. There seemed to be something glinting on the seat of the Throne.

"I'll be right back; I think I left something over there." Riku called out, still gazing towards the glinting object.

"W-wait, hang on a moment, Riku!" Roxas began to shout out.

But Riku had already begun to make his way back towards the Throne. Roxas groaned in frustration. He watched as Riku began to make his way up the steps. Roxas then squinted to try and make out what the glinting object was. Suddenly he realised what it was.

"RIKU, DON'T TOUCH THAT!" Roxas bellowed towards Riku, but it had been too late.

Riku was now towering over the seat of the Throne, reaching out to grasp the mysterious object in front of him. The object had been an emblem looking shape; it took the form of an upside-down heart with arrow heads pointing towards the left, the right and straight ahead from the heart's tail. Roxas released his grip from the door and ran sprinting towards Riku; flicking his wrists to summon his Keyblades. Riku's finger only touched the emblem when a huge sudden force threw him off his feet, sending him tumbling down the steps. Roxas skidded to a halt and gazed wide eyes towards the ceiling; Heartless and Nobodies were raining from above! Many began to hold down Riku when he collided against the floor; Riku wasn't moving at all. Roxas caught sight of many enemies attacking Riku from all sides. Suddenly, Heartless and Nobodies began to make their assault on Roxas himself. Roxas swung his Keyblades upwards as he jumped into the air, the Keyblade colliding into many enemies. He then span in mid-air, dodging more enemies flying towards him. Roxas landed back onto the floor, balancing himself upon impact. Roxas then switched his sight towards the huge crowd of Heartless and Nobodies where Riku was caught in. But before Roxas can act, a huge light blindly grew from the middle of the crowd of enemies.

"ARH!!!!!!!" A voice roared.

An explosion suddenly erupted, taking out almost all the enemies caught in it. Only a couple stronger enemies were left standing. Riku appeared from the smoke, grasping his Way to the Dawn Keyblade.

"Riku, that was amazing!" Roxas called out to him, mesmerized by what happened.

"N-never mind t-that ... what t-the heck is going on ... w-what were they ... what ... WHAT THE HECK IS THIS ... THIS THING!?" He bellowed out as he held up his Keyblade in front of him, panting and wheezing.

"That, my friend ... is the key to your survival." Roxas stated to him, giving out a small laugh with his response.

But before they could say another word, Heartless and Nobodies suddenly fell from above in greater numbers. Roxas caught sight of immense numbers of Heartless climbing down the walls around them, covering the entire walls in darkness. Nobodies were also spawning from the platform floor, crowding about the whole platform. Roxas and Riku were both completely surround, unable to escape.

"Perfect, just what we need!" Roxas sarcastically grunted.

"Wh-what do we do now!" Riku shouted out from another section of the platform, Roxas could barely see him at all.

"Defeat as many as you can!" Roxas bellowed back.

This is insane, we have no chance against this many. He then doubtfully thought. Unless ... If Sora can do it, then so can I!

An idea popped into Roxas's head, it was a first for him to try to accomplish but it was his only chance in order to get rid of these enemies. He tensed his muscles as hard as he possibly could and kept the idea stuck his mind. A dazzling white aura glowed around him, and continued to grow brighter and stronger. All the enemies stopped in their tracks and turned their attention towards Roxas. Roxas covered his face with his arms as he crouched down into a ball, his hands clenching his Keyblades as tight as he could. Then swiftly he spread his arms and legs wide apart, his head lifted up to the ceiling with his eyelids shut tight. Blinding light surrounded the whole of the room, Riku and even the enemies covered their eyes from the powerful light.

The light finally faded away, allowing Riku to uncover his eyes. He suddenly gaped at what he caught sight of. Roxas had appeared from the light completely changed. His Keyblades were no longer in his grasps, but were floating around him like a spinning wheel. His cloak and clothing were not just pitch black anymore, but transformed into plain white with black flame graphics around the edges of the cloak and clothing. Roxas himself also began to hover off the floor, his eyes fixed on the Nobodies and Heartless who were now backing away in terror.

Roxas's Final Form has been unleashed.

14 - The Dark Heart

The metal chain glistened aimlessly, shining as if it was the small light in the large, smothering darkness. At the end of this chain was a small, metal crown. The crown felt like a dead weight against the chain itself, but still had some significant importance. Sora continued to gaze while holding the crown pendant that dangled in front of him, lost in thought. He sat there, on the edge of a plain, white, circular platform in the middle of nothing. The darkness that filled the atmosphere around the platform just went on towards the horizon ... going on forever. What was the time? How long has he been here? Does time even exist in this place? Sora had no emotion in him whatsoever; he couldn't be cheerful even if he tried. He can't even remember what it was like to smile, let alone how to. All he had left was the chain he was clutching.

"I'm starting to forget everything, aren't I? Who I was, who I knew, what I did, where I've been; my whole existence ... just washing away." He sighed to himself depressingly.

Suddenly, a large chunk of the platform across the other side from Sora broke away; it fell into to nothingness below, ceasing to exist. This place showed Sora that his own heart was beginning wither away. Sora's chest began to throb painfully, but all Sora did was brush it away.

Sora placed back on his pendant, hooking it in place round his neck. He then fell back to lay on the surface of the platform, resting his head against his left arm. He then lifted his other arm up towards the nothingness above; instantly his Keyblade appeared in his grasp. He took his time to examine it, juggling it in his palm. It hasn't changed since he lost his life to Xaphire; it was still the Keyblade of Darkness. Just glimpsing at it filled Sora's head with dread, sending cold shivers down his spine.

"No matter how much I try; I just can't get rid of you. You're just a piece of junk to me now." He groaned, disgusted by the appearance of the Keyblade.

He carelessly threw it aside; it began to fall into the nothingness below just like the junk of the platform a moment ago. Sora reached out above and held out his right hand once again, still resting against his left. The Keyblade of Darkness reappeared out of nowhere, as if it wasn't thrown away at all.

"Don't worry, soon that'll be out of your misery, just like to rest of you." A menacing voice suddenly called out from afar.

The sudden voice caused Sora to literally jump out of his skin, his body jolted as a reaction. He quickly leapt to his feet and turned to face what just called out to him, with the Keyblade in hand ready for conflict. Who he saw right in front of him was a masked, mysterious boy; he was fairly muscular, biceps that could match Riku's own. He wore very dark clothing that had been similar to Riku's Dark Form from his time in the Darkness, with slight differences including a strange symbol in the middle of his chest and a slight difference in colour scheme. The helmet that he wore to mask his face had a simple round structure, with its black and simple shading and a metal jaw plate on the bottom. He was the exact same height as Sora, and also held a Keyblade as a weapon. This Keyblade had the same patterns and colour as the masked boy's clothing and gave a cold and sinister vibe. Sora realised that he had seen this guy in the past; but where and when this had been, he had no idea.

"H-how did you get here?" Sora retaliated, stuttering with the surprise.

"Get here!? Hahaha ... I've always been here. You've just been ignoring me." The Masked Boy laughed, even his voice sounded somehow familiar.

"Huh!? Th-then who are you?! Why are you here?! How is it that you have a Keyblade!?" Sora then bellowed out to him, thrown off by his answer.

"Heh ... it seems you are still a mindless fool, asking so many questions. It would be better if I knock

some sense back into you. Let's start off with the names; I already know your name is Sora, so all is left is mine ... I am Vanitas!" The boy introduced himself; his sinister voice echoed the whole area.

Upon hearing the boy's name, Sora felt a sudden surge of pain surge through his head. The pain grew stronger, causing Sora to fall to his knees and his hands gripped his head tightly. Vanitas took the opportunity to collide his boot against Sora's forehead, sending Sora flying. Sora began to fly away from the edge of the platform, slowly falling to the nothingness below. He swiftly recovered and gained control of his balance. He grasped the platform edge to prevent himself from falling, but the pain inside his mind continued to grow. Sora hoisted himself up to the platform and rose to his feet, feeling light-headed. Suddenly, Vanitas leapt for another strike, this time it involved his Keyblade. Sora clashed against the incoming Keyblade with his own, causing both Keyblades to ricochet against each other. Sora then dipped his body and launched an uppercut. Vanitas evaded the incoming attack by leaning away while taking a quick step back. Sora then curved his Keyblade round and attempted another attack, switching his Keyblade to a back-hand attack. Vanitas instantly leapt away to gain distance from Sora. He landed and dug his boot against the floor to halt himself; as he did this, he threw his weapon-free hand towards the opposite direction, head still locked on Sora. Sora's eyesight followed the direction of Vanitas' free-arm and caught sight of an object appearing from the far away darkness. At first glance it seemed to be a golden spot of light; but as it grew, it formed some sort of tail.

"You have a very unique way of fighting, almost like ... an old friend of mine." Vanitas menacingly pointed out, although this did not seem like a compliment.

"An old friend of yours?" Sora echoed in confusion. "Who would that be?"

"I'm sure you have met him in the distant past, you were probably just too young to remember him though." Vanitas tormented, pointed his Keyblade at Sora and chuckling horribly. "Then again, all that's left of him now is an empty shell!"

"From that tone of voice, you sound as though you did something to him." Sora gathered, feeling uneasy about this guy. "What did you do to that guy?"

"That ... is none of your concern." Vanitas chuckled darkly, his voice echoed all around as though he was in control.

Vanitas then turned towards the flying tail in the distance; Sora also switched his sights towards the incoming object. The flying tail had gotten closer, increasing in size. Sora then gasped in shock as he realized what this flying object actually was. It was a large mass of various different Keyblades. Hundreds of them in all shapes and sizes, slithering through the pitch black sky like some sort of dragon. Sora at first was too mesmerized by the tail of Keyblades to realise to he was their target. But soon enough he swiftly snapped out of it and instantly leaped towards Vanitas for another clash without thinking twice; making sure that the tail won't strike him when it goes in for the attack. But that was when the unexpected happened. Vanitas launched himself high into the air as Sora was just about to come into contact with him, he then caught one of the oncoming Keyblades forming the tail. Sora halted his own movement and watched Vanitas in horror, gobsmacked by this unusual sight. Vanitas swiftly threw himself from the Keyblade onto the top of the tail and began to ride it like a surfboard. Sora had seen many unusual sights during his time as a Keyblade Wielder but this this had stepped up a whole new level. Vanitas rose high up above, gaining distance from the platform, and then swiftly swooped down towards Sora like a flash of lightning. Sora had no time to think; he instantly reacted to the incoming attack and leaped to evade the Keyblades as they narrowly missed him. Sora landed into a smooth roll and hopped back to his feet, feeling somewhat relieved. Vanitas instantly switched around to strike a second time. Sora switched his sight back towards the incoming attack, eyes locked onto Vanitas. Without thinking, Sora swiftly launched himself out of the way as the tail of Keyblades sped past. Sora continued to evade incoming attacks as the tail of Keyblades constantly attempted to collide into Sora. He caught sudden glances of Vanitas appearing from completely out of nowhere during these

attacks, as if trying to catch Sora out by surprise. Suddenly, Vanitas' movement stopped completely and he was nowhere in sight. Sora halted to a stop and cautiously tried to find Vanitas' position, refusing to blink in case of Vanitas attacking by surprise.

"Sora, why do you fight me? What is the point in it?" Vanitas' voice then echoed from all around Sora. "You started it! Where are you, you coward!?" Sora bellowed out, restlessly turning to spot any sign of movement.

"You continued to fight me and yet ever since your loss against that Xaphire guy, you've been doubtful of your own abilities." Vanitas' voice stated ominously. "So, what's the point in fighting me if you know that it is highly possible you would lose again?"

"I made a promise! I made a promise that I will return to Riku and Kairi, and I will keep that promise until I fulfil it! So I will keep fighting, and I will win!" Sora bellowed out, beginning to believe in himself again.

"Promise!? How pitiful! You use them to bring up others hopes only to be shot down due to these so called 'promises' actually being lies!" Vanitas' voice argued in distaste.

"Then I'll make sure that doesn't happen!" Sora stated proudly, finally beginning to smile. "So come out from hiding and we'll see who's correct!"

"You shouldn't be concentrating on finding my whereabouts. Instead, you should be concentrating on your time limit." Vanitas then stated, chuckling.

Sora drew back, "W-what are you talking about!?"

Sora then realised what Vanitas had meant, and he was right. Sora was too fixed on the fight that he had completely forgotten he was on a time limit. He noticed that the platform continued to crumble; many various sized cracks split the platform in several sections, with the edges of the platform jagged and awkwardly shaped. Sora became cautious of his foot placements, being sure not to cause sections of the platform to break away. Suddenly, the platform began to shake lively and violently as if it was an earthquake. Sora stumbled backwards with loss of his balance and fell to the floor. The quake was so violent it had been impossible for Sora to stand up at all. Just then, a large, horrifying crack ripped straight through the middle of the platform, causing the platform to split apart. Sora realised in shock that he was sitting right on top of the crack. The left half of the platform broke away from the right, causing Sora to tumble off of the platform. Swiftly, Sora twisted his body and latched his hand onto the remaining half. Carefully, he gazed back at the falling half of the platform as it disappeared into the darkness below. At that moment, Sora's chest began ache painfully, causing him to struggle keeping his grip.

"Not much time left, I see." Vanitas' cold, calm voice echoed. "I wonder how long you'll be able to hold on to that life of yours."

"I. Will. Not. GIVE UP!!!" Sora roared at the top of his voice, shaking as he tried to keep grasp of the edge.

"Famous last words ..." Vanitas chuckled.

Suddenly, Sora heard the clashing sounds of metal from the far distance, the sound of Keyblades. Vanitas was about to make his move. Sora urged himself to hoist up onto the platform, but he had somehow lost most of his strength in an instant. Sora then felt a strong gust of wind from below, causing his body to sway. And so Vanitas struck. The hoard of Keyblades collided into Sora from below within seconds. Sora screamed in pain and agony as every Keyblade went right through his body. His body flew high up from the platform, Keyblades passing through with no end in sight. Just then, it finally finished. Sora began to fall, close to losing consciousness. Swiftly, Vanitas appeared from above and caught Sora by the neck. Sora struggled to breathe and began to choke.

"Tch. You're such a worthless being. Just like everyone else." Vanitas spat at Sora coldly. "No wonder you fell into the dark abyss yet again."

"Sh-shut up! No one, n-not even a Nobody, is worthless," Sora struggled, gasping for air. "Wh-why are you so cold hearted!?"

“Cold Hearted!? Me!? Never! I’m only pure darkness anyway.” Vanitas joked, his chuckles echoed horrifically.

“P-pure darkness!!! That’s impossible! A person of pure darkness w-wouldn’t even be-” Sora began, surprised by Vanitas’ statement.

“-A being? Is that what you were about to say? It’s true; I am no being, but half a being.” Vanitas finished, explaining what he was.

“I don’t ... get it.” Sora’s voice trailed, showing signs of him weakening.

“Maybe this will make you understand.” Vanitas then sighed.

With that, Vanitas’ helmet faded away, revealing his true identity. Sora was completely dumbstruck; he gazed at Vanitas’ face, not taking his eyes off him. Sora saw his own face, albeit paler skin and jet-black hair. Now Sora realised that the familiar voice he was hearing from this masked being was his own, darker voice.

“It’s rude to stare, you know.” Vanitas noted arrogantly, an evil smile strapped across his face.

“N-no way! Wh-what ... WHAT ARE YOU!!?” Sora bellowed with the last of his strength, utterly confounded.

“I am your worst nightmare.” Vanitas’ voice echoed horrifically in a deep tone.

Vanitas tossed Sora onto the remaining section of the platform as if he was a broken toy. Sora rolled across once he collided against the floor, ending up just lying motionless and in agony. Vanitas lowered onto the platform and strode to Sora, his own Keyblade by his side. Towering over the fallen hero; Vanitas began to lift his Keyblade, holding it with both hands, ready to strike down. Sora just lay there; he couldn’t move, speak, or even easily breathe anymore.

“It was great beating you up, but now ... I’ll have the pleasure to end your existence!” Vanitas chuckled gruesomely.

Sora slowly closed his eyes; drew in a long lasting breath and was ready. But, he knew he wasn’t ever going to be ready.

“I wonder what ‘they’ would feel if they saw you now; I bet they would be turning in their graves ... once they’ve enter them.” Vanitas spoke curiously and mockingly.

Sora’s eyes suddenly snapped open, just as when Vanitas began to commence his final strike. Sora gripped his Keyblade tightly as he clashed it against the incoming Keyblade, causing them both to ricochet upon each other. Vanitas had been completely caught out by the surprise, losing his balance. Sora then swiped his legs around as he leapt to his feet, tripping up Vanitas in the process. Vanitas bashed the back of his head against the platform, causing him to daze. Just as he tried to recover to his feet, Sora’s boot pinned him to the floor by his chest. Sora then aimed the tip of his Keyblade towards Vanitas’ forehead. Both of them were heavily panting; Vanitas with the shock of being suddenly overthrown, and Sora with the sudden adrenaline and aggressiveness rushing through him. He was furious, what Vanitas had said had caused Sora to lose control of his own emotions.

“So, this is why you lost to that Xaphire guy; because you were just too laid back.” Vanitas realised, mysteriously calm.

“I’ve had enough of being pushed around and beaten down by the darkness, I WILL fulfil my promise!” Sora bellowed, his eyes burning with rage.

Vanitas gazed back at him for a moment, as if trying to read him. But then he began to laugh.

“How will you accomplish this goal when you’re in this situation? You’re stuck in your own soul as your heart is crumbling out of existence, how will you get out of it?” Vanitas argued, his evil smile showing scornfully.

“I’ll improvise.” Sora answered with a serious smile, determined.

Just then, Vanitas snapped his fingers, giving out a dark and penetrating aura around him. Sora leaped back in retaliation. Vanitas slowly rose to his feet, eyes gazing at Sora like sharp daggers ready to stab.

"I'll make sure to not let that happen." Vanitas horrifically stated, gritting his teeth.

Suddenly, Vanitas began to hover off the platform floor, drawing back his Keyblade showing he was ready to clash. Sora then felt his own body beginning to lift off the ground. He then knew what was about to happen; they were entering sudden death. Sora began to draw back his own Keyblade, ready to clash blades. All the anger and determination he had gained transferred into his weapon, causing both him and his Keyblade to have terrifying willpower. Within seconds, both launched towards each other at explosive speeds, causing the whole area to shake violently as they collided against each other.

Keyblades were clashing at every direction, ricocheting off the other's blades constantly and swiftly. The booming sound of clashing blades pieced the atmosphere, shredding it to pieces. Sora's fury proved no limits, overpowering Vanitas malice. Vanitas was showing signs that he was struggling to keep up with the constant clashes. And that one moment, Vanitas left a fatal opening. Sora swung his Keyblade with full force, colliding into Vanitas' ribs with explosive power. Vanitas crashed to the remaining section of the platform, causing it to crack. Sora lowered himself to Vanitas' side, sighing heavily with relief.

Vanitas was motionless, he seemed to be unconscious. Sora took a moment to examine Vanitas' appearance. Sora was still in shock of the fact that his own reflection had been his foe during this whole fight.

Suddenly, he felt the platform jolt with the deafening sound of cracking. Sora switched his sight to the whole platform. He began to panic; the final section of the platform was breaking apart at an alarming rate.

"No matter how much you try ... you'll never be able to return to existence." Vanitas consciously wheezed, struggling to stay alive. "It's hopeless."

Sora switched back to him, hearing his weakly chuckle.

"Nothing is ever hopeless." Sora argued, keeping hold of his sense of resolve.

Just then, the platform shattered into falling pieces. Both Sora and Vanitas fell to the nothingness below. Sora reached above to grab anything that prevents his fall, hoping to get out of this soon to be nightmare. But all around him was nothing. Just nothing.

"Give it up. Your heart has fallen." Vanitas chuckled weakly as he fell beside Sora.

"Just wait, they'll bring me back! I'm sure of it!" Sora bellowed out to him in frustration.

"Well, if you ever do, let me warn you." Vanitas began with a dark sigh. "I am always your shadow, following you wherever you go. I have always been and always will be, as long as 'his' soul sleeps inside your heart."

"... His?" Sora echoed in confusion.

Then, Vanitas began to laugh uncontrollably, "Get ready for the endless pain and suffering!"

With that, Vanitas disappeared into the darkness, out of sight.

Sora fell and fell, unable to do anything. He tried one last time and reached up above, hoping there was someone there to catch.

And at that moment, his call was answered.

15 - A Deadly Message

Roxas examined his newly released form, astonished by the transformation his whole body had undertaken. He then caught sight of the various Heartless and Nobodies backing away from him, cowering from the immense pressure.

“This power ... is SO COOL!!!” He shouted out excitedly, feeling this new freedom rush through his body.

He had never felt such strength and power before, this whole new experience was unreal to him. The fact that he was defying gravity and able to command his floating Keyblades to execute unbelievable techniques was like a pleasant dream. He then gazed around to the many Heartless and Nobodies before him, backing off and hesitating on what to do now. Roxas then switched his sights over to Riku, who was gasping in shock at the new transformation. Roxas realised that he doesn't know the limits to this new power, meaning he could do more harm than good if he wasn't careful.

“Riku, you're going to have to stay back for a while.” Roxas told Riku, his tone of voice had become serious. “I don't know how this'll end, so I'll deal with these enemies by myself.”

Riku nodded, not wanting to complain, but still was wide-eyed by what he is watching. Roxas switched back to the large amount of Heartless and Nobodies before him, still cowering on the spot. Roxas clenched his fist and tensed his muscles; the two Keyblades around him increasing in spinning speed, ready to strike. In one fell swoop of his right arm, the Keyblades swiftly launched themselves towards the enemies. Huge numbers of the enemies were vanishing in an instant by the speed and force of the two Keyblades as they struck through them with ease. Roxas then launched himself towards the enemies, the aura of energy flowing behind him like a tail. The Keyblades flew back to their master and span around him at a ferocious speed. Roxas then unexpectedly switched course and shot upwards towards the ceiling, confusing the enemies. Then, like an eagle, dived down to the ground like a missile. Within a second, he collided with the ground; all around him had suddenly been filled with countless beams of light that shot towards the ceiling. All the Heartless and Nobodies could not do a thing; hundreds of them disappearing instantly as beams of light exterminated them like they were bugs.

Finally, it all ended. Roxas appeared from the dense smoke taking up a one-handed handstand position, direction of sight towards the ground. He then swiftly released his palm and resumed floating in mid-air. He gazed round; not one enemy was left after the explosive attack. The area was empty once more. He then switched to Riku and flew casually over to him. Riku just stood there, staring aimless into space.

“Riku, are you alright?” Roxas wondered curiously, as though nothing happened in the first place.

Riku snapped out of his daze, “Oh! Y-yeah, never better.” He answered in surprise, rubbing his head.

“That's good to hear. Come on; let's get out of this place. I've had enough of this room.” He laughed; relieved to hear he's safe.

He turned his sight towards the Throne Room entrance, just about to glide in that direction.

“Wait!” Riku suddenly halted him.

“What is it?” Roxas replied, whirling back around wonderingly.

“I know that transformation is powerful, but I feel you shouldn't stay in it for too long.” Riku explained, his voice in a serious manner. “You should only use it when it's necessary to do so.”

Riku was correct about that; Final Form takes up a lot of energy when transformed, and it would be a vital cost if this power disappears in the middle of battle. A part of Roxas was persuading him to revert back to his normal Form, but another part was saying to stay in transformation and feel the freedom flow through his body. After a moment of thinking, Roxas made his decision. He reluctantly transformed back

within a flash and dropped to his feet on the floor, his cloak was back to the normal black colour and his Keyblades disappeared from sight. Although disappointed, he knew it was best to save the energy for another time. Hopefully, the next time would be when he duels against Xaphire and Sora's Heartless once again.

"Right, so ... where we off to now?" Riku wondered curiously, gazing about.

"Hopefully, out of this horrible world." Roxas answered spitefully.

Then, a thought suddenly clicked into his head. What about summoning a dark path? He was able to do so while in the Organization, so he should be able to do it now! Roxas held out his arm, tensing up his muscles, and thought of the one place he desired to go to. First he thought of travelling to Destiny Islands, but instantly remembered that he needed to bring Riku to Naminé, and so had Castle Oblivion in his mind.

Nothing happened.

He tried again, this time Castle Oblivion deep in his mind. He tensed his muscles once again and eyes fixed straight ahead.

No luck.

I don't understand, this castle was owned by Organization XIII so surely I should be able to open a path! Roxas thought, confused and close to frustration. So why can't I!?

"Something wrong Roxas?" Riku curiously asked him. "Why are you holding your arm out?"

"What? ... oh, it's nothing." Roxas answered, dropping his arm by his side. "We're going to have to find some way out of this place. Have you got any ideas?"

"Nope," Riku shrugged reluctantly, but then caught sight towards the Throne. "That Throne has been bugging ever since I woke up."

"What do you mean? It's an ordinary 'Throne', I see nothing wrong." Roxas replied, gazing at the Throne oddly.

"Well, it's just that there is some engraved writing on it. With that, there are some symbols that I'm not at all familiar with." Riku stated out, pointing towards the Throne.

"Symbols? Do you know what they look like? Or have you got any idea what the writing said?" Roxas questioned, crossing his arms with curiosity.

"I was only able to gain a quick glance before you woke up. So I wasn't able to read it properly." Riku answered, shaking his head.

Roxas began to advance over to the Throne, curious of these strange symbols and engraved writing that Riku had just pointed out. Riku followed from behind. Once Roxas reached the top of the steps, he examined the Throne thoroughly, from the floor to the seat to the peak. He made sure he examined every section of the Throne. He wasn't able to notice anything eye catching on the Throne at all. So what was Riku talking about?

"Riku, I don't see anything." Roxas called out to him, "Where on the Throne did you see these symbols?"

"On the back of it," Riku answered from behind.

You could have said that before I looked! It might have helped! What gave you the idea anyway to examine this Throne! Roxas shouted out in his head, frustration beginning to rise.

Roxas began to shuffle his way behind the Throne; this was fairly spacious but Roxas still had to have his back against the wall. He examined from top to bottom for it but there was no writing or symbols in sight. He glanced behind in case the symbols were on the wall itself, but there wasn't any sign of it at all. Roxas put his hand against the back of the Throne and closed his eyes, thinking.

What is he talking about, could he of imagined it? I haven't got time for this!

He opened his eyes again. Just at that moment, he suddenly jumped out of his skin. He caught sight of the writing Riku was talking about, right in front of his very eyes. Shocked by the sudden appearance,

Roxas had a closer glance. Riku was right; there were 4 strange symbols engraved on the Throne's back, with writing that had been engraved below the symbols. Thankfully it was plain English and readable:

The Bond has been broken.

The Blade has been shattered.

The Protection has been weakened.

The Core has been scarred.

The Future has been set.

Death by Sunrise, Oblivion by Sundown.

Roxas was surprised by the last quote "Death by Sunrise, Oblivion by Sundown" he has heard that statement before when he caught a glimpse of Sora during a past dream, yet he still doesn't know what it meant. This whole message had been confusing for Roxas; nothing at all made sense to him. He then examined the symbols; Hidden within these symbols, Roxas caught sight of object outlines. Although, this was hard to make out through the scribbles: He was able to recognise a Chain, a Sword, a Shield and a Heart. Roxas realised instantly from that point that the symbols were linked to the first 4 lines of the engraved message. But what has this got to do with anything? Roxas closed his eyes and went deep into thought, working out the message from his experience.

"So, have you got any ideas about the symbols and writing?" A loud voice suddenly wondered.

Roxas jumped so quickly, he left the floor. Roxas opened his eyes and switched around. Riku was poking his head through the gap of the Throne.

"Riku!? If I had a heart, I would have had a heart attack!!!"Roxas bellowed at him, shaking. But then remembered what Naminé told him, about the heart he does have.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to do that." Riku innocently apologised.

"(Sigh...) Never mind. Anyway, I've worked out that the symbols are linked to the message etched on here, and that it has something to with the future." Roxas began to explain, sharing what he was able to figure out. "But I'm still confused about the whole message itself."

Riku examined the message and symbols more carefully.

"I see, but what does the line at the bottom mean?" Riku then wondered, pointing towards the final line of the message.

Roxas sadly shrugged, "I don't know. All I can say is that I have heard this quote before." He sighed, "Well, it would be best for us head back."

Riku stepped back to give Roxas enough room as he shuffled himself out though the gap behind the Throne. Roxas stretched out, easing his joints and muscles. He felt slightly cramped positioned behind there and his body began to ache after a while.

"Let's get going." Roxas calmly instructed, nodding to Riku.

Roxas lead the way to the entrance of the room, feeling relieved of finally leaving this horrid room. After all the painful battles and the loss of Sora's life, the only feeling this wretched place gave was dread and darkness. Once there, Roxas and Riku both gave a strong push through the doors and passed through the opening, leaving the Throne Room for good. They had returned to the Dome Room, nothing seemed to have changed. The water was as still as glass apart from a few ripples from the waterfalls. Roxas dipped his foot to make sure the water was still walkable; thankfully it was. Roxas took a step forward and continued to stroll across to the other end of the Dome. Riku hesitated because of the water but then followed Roxas with the sign of relief of being able to cross the water with ease. Roxas then suddenly halted in the direct centre of the Dome, realising something was wrong about this Room. The door on the other end of the room that Roxas was trying to reach had unexpectedly vanished. Roxas

gazed around the Dome for any sign of an entrance, but soon realised not only that door was gone, but the large door to the Throne Room had suddenly disappeared as well. Roxas began to panic; they were stuck in this Dome with no way out in sight. He examined the whole area but there was no sign of a way out. He then noticed Riku, who was staring straight up towards the circular ceiling. Roxas followed his eyes to see what he was gazing at. There, in the middle of the Dome's ceiling, was a small, golden keyhole. The Oblivion Keyblade instantly appeared in Roxas's right hand. Roxas felt puzzled for a moment of what was happening, but he knew there was no other way of proceeding. He lifted the Keyblade towards the ceiling, pointing in line towards the keyhole. He heard a loud click from inside the Keyhole even though it was fairly far away.

Suddenly, at that moment, the Dome completely shook. It was difficult for both Roxas and Riku to keep balance, but something was preventing them from losing their footing. Roxas noticed why; they were sinking into the water. Roxas and Riku tried to budge their legs but they won't move, the water felt more like quicksand rather than water itself. The water was now up to their waist and rising swiftly.

"Riku! Hold your breath when we go under!" Roxas instructed him in a loud, echoing voice.

"What good will that do!? We're going to drown either way!" Riku argued, showing that he was panicking.

"Just do it!" Roxas bellowed back.

The water was neck high now. Roxas took in a few deep breaths and noticed Riku doing the same, then took in one long, lasting breath as he ducked under. Underneath the water now, Roxas banged his fist against the water's surface. It was as if a sheet of glass was placed across the whole of the water, he couldn't get through it. Everything was blurred due to the water, Roxas could see barely anything. Something caught his eye though; there was a golden light right at the bottom of the Dome. With Keyblade still in hand and oxygen in his lungs wasting away fast, he could only hope that was another Keyhole. He quickly pointed the Keyblade towards the golden light and grasped on its hilt as strong as he could. To his relief, he heard a loud click echo all around the Dome water. Then, the water instantly switched to the opposite end of the Dome, as though the whole Dome was rolled like a ball, and Roxas hit the watery floor with a hard knock. He gasped for air to return to his lungs, relief returning to him. Panting, he steadily got to his feet, trying to gain back his balance. The Room was now visible to him, yet it was as dim as when the place was submerged in water. Roxas noticed that he was standing on the water just like he had done on the other section of the Dome. It was strange, technically he was upside down yet he felt absolutely fine. It felt as though gravity was shafted the opposite direction. Roxas switched his head round and caught sight of Riku a small distance away from his own position, rising up to his feet as well.

"Now that ... was close." Roxas sighed, relieved, completely soaked and still gasping for air.

"Yeah, what made you decide to do that?" Riku curiously asked him, also completely soaked and gasping in air.

"I felt luck was on my side." Roxas jokingly answered, chuckling.

Roxas then suddenly caught sight of something in front of him; 4 large double-doors appeared at the end of the Dome, each one had a bright golden Symbol above them. The Symbols showed a Chain, a Sword, a Shield and a Heart.

"Is this ... what the message meant?" Riku asked, also examining the Symbols with wonder.

"By the looks of things ... I guess so." Roxas answered him.

They jogged over to the various double-doors for a closer insight. They then halted to a stop; both Roxas and Riku switched their gaze to each other.

"So, which one first?" Riku asked curiously.

"It would be best for us to do it in order, so I'm guessing the Chain should be first." Roxas replied back to him, making up his mind.

They nodded to each other, and turned to the doors with the Chain Symbol gleaming above it. They strolled over and both grasped hold of a handle and pushed. The doors stiffly and slowly opened apart, causing Roxas and Riku to put much of their strength into the push. Once open, Roxas and Riku went through into the next Room. The room was completely pitch-black; nothing could be seen past the double-doors. The Large doors suddenly slammed behind them, giving them a fright. Then lamps were lit around the room, showing what the room contained. It was a corridor, similar to the one Riku and Sora first woke up in. Another door was on the other side of the corridor, yet it felt like a mile away to get to. Roxas and Riku shrugged towards each other. Roxas took a step forward but stopped instantly. At that point, a Dark portal opened and a mysterious cloaked figure hidden within an Organization cloak appeared before them; this person was fairly tall and sleek. Roxas swiftly summoned his Keyblades ready for battle; Riku did the same and summoned his Keyblade. But the figure did nothing in retaliation and just stood there, motionless. Roxas was hesitant; he knew the figure standing before them was not Xaphire, as Xaphire was more buff and his power could be felt from a very large distance. The figure before them was significantly weaker and showed no sign of power within him. This was what made Roxas cautious; either this person was generally weak or was clever in covering up his power. "Show yourself!" Roxas demanded to the cloaked figure, pointing his Keyblade in the Figure's direction.

The cloaked figure then chuckled, the voice sounded very familiar. He then drew back his hood and revealed his identity. This caused Roxas to gasp and take a step back upon seeing the identity. "Well now, Roxas! There is no need to get edgy!" The cloaked figure innocently gestured, "What did poor old Demyx do to you?"

16 - Flight of the Dragoon

“Demyx!? What are you doing here!?” Roxas drew back, shocked by the very sight of his ex-colleague. “There’s no need to be so rude, Roxas! The only reason I’m here is to say hi.” Demyx lightly answered, acting laid back as always.

“But you ... you were erased a while ago!” Roxas argued back to him, confused by Demyx’s presence. “Sora erased you!”

“Well I’ve returned, that’s all that matters.” Demyx replied cheerfully, showing his innocence.

“Wait, you can’t just come back, Demyx! From what I know, it’s impossible for a Nobody to revive after erasure!” Roxas explained to him, his voice began to echo round the room as he tried to contradict Demyx’s existence.

Demyx chuckled, “Well, it looks like I defied the physics of a Nobody. And besides, what about you? You were erased a while back as well, weren’t you?” Demyx pleasantly argued back, his voice grew somewhat horribly louder as it echoed.

“I never did get erased, I returned to Sora’s body. The reason I’m back is because he lost his life, and now his Heartless is being controlled by Number XV: Xaphire!” Roxas explained cautiously, feeling an eerie aura entering the atmosphere around him.

“Hold on, Xaphire’s still around!? Wow, that guy must be made of steel!” Demyx commented, crossing his arms with an impressed-like smirk across his face.

“Let’s just keep to the subject! You cannot just defy the physics of erasure, no one can!” Roxas refused not to go off the topic until he gains the truth of Demyx’s existence.

“Just chill, Roxas! Nothing is impossible these days.” Demyx shrugged, trying to keep his cool.

Roxas suddenly saw something dark glint in Demyx’s eyes just a nanosecond before he blinked.

“But there are always explanations for the possible. So tell me the truth, Demyx! How are you still able to exist after you were erased!?” Roxas yelled at him, he was beginning to be frustrated with Demyx stirring his answers so the truth doesn’t surface. Roxas knew something wasn’t right about Demyx’s presence.

“Calm down Roxas, you’re going to bring this place down with your temper.” Demyx jokingly warned him.

“STOP TAKING THE MICK, DEMYX! TELL ME THE TRUTH!” Roxas roared, finally losing his patience.

At that moment, Roxas’ two Keyblades appeared in his grasps. The Oblivion Keyblade rose towards Demyx’s direction, showing that Roxas was at the point of threatening Demyx to receive the truth. Demyx just stood there calmly, gazing at Roxas with no expression across his face. Suddenly, dark mist began to seep out of his eyes and mouth. Darkness filled his eyes completely to the point that his whole eyes were pitch-black. He now began to talk in a whispery, eerie voice.

“I am a fragment of your memory, taken by this Castle and created into reality. You are to be tested for survival in order to escape this world.” Demyx spoke out, his voice echoed throughout the room.

“So that was what the symbols had meant! We have to be tested in different areas!” Roxas realised, finally figuring out what the symbols and the statement had meant.

Well ... most of it.

“I’m really lost here, what is going on?” Riku finally spoke out, all this time he did not understand a thing of what Roxas and Demyx was talking about.

“You would have understood if you still had your memory.” Roxas commented with a small smirk.

“Riku, be ready with your-!”

Suddenly, Roxas had been thrown back against a wall by a powerful gush of water. He fell to the floor the moment it stopped, wheezing heavily from the shock of how unexpected that attack had been. Demyx had summoned his unique Sitar and began to strum it with a pick. Darkness continuously flowing out of his jet black eyes, he had them fixed onto Roxas. He was the target. Roxas swiftly leapt to his feet and instantly began to sprint towards Demyx, being wary of the next attack.

Demyx suddenly yelled out, "Dance, Water, Dance!" in a loud gurgling, whispery voice.

Roxas caught sight of Demyx's water clones appearing from every direction, spinning uncontrollable around him. Roxas swiftly halted to a stop and braced himself for the incoming attack. Unexpectedly, all the clones collided straight into Roxas from every direction. His whole body was thrown upwards towards the ceiling, his whole body spinning uncontrollably. He took a moment to gain the bearings of his area and immediately gained control of his own body. But, Demyx was one step ahead of him. Demyx sent himself flying into the air until he was leveled face to face with Roxas; he strummed his Sitar at an immense pace and summoned water-jets into Roxas from all sides. Roxas' body smashed to the floor due to the insane force from the jets. He weakly rose to his feet, struggling to gain centre of balance. He took in a deep breath and leaped back into the air. Demyx used his water-jets to strike Roxas like a torpedo. Roxas caught sight of the incoming attacks and swiftly evaded, the water-jets just narrowly missing him. He instantly struck his Keyblades against Demyx as he shot past, catching Demyx off-guard. Demyx lost control of his body as he flew and collided into the nearby wall. Shaking his head, he took no time at all to immediately turn and launch himself off the wall back into the battle. Roxas braced himself for what was next.

Demyx once again bellowed out, "Dance, Water, Dance!!!" in his croaky, whispery voice.

Orbs of water suddenly appeared above Demyx that were the larger than basketballs. Within a second, they shot towards Roxas at an alarming speed. Roxas swiftly retaliated and parried most of the orbs, but one managed to hit him squarely on the forehead. He crashed to the ground and lifelessly rolled to the other side of the corridor, completely unconscious. Demyx lowered to the ground, his feet tapping the floor upon contact. Unexpectedly, Riku struck him on the back with his Keyblade, causing Demyx to lose his footing and toppling over on the floor. Demyx swiftly leapt to his feet and switched to Riku, appearing oddly amused.

"The boy with no memory ... Let's see if you can actually wield that thing, shall we?" Demyx chuckled horribly, smirking as dark mist continued to flow from his eyes and mouth. "Rock on!"

"I know I can use my Keyblade better than you can use that ridiculous instrument of yours." Riku mocked him, strengthening his grasp on his weapon as he prepared to clash.

Demyx gasped, "How dare you mock my music!" He spat in his gurgling voice, showing that he was insulted by Riku's remark.

Riku swiftly leapt out of the way as Demyx strummed his Sitar once again, water-jets narrowly missing Riku's body. Riku retaliated and swiftly leaped for an uppercut, but Demyx span to the side just before contact. Riku span and stuck towards Demyx instantly. Demyx instantly blocked it with the Sitar, and swiftly strummed the instrument. Water suddenly collided into Riku and threw him out the way.

"Blizzaga!" A voice suddenly roared from behind Demyx.

Demyx turned in retaliation as swiftly as he could but it was no use. He froze on the spot. Roxas tread towards the frozen Demyx and gazed at him.

"There was always one problem with your music; it always froze when it was cold." Roxas stated coolly. He raised his Oathkeeper Keyblade towards Demyx's frozen body and pierced it. The Ice cracked the moment the Keyblade struck and shattered in mere seconds. Demyx fell lifelessly to his knees, his Sitar disappeared from his grasp.

"You sneak! You only pretended to be knocked out." Demyx grunted in his low whispery voice, wheezing as he struggled to breath, "Man, that smarts!"

“Don’t bother complaining. You were always the weakest within the Organization.” Roxas snarled at him. “I have no idea why Xaphire had used you against me.”

“Heh heh ... if you put it that way, then I must be a warm up to Xaphire’s game of tricks.” Demyx whispered back.

“What do you mean?” Roxas curiously wondered.

“I’m most likely not the only one you’ll be facing off against.” Demyx struggled to explain.

At that moment, Demyx’s body began to fade away.

“Arh man, not again!” He screamed out.

He disappeared.

“So, there’s more or you, is there?” Roxas moaned under his breath, gazing at the area where Demyx disappeared.

“You know ... I feel sorry for that guy.” Riku admitted unexpectedly.

“What!? Why? During my time in the Organization; all I saw him do was complain, lie back on a sofa and do nothing at all!” Roxas argued back.

“He sounded like he didn’t really want to fight at all.” Riku calmly shrugged. “As though all he wanted was peace and quiet.”

There was a moment of silence at that point between the two of them. Roxas gazed towards where Demyx disappeared, starting to realise what Riku meant.

“I guess you’re right about that, fighting was never his forte. But then again, he was only a fragment of my memory, and he was just a Nobody so he only pretended.” Roxas sighed, rubbing the light bump on his forehead.

“He seemed to me like more than ‘only a fragment of memory’ and more than ‘just a Nobody’ to me.”

Riku commented, crossing his arms.

“Well, if that’s how you see it, that’s fine by me.” Roxas shrugged in a bored manner. “But we need to press on.”

They began to head over to the doors on the opposite side of the door they entered in and opened the set of doors the moment they reached them. On the other side of these doors, they caught sight of what seemed to be an arena. There were lit torches placed on various stands around the arena itself, giving it a magnificent orange glow. There were another set of doors on the other end of the arena. Roxas and Riku swiftly nodded to each other and headed down a flight of stairs towards the glowing arena. The moment when Roxas placed a foot on the arena’s sandy ground; a Dark portal instantly appeared close in their sight. Another hooded man in the Organization cloak appeared; he was fairly muscular and taller than Demyx had been. Roxas held out his Oblivion Keyblade towards the cloaked Organization member, ready to clash blades.

“Show yourself!” He commanded, cautious not to show any opening and weak points.

“Such a strong command ... from such a weak child.” The member deeply chuckled as he slowly threw back his hood.

“Xaldin, I knew it was you!” Roxas cheekily admitted, giving off a cheesy smile that could match Sora’s own.

“So you were expecting me? After Demyx’s poor performance, I guess I must show you how a true man fights.” Xaldin shrugged with a calm voice, whispers beginning to appear in his voice.

“What, with your cooking knives!? Come on, the last time you’ve slain anything properly had been the Christmas turkey!” Roxas cheekily mocked.

“So I was right; you are still the weak, pathetic child that I knew.” Xaldin spat in his whispery voice.

His eyes suddenly turned pitch-black, a lot faster than Demyx had done, and the dark mist began to seep through his eyes and mouth. He began to raise his arms apart and his six Lances flew to his sides, grabbing three of them while the other three stopped and suspended in mid-air. Roxas grasped onto his

Keyblades tighter and Riku got himself ready to strike. But at that moment, Xaldin threw his arm towards Riku's position and a gust of wind took Riku by surprise, throwing him out of the arena and colliding against the wall. Once he was out of the way, an invisible barrier appeared and enclosed around the whole arena. This meant Roxas was trapped inside the arena and Riku could not intervene the fight. "Riku!" Roxas called out to him.

There was a small grunt from outside the arena.

Roxas then turned to Xaldin, "Why did you do that!?"

"It wouldn't have been fair if it had been two against one, so I decided to level out the playing field."

Xaldin shrugged, not caring at all.

"It was our three weapons against your six!" Roxas argued back. "You had the advantage!"

"I do not count weapons." Xaldin stated calmly.

Roxas sighed, trying to think on what to do. It wasn't too long until an idea popped up in his head.

"Well then, maybe I should even this fight out a bit more."

Roxas then crouched down and crossed his arms, covering his face. His muscles began to tense up as power drew into his body. Within a second, a bright, light aura began to engulf his body, continuously getting brighter. Xaldin watched the process, waiting patiently to end. After a short, swift moment, Roxas threw his arms and legs out and shut his eyes tight, his teeth clenched together. The room filled up with the blinding aura and took a few moments to die down, revealing Roxas in his Final Form. His two Keyblades span around him at a calm pace.

"Well this is new." Xaldin chuckling in his whispery voice, showing a slight surprise.

"I'll show that I can beat you at your own game!" Roxas proudly bellowed out to him, clenching his fists tightly so that he was ready to clash.

"Acting tough isn't going to get you anywhere." Xaldin warned in a threatening tone, his whispery voice horrifically echoing the stadium.

At that moment, Xaldin swiftly threw his arms in front, pointing towards Roxas' direction. His Lances reacted to his command, flying towards their target at a blinding speed. Roxas had no time to think, he swiftly slid out of the way of the Lances, just narrowly slicing the fabric of his left sleeve. Roxas then instantly leaped towards Xaldin, aiming for a vital opening in his body. He swiftly threw his arms to command his Keyblades on striking Xaldin, concentrating on his attack. But Xaldin was able to summon his Lances just in time to parry the attack. All weapons clashed against each other in an all-out frenzy, metal ricocheting against each other as it echoed around the arena. Roxas rapidly drew back his two Keyblades, trying to gather his thoughts. Then, with no time to spare, both Xaldin and Roxas flew in for a close clash. Both face to face as they passed each other, Keyblades and Lances flying and ricocheting all around them. Roxas halted his movement in the air and span his body round, Xaldin swiftly did the same. Both now facing each other once again, Xaldin threw out both his arms in command and all six lances suddenly flew to his hands. He spun them at a fierce speed and a huge gust of wind had been summoned into the arena. Roxas attempted to dodge this attack but got caught up by the winds strong force; he got thrown back against the invisible barrier, his back smashing against the barrier as though it was a brick wall. He fell to the ground of the arena but swiftly recovered just inches above the floor. In retaliation, he threw his right arm horizontally across as a command and the Oblivion Keyblade flew in to strike Xaldin. Xaldin easily threw one of his Lances to parry the oncoming Keyblade, feeling like it was nothing to him.

"Come on, Roxas, that was pathetic!" Xaldin roared in a now gurgling voice. "Are you even trying!?"

What he didn't realise was that Roxas planned that to happen. To Xaldin's surprise, Roxas abruptly appeared behind him from out of nowhere and swiftly struck with an uppercut. It caught Xaldin completely off-guard and sent him flying up high into the air. Roxas took no time to hesitate and launched himself towards Xaldin. Upon level with him, Roxas instantly vertically span sideways, both

Keyblades flew round and struck into Xaldin from Roxas' command. Xaldin was sent flying to the ground, but was abruptly caught by the clash of the Oathkeeper Keyblade as Roxas instantly appeared again towards the left. Xaldin collided against the invisible barrier, completely dazed from Roxas' frenzy of attacks. But Roxas wasn't finished. He appeared again face to face with Xaldin and struck him with a powerful kick to the side. Oddly, echoes of whispery chuckles filled the arena. At that moment, unexpectedly, Xaldin recovered and halted his movement. In his retaliation, he sent Roxas against the invisible barrier, his grasp on Roxas' neck. He then caught one of his many Lances that were hovering by his side and attempted to strike Roxas down. Roxas swiftly caught his Oblivion Keyblade from mid-air beside him and parried to prevent the attack. The weapons ricocheted against each other; both Xaldin and Roxas used as much force as they could to overcome each other. Roxas was able to brush off Xaldin's grasp but he continued to force his Keyblade against the Lance. Roxas was at the point where he had his feet against the barrier to offer himself stable support and extra strength, but Xaldin's might was beginning to over-power his own. Roxas swiftly changed his motive and slid out of the way to avoid the Lance and dropped to the floor. Roxas prevented himself from colliding to the ground due to his hover ability. He noticed Xaldin point at him from above, commanding his Lances to strike once again. Roxas had no time to hesitate; he shot out of the way as Lances began to strike. He zigzagged his way around the arena as the Lances continuously struck and narrowly missed him. Xaldin flew to his Lances and grasped hold of them. Roxas halted to a stop and gazed at Xaldin's weird change of movement. The Lances suddenly gathered and joined together to create some sort of large Dragon-looking figure. Roxas caught sight of Xaldin leaping on top of the Dragon-like Lances and rode on top of it with ease. Roxas watched carefully, he had seen this attack before. Xaldin rode the Dragon-like Lances as it circled the arena. Xaldin then rose swiftly towards the ceiling and the Front Lance switched to point downwards towards Roxas' position. At that moment, three other Lances appeared and attached onto the Front Lance. Light began to shine on the tips of the Lances, continuously glowing brighter. Roxas knew what was about to come next.

"Fear the Dragoon's Breath!" Xaldin bellowed under his gurgling voice, proudly laughing as the Lances continued to charge up power.

A tornado began to rapidly spin from the Lances tips and directed straight towards the middle of the arena, where Roxas was currently positioned in his hovering stance. Roxas knew that even if he tried, he would not be able to evade the incoming attack. The tornado struck to the floor, colliding into its desired target. Roxas had been engulfed in the attack, yet he was prepared for this. Xaldin watched and the tornado took out the whole arena, laughing and amused by the destruction. But that suddenly stopped. He noticed that Roxas was unharmed from the attack; instead he was engulfed by a very bright barrier with Hexagon shapes linked all around his body. Roxas had cast Reflega.

"Time for the Dragoon to fall, Xaldin!" Roxas roared proudly.

He threw his arms towards Xaldin's position and a blinding ray of light suddenly sped straight towards the target from the barrier. Xaldin tried to dodge but it was far too late. Xaldin had been caught up by the intense light ray. The ray was so strong that it destroyed the barrier shielding the arena completely. The barrier shattered into pieces as it was blown away from the attack. Riku shielded himself as tiny shards of the barrier flew in his direction. The light ray finally died down and Xaldin fell lifelessly to the floor. His Lances all disappeared at the moment when he hit the ground of the arena.

"N-never thought y-you could produce an attack that strong ..." Xaldin stuttered as he gazed up towards the towering Roxas.

"I will be honest; I'm only beginning to find out what my powers are capable of." Roxas chuckled. His body reverted back to his original form.

"Tch! You're still such a child!" Xaldin spat distastefully.

"How would you know, you're just a fragment of my memories." Roxas tiredly argued, gazing down on

him like a piece of garbage.

"Is that what Demyx had told! HA! We are more than just memory fragments!" Xaldin roared with pride.

"You'll see very soon ..."

His body had then been engulfed by the Darkness and disappeared from sight, his laughs still echoing the arena as he left.

Roxas gazed oddly, "What does that mean?"

Roxas then switched round and noticed Riku running up towards him.

"That was crazy!" Riku shouted out to him as he halted to a stop.

"Heh heh. Sorry you couldn't join in." Roxas lightly joked, smiling pleasantly. "I wonder who would be next to fight? My guess it that it maybe Xigbar; seeing as it's going in the order of the last six members that were erased." He then wondered.

"I don't really know who that is ... but it would be best to rest first though; we might get a fight that's stronger than this one, especially as you used that transformation of yours just now." Riku warned Roxas cautiously.

"Nah, I'll be fine." Roxas assured him happily.

Roxas began to head towards the doors that entered the next area. Riku followed from behind but was wary of Roxas's condition, feeling that they were not prepared for what's about to come. There was a moment of silence between the two, both thinking of different things. This was broken by Roxas.

"Riku, is any of your memories returning to you?" Roxas wondered curiously.

"Nothing has come up." Riku sadly answered, shaking his head.

"That's a pain." Roxas murmured. "I thought it was a good idea of me to check on that."

They grasped hold of a handle each and nodded to each other, ready to enter through the doors. They pushed the doors, only to be caught off-guard as the doors threw themselves open. Roxas straightened himself up and helped Riku to his feet as he had fallen to the floor. The Room they had entered in had been completely pitch-black. There was no light in the distance meaning that both Roxas and Riku were unable to judge how large the room had been. Roxas noticed the set of doors slam shut from behind them, causing the light that was left to vanish from the room entirely.

"Xaphire is going to have to install some light in these rooms. This is just getting ridiculous!" Roxas pleasantly yet loudly joked, hearing his voice echo all around him.

All of a sudden, the whole floor instantly turned into molten rock; catching fire to both Riku and Roxas's feet. The floor became a circular molten arena. Within seconds, fire rose around the edges of the arena, but the walls and ceiling were still unable to be seen.

"WOAH!!! PUT IT OUT, PUT IT OUT, PUT IT OUT!!!" Riku screamed loudly, running around the place as his feet continued to burn.

But Roxas just stood there, staring in front and began to breathe heavily. He was unharmed by the heat and the molten rock covering the floor. But, it was what this indicated shocked Roxas to the core.

"No ... No it can't ... it can't be!" Roxas worriedly moaned; his eyes wide with sudden realisation and shock.

A Dark Portal began to appear towards the centre of the arena. A slim, tall, cloaked figure strode out from the Darkness inside.

"I won't ... I won't ..." Roxas began to shake violently, shaking his head in denial.

The man halted to a stop, he threw back his hood to reveal his identity. But Roxas didn't need to be shown to know who this figure was.

"I WON'T FIGHT YOU, AXEL!!!" Roxas roared.

17 - Hesitation and Confidence

"Wh-where am I? Why am I here!?" Kairi ordered the towering Xaphire, pressing her hand against her head to sooth the pain.

"Hmph! Such typical questions." Xaphire moaned under his breath.

He knelt down to Kairi's level and leant forward, his right eye piercing into Kairi as he gazed into Kairi's eyes. To Kairi, it felt as though Xaphire could see into her mind and her heart. It was as though Kairi couldn't hide anything from him whatsoever. But she refused to back away, feeling able to resist Xaphire's dagger-like eye.

"How about I ask you a question: What do you think happened to Sora and Riku after they got dragged into that vortex 3 days ago?" Xaphire asked her calmly; although to Kairi, this felt like a threat.

"I know ... I know that they're alive, they've survived through everything and can cope against anything standing in their way." Kairi raised her voice as she spoke, showing she was confident. "They'll find out what happened to me; they'll come and get me!"

Xaphire continued to gaze at her for a moment longer, not speaking a single word. There was no emotion bearing across his face, making Kairi wonder if this man actually had a soul. Xaphire then closed his eyes and slowly nodded, rising back to his feet. Then, like an explosion, he began to laugh loudly and deeply, as if he was truly amused. Kairi watched him oddly and confused, then aching pain in her head grew as it throbbed.

"Wow! You certainly are the typical damsel in distress! Hoping her heroes are going to save her!"

Xaphire bellowed proudly, chuckling. But then all of a sudden he stopped laughing in a click, as if it just turned off by a flick of a switch. "Well I'll tell you this now; it is pointless for you to have this false, pathetic hope. In reality ... you shouldn't even have any hope at all!" He uttered to her boldly.

"What!? Wh-why's that!?" Kairi roared back, she was not going to be broken down by this guy.

"Because ... One of them is dead, and the other is suffering with severe amnesia, unable to remember anything." Xaphire answered deeply.

Kairi's eyes widened in disbelief, beginning to shake her head in denial.

"Y-you're lying!!" Kairi screamed out, not believing any of what Xaphire just told her.

"Tch. If that is how you're going to be ... I'll prove it to you then." Xaphire chuckled eerily.

He then snapped his fingers; the second figure, that was standing patiently as if it had been a statue, suddenly drew forward into the light. Kairi noticed that as it drew nearer, blank yellow eyes appeared glowing back at her. Darkness was seeping from the figure's body as though it was some type of liquid evaporating from the skin. Kairi grew afraid of what she was about to see, fear building up inside her. But when she finally caught sight of the figure in the light; it wasn't fear anymore that had been building up ... it was grief. She even dropped her hand from pressing against the wound on her head.

"N-no ... It isn't ... it can't be." She breathed heavily; not believing what her eyes were seeing, or not wanting to believe.

"Your eyes are not lying to you, Kairi. Who you see before you is the Heartless of the boy who fell fighting, believing in being able to return back to his home to see the one person he dearly loves and cares for ... you!" Xaphire explained, folding his arms and showing no emotion except for a small, horrifying smile. "What a fool he had been."

"Sora ... no!" Kairi squeaked, tears rolling swiftly from her eyes down her cheeks. She was trying to hold it in but this grief began to take over her emotions entirely.

"How very sad and touching; this only proves how weak and pathetic those two idiots were. They

believed in false hope just like you.” Xaphire continued to speak with not a care in the world. “In the end, both were doomed to fall.”

That was when she snapped. Kairi screamed, breaking down instantly when she heard those last words. Xaphire watched awkwardly as Kairi continued to weep loudly, showing no emotion or expression whatsoever. Sora’s Heartless continued to gaze at Kairi, not moving at all.

Xaphire then began to lose patience, “For goodness sake, no wonder you’re a Princess of Heart; you’re too pure for your own good!” Xaphire roared over the screams and weeps.

“YOU’RE A MONSTER!!!” Kairi screamed with a high pitch, grieving for Sora.

“I’m a monster, am I?” Xaphire wondered curiously, “Will a monster command a vile order for the amusement? Sora ... hit her!”

Kairi suddenly halted her weeping as she gasped, switching her sight straight towards Sora’s Heartless with incredulity. Her eyes were red and bloodshot, her face dripping wet from her tears. Sora’s Heartless whipped its head round, it glared wide-eyed towards Xaphire as though with shock. Xaphire stared back, showing off a dark, serious look.

“I’m going to count to three, and then you’ll strike her across the face.” He told the Heartless slowly and clearly, his eye fixed on it.

Sora’s Heartless turned its head back and gazed upon Kairi; it noticed her mouth gaping as she shook her head. The Heartless then slowly stepped closer to Kairi until it was literally towering over her, the blank yellow eyes still fixed on her. Kairi was shaking uncontrollably; she couldn’t believe what was going to happen. Sora’s Heartless gradually raised its right arm while its hand strengthened into a fist. At first, Kairi thought it was herself shaking but then she realized: the Heartless’ was shaking with hesitation, but Xaphire wasn’t able to see this.

“Three...” Xaphire began the countdown.

Kairi continued to gaze at Sora’s Heartless; she was trying to tell him, “Please, no.” But the words were not flowing out of her.

“Two...”

Sora’s Heartless slightly lowered and its fist very slowly loosened, feeling as though the Heartless began to have second thoughts.

“One...”

Xaphire was switching gaze back and forth with the pair, his eye pierced like knives stabbing through the body.

“NOW!” Xaphire then bellowed.

Sora’s Heartless hesitated for a second, and then launched its fist towards Kairi’s innocent face. Kairi caught the full force of the punch, her left cheek bone caught by the knuckles of the Heartless’ fist. A light crack was heard as Kairi’s head turned away by the force of the Heartless’ strength. Xaphire smirked; although he was a Nobody and has no true emotion, he showed he was amused by what he watched. When it all ended, Kairi continued to look away, her face hidden by her soft, reddish-pink hair. Drops of blood fell to the floor and splattered on its impact. Sora’s Heartless dropped its arm but continued to stare at her. Although it was impossible to see as it was hiding it, the Heartless was regretting. Xaphire suddenly took a deep breath, breaking the silence.

“Tch. A monster would be a small, weak runt compared to me ... Sora, grab her and follow me.” Xaphire commanded deeply, his dark voice echoed around the hall. “It’s time we began.”

As Xaphire turned, Sora’s Heartless continued to stare at Kairi. She was sobbing silently and her hand rose up behind her hair as she soothed her cheek. Sora knelt down beside her and took her arm lightly. She turned her head towards the Heartless, showing the result of its strike. There was blood dripping from the side of her mouth and a large, dark and horrible bruise swiftly appeared on her left cheek. Her cheek bone had been cracked by the force. Kairi gazed at Sora’s Heartless sorrowfully and painfully as

it continued to gaze back, eyes meeting each other.

"If she's resisting; just hit her again!" Xaphire called out eerily, he stopped to wait for the two.

Sora's Heartless got to his feet, lightly clutching onto Kairi's arm. Kairi slowly rose up, her whole body shaking due her legs becoming weak and close to giving way. Sora's Heartless tugged on her arm and turned away, looking at her no more. Kairi was pulled and the two strode towards Xaphire, a door had appeared through the darkness on the other end of the hall. Xaphire lead the way and the two followed, with Sora's Heartless keeping its grasp of Kairi and dragged her along. Kairi's cheek continued to throb even more painfully than her head, tears and blood still rolling down her face. Kairi closed her eyes, taking her mind off the real, cruel world that she was in.

It was Sunday in the afternoon, a day after Sora's and Riku's disappearance, and Kairi sat on her bed motionless. She had not moved all day, her parents heard about the incident not long after it happened and left her alone, not wanting to interfere. Selphie had been trying to call her all day but Kairi didn't answer back. She was too depressed and spaced out to move or do anything. She sighed, feeling the heart-broken pain run through her body. All she could do was worry for Sora and Riku's safety. Suddenly, there had been a knock on the door and instantly opened on its own. Kairi snapped out of her trance and watched the door. Selphie appeared from behind it, her head peeking through the opening. She slowly walked in and closed the door behind her. She waddled up to Kairi and sat next to her on the bed.

"I had to come and see you, you weren't answering my calls." Selphie admitted to her. "I'm worried about you, about what happened to you and to Sora and Riku."

"I'm sorry, but I can't get it out of my head." Kairi apologized quietly, struggling to speak. "Watching as those two had been dragged into that vortex or whatever it was ... Watching helplessly Sora and Riku disappear like that!"

"I can't believe something like that would happen ... again! Seriously, it's like those two have the worst of luck!" Selphie began to joke, trying to lift the atmosphere in the room. But Kairi showed no smile. Selphie continued, "I know that you care so much about those two ... I know how much you loved them both. But me, Tidus and Wakka also care about those two, we're all their friends. I think both of them want you to be strong, to believe in them being able to come back just like they did before ... at least I want you to."

"But ... but what if they don't? What if they don't return home this time!?" Kairi answered painfully, feeling the grief increasing. "I couldn't bear the pain of losing them forever!"

"Because they're both really strong; they can look after themselves wherever they go. And don't forget; you believed in them before when they were missing and look what happened, they returned to you." Selphie explained hastily, trying not to make her feel any worse.

They fell silent, both gazing down to the floor. Kairi's body began to shake with angst, causing Selphie to feel uncomfortable. Selphie then swiftly broke the silence again, beginning to explain about the aftermath of the crisis.

"The Island had been closed off from the public, meaning we can't go back there for the time being. The devastation had been colossal. Authorities were told about Sora and Riku and an investigation began immediately. I bet us two plus Tidus and Wakka are gonna be interviewed about it soon." She discussed to her, trying to get her speaking.

Kairi merely nodded. Selphie sighed, it was time she admitted the truth of why she had visited.

"There was another reason why I arrived to see you; I was given this by Sora's parents a moment ago to pass on to you. I think you'll like it." Selphie told her, she slipped into one of her pockets to reveal an envelope addressed to Kairi. She handed it over to her and watched curiously as she gazed at it.

"I haven't opened it!" She hastily admitted, knowing about her own curiosity.

"This is ... Sora's handwriting." Kairi suddenly realized, her spirits began to lift slightly. "I know his handwriting from anywhere; it's always this messy." She began to giggle.

"Are you going to be able to read it?" Selphie wondered, having trouble to spell Kairi's name in Sora's awful handwriting.

"Yeah. After knowing him for so long, I've grown used to it." Kairi nodded with a smile.

She then ripped the top of the envelope, taking out a folded letter from inside. She opened it out and read through straight away:

*Kairi,
11 years I've known you now and not a day have I not thought about you,
Thinking of you gave me the strength to accomplish my goals and conquer my fears,
When I, you and Riku were split apart, I was determined to find both of you,
When Riku had your body and fallen to the darkness, I was determined to protect you,
When I became a heartless and plunged into darkness, I made sure not to forget you.
When I and Riku were stuck in the Realm of Darkness, reading the letter you sent to me gave us hope.
And so I want you to know that if I end up in a situation like before and we get thrown apart from each other,
I want you to believe in me like you've always done before,
Just picture the drawing we did of giving each other paupu fruits and I'll always come back no matter what happens,
I'll always be there for you, I promise!*

Sora

Kairi smiled, she began to tear up with happiness. Selphie read the letter herself and her mouth instantly dropped with shock and awe from what was written.

"I ... I never knew he could write like that!" Selphie admitted with surprise, having trouble finding the words.

"He ... he does tend to surprise people, that's for sure." Kairi giggled cheerfully, teared up, "But now I know, I know they'll be back." She admitted confidently.

She then suddenly rose off the bed and moved herself over to a small draw on the opposite side of the room, where a simple desk was situated. She opened it up and took out a star shaped object. It had been her good luck charm. She gazed at it and sighed, continuously smiling.

"I wish I gave this to him before the disaster, but I know he's got luck on his side." Kairi spoke as showed to Selphie.

Selphie nodded to her cheerfully; relieved she was finally happy again.

Kairi then gazed out of her bedroom window, but her smile suddenly faded away the moment she caught sight. She noticed a figure standing towards the end of the street that she normally see through the window. The person was staring right back at her, but this figure was standing too far away for Kairi to find out who it was. Kairi then unconsciously blinked. The figure suddenly disappeared from sight, nowhere to be seen.

"Kairi, are you okay?" Selphie wondered, she was confused to why Kairi was gazing dreamily out the window.

"Y-yeah ... it's nothing." Kairi stutteringly replied, still staring out towards the now empty street.

Kairi eyes opened up to reality once again; she was being dragged by Sora's Heartless down a long

dark corridor, no lights anywhere around the extent of the room. Xaphire was leading the way, his Organization cloak flapping freely behind as he strode. Kairi noticed Sora's Heartless had a fairly loose grip around her arm. Upon glimpsing towards the Heartless, Kairi suddenly realized something. "Oi, Xaphire! Do you know if Sora's Nobody appeared?" Kairi called out clearly, showing a slight amount of hope.

Xaphire instantly came to a halt, causing Sora's Heartless to react the same. He turned round and laid his deadly eyes upon Kairi. He began to chuckle.

"Oh yeah, I forgot about him. Yes, he appeared." He answered eerily with a small sigh. "When I shattered Sora's heart, he appeared not long afterwards. He fought me and Sora's Heartless with Riku's assistance. It was fun beating them up, but I decided to leave those two to rot after I broke every chain in Riku's memory. Right now, they're probably searching for a way to repair his memories. Fat chance that'll happen though."

"You truly are a cruel man..." Kairi growled, drawing back.

"Clever girl, did you only realize that just now?" Xaphire sarcastically clapped his hands to her.

"As long as Roxas or anything close to Sora is still around, there will always be hope and chance that'll he'll come back." Kairi confidently spoke out. "It's happened before and it'll happen again!"

"Tch, so that's how you're going to be. Well guess what ... his heart is demolished! No matter what you do, you can't bring him back, no one can!" Xaphire argued back, showing he was growing tired of this.

Kairi glared at him with despise, and then switched to Sora's Heartless. The Heartless was gazing straight back to her. Everything fell silent. It had been close to impossible to read Sora's Heartless, but Kairi knew that what she spoke out had dug into its mind, questioning possibilities and reality.

"Now that's over and done with, we have worked to do." Xaphire demanded them, breaking the silence.

Xaphire turned and continued on towards the door on the other end of the corridor, the other two dragged on behind. They reached the door and Xaphire threw it open with force, causing it to slam against the wall. The other two followed as he continued through. The door slammed shut behind them as they passed by, causing Kairi to jump slightly. The room instantly lit up but there was nothing in it, just an empty, small, circular room. Xaphire threw his arm out in front, towards the wall. Instantly a Dark Portal appeared, darkness pouring out freely.

"Where are we going?" Kairi wondered, glaring towards the portal. She remembered the last time she went through a portal just like this one, knowing that it wasn't a pleasant experience.

"There's one thing special about this room; no room in this Castle would allow a Dark Portal to be summoned ... apart from this particular one." Xaphire explained, ignoring Kairi's question.

"Why is that?" Kairi then asked curiously.

"This world used to be a prison for the accused and the worthless. If they were able to successfully get past the numerous traps and spells, they would end up here. They were free to leave this world ... that is if they were able to cast up a Portal." Xaphire continued on, chuckling. "Where we are going is identically as tormenting as this world."

"Where are we going then?" Kairi repeated herself, louder and clearer this time.

"Castle Oblivion." Xaphire spat out.

18 - The Fight of Flames

Roxas stood staring fearfully towards the idle Axel, who in turn just stood there aimlessly, no reaction showing in the slightest. Riku, on the other hand, was still running around the fire-based arena as he tried his best not to burn his feet. Oblivious, he suddenly tripped up, and fell face first onto the fiery floor. He sat up hastily.

“Oh wait ... this isn’t hot at all!” He finally realized, scratching his head with embarrassment.

But Riku noticed that Roxas wasn’t paying attention, instead had been frozen in place. Roxas was shaking; he never even considered the fact that he would be facing his best friend. It was only now that he realized: Axel had been the next member to be erased! He had been fighting side by side with Sora and fell protecting him from the Dusk Nobodies. Only to be cut down by Xaphire himself. But something wasn’t right; Demyx and Xaldin had greeted him with open arms ... well, in their own way. But Axel wasn’t saying a thing, as though he was just like some sort of puppet. Roxas didn’t know what to do in this situation.

Just at that moment, Axel swiftly leapt backwards and disappeared from sight. Roxas jumped up by the sudden surprise. He searched about hastily to spot Axel within the flames, but he was nowhere in sight. Riku was soothing his feet, but then heard a wisp of flame sizzle above him. He instantly raised his head up.

“Roxas, above you!!!” He bellowed out.

Roxas hastily switched to Riku’s direction, but was too late to react. All he could do was watch as Axel flew towards him at full speed. Axel launched his Chakrams with all his might and Roxas retaliated swiftly as he tried his best to parry the incoming weapons. Instantly bringing out his two Keyblades, Roxas had been able to parry the right Chakram just in time. But he did not watch where the other Chakram had been attacking from. Suddenly, Roxas was caught out from behind by the rogue Chakram and thrown heavily towards the edge of the arena. He struggled to his feet as he began to regain his perspectives, but unexpectedly felt Axel kick him powerfully in the ribs. On the floor, Roxas felt Axel’s boot pinning him down. He couldn’t think of anything to brush Axel away, he was still refusing to fight Axel and so attacking him now was out of the question. He could see Axel in the corner of his eye readying to finish the job at hand. Axel tensed his body and raised his right Chakram above, prepared to strike the finishing blow. Just then, something unexpectedly struck Axel, causing him to skid across the fiery floor to a halt. Roxas switched his sight to see Riku standing tall, pointing at Axel with a tense expression on his face.

“You have some nerve attacking your opponent while he’s unprepared!” Riku roared angrily, his teeth clenched together. He then switched to Roxas and helped him up to his feet. “I don’t know who this guy is but I could tell that you two used to be good friends. It reminds me ... of something from my past. Don’t forget, he probably isn’t the same person as you remember him to be.” Riku told him wisely, a hint of his broken memories returning.

Roxas nodded in a reassured manner. But he felt that it wasn’t right to fight Axel, even if Roxas has fought him in the past. This whole scenario just didn’t sit right with him.

They both prepared themselves for Axel to strike for another conflict, but caught sight of something affecting Axel, showing something was wrong with him. Axel had a hand clutching his head tightly and was shaking slightly. Roxas tilted his head in curiosity, but this had only been short-lived. Axel unexpectedly reacted and launched his Chakrams once again, but this time they instantly burst into flame-wheels. Both Roxas and Riku retaliated swiftly and both successfully parried the incoming

weapons. But they were not finished yet; the Chakrams span round like boomerangs and sliced in abruptly for another strike. Riku and Roxas kept on parrying the attacks and dodging them non-stop. But the flamed Chakrams continued on flying back to attack them, like they were somehow remote controlled. Roxas now had to think of a way to stop this from continuing; he couldn't continue dodging and parrying like this forever. He knew already that he and Riku started to feel the fatigue; it was only a matter of time till they slip up fatally. Then, an idea came to mind, but ... this had been where Roxas must now turn his body to the offense. He clutched his Keyblades as tight as he could; and as the Chakrams closed in on them, he stabbed through the open gaps of the weapons. This caused the two Chakrams to spin uncontrollably around the blades. Roxas took the opportunity and, without thinking, threw them back towards Axel. Axel had been unprepared for this and took the incoming weapons with full force, sending him flying nearly out of the ring of fire. He then stomped his feet against the floor and took back the control of his balance. Roxas regretted the idea straight away the moment he thought about it, but he now knew he had no choice in the matter. He watched Axel as he clutched his Chakrams heavily; he looked like he was in agony. But this had only gotten worse, Axel dropped to his knees with shrieks of pain echoing around the arena. Roxas began to shake in sorrow as the cries of despair continued to echo. And then the whispers began.

"Roxas ... finish me ... stop ... Xaphire!" The whispers screamed in agony.

"Axel ... is that actually you!?" Roxas jumped suddenly, gazing at the kneeling Axel.

"Xaphire ... took my ... memories ... all of our memories ... to fight against you ... to erase you ... to use you!" Axel's whispery voice echoed. "Quickly ... finish me!"

"B-But ...!" Roxas tried to refuse, but had instantly been interrupted.

"Just do it ... I'd rather be dead ... than to be ... controlled by Xaphire!" Axel bellowed, the agony getting to him.

"I ... I will." Roxas finally agreed, although reluctantly. He then turned to Riku, "Thank you for the help, Riku. But now ... this is a fight between olds friends."

Riku didn't argue back, he nodded as though he knew what was going on. Roxas smiled, and then turned back to Axel's direction. He then steadied himself ready for Axel to attack. But Axel's body began shaking violently.

"No ... no ... no ... NOOOOOOO!!!" Axel's whispers roared, deafening screams filled the room like nightmares.

Roxas covered his ears hastily by the deafening, horrible screeches, but continued to glare towards Axel as his body drastically lit up in flames. Seconds past, and Axel's whole appearance and Chakrams revealed to gain extreme changes. His cloak was burning red, flames blazing from the fabric. His eyes were even on fire. His Chakrams had also lit up in continuous burning flames but unlike before it had grown basically 10x its normal size, and calmly began to float either side of Axel with ease. Axel had begun to, in turn, defy gravity himself.

This was Axel's Final Form.

The fact that he had a Final Form had been unbelievable! Roxas was amazed by the sight of this change, gazing at the ferocity of Axel's appearance. But swiftly snapped out of the trance and instantly turned serious. He had to keep himself engaged in the battle, because this was the fight to the death between the two of them. One mistake and this would be all over for him. Roxas felt that this conflict would be more of a fair fight if he entered his Final Form as well. But as he began to attempt the transformation, he suddenly realised he was still recovering from the battle with Xaldin. Meaning it was impossible to transform at this point in time. This was bad, as Axel took this advantage and went in for the attack. He flung the large, furious right Chakram straight towards Roxas with full force, the explosive power of the weapon made the whole arena shake like an earthquake. The other soon followed. Roxas hastily reacted, bracing himself for the impact. He guarded himself with the Keyblades, hoping it would

hold of the Chakram's might. But it didn't. The Chakrams both collided into Roxas unexpectedly at the same time, causing an enormous explosion that filled the whole arena. Riku gazed in horror as smoke instantly filled the room. Coughing and spluttering, he squinted as hard as he could to find out what was happening with the battle. Roxas had been hurtled against the fire-wall, catching his cloak alight. He had the wind completely knocked out of him, gasping to get his breath back in his lungs. Feeling the heat from the cloak, he kicked and stamped as fast as he could to put out the flame. Finally, not only did the fire go out, but he had caught his breath back. He took in as much oxygen as he could, and steadily got to his feet. Just at that moment, Axel appeared from nowhere and struck upwards with the Chakrams, catching Roxas out by surprise. Roxas had not been prepared for it at all and took the full blow, sending him sky-high. Axel leapt towards him for another strike, but Roxas recovered just in time to stop the incoming attack. He braced with the Keyblades, causing the weapons to collide explosively, and counter-attacked with as much might as he could wield. The Keyblades struck Axel in the chest, causing him to fall backwards. Roxas then landed back to the floor on his feet, panting and wheezing by the sheer amount of pain he was in. Axel took no time at all to recover from the attack and continued to throw the Chakrams towards Roxas' direction. Roxas couldn't continue to fight in the state he had been in now; he had to turn into his Final Form as soon as possible. He swiftly braced against the incoming attack and parried as best as he could. He then leaped in for another counter-attack, charging towards to patient Axel. Roxas smoothly leapt into the air, and struck a flurry of blows against Axel during consecutive flips in mid-air. Axel caught his Chakrams and swung his arms in order to direct the floating Chakrams towards Roxas' direction. Roxas swiftly sprung back and landed farther away from Axel, ready for the next move. But then it finally hit him; Roxas had enough power recovered in him to transform into Final Form. This was now his chance to turn the tables around. He swiftly leapt into the air, grasping his Keyblades tight, and tensed all of his muscles. The white aura hastily surrounded his body, causing white, blinding light to form. Within seconds, his cloak turned from jet black to white with black, sharp patterns. His Keyblades were now floating by his sides, ready for action and battle. Roxas was reluctant on having to go all out on fighting Axel, but he knew now that Axel needed to be set free from Xaphires control. After learning the truth of Axel's death from the last conversation he had with him, Roxas had to do this. Roxas prepared himself to clash with Axel, Axel also did the same. Both in Final Form, both ready to finish the conflict.

"Axel, you better not let me down!" Roxas called out, showing off a cheeky smile.

Axel didn't say a word, but Roxas spotted him giving out a slight nod.

Roxas pushed against the floor with all his might and flew swiftly towards Axel, closing in to begin his strike. Axel, in turn, threw his Chakrams into the air and prepared to clash weapons. Roxas just began to swipe his arms to navigate the Keyblades when Axel unexpectedly began his ultimate attack. Instead of the Chakrams falling back down, a rain of fire and magma fell towards Roxas, catching him off guard completely. Roxas was thrown back, screaming in agony as his whole body continued to burn from the rain. Axel then clenched his fist in front towards Roxas, causing the Chakrams to fly in the demanded direction at a staggering speed. Upon impact with Roxas, an explosion erupted around the whole arena that was strong enough to cause a massacre. Riku hastily braced as the power from the explosion came into contact with his body. As the smoke finally cleared, both Axel and Riku realized that Roxas was nowhere in sight. He had completely disappeared.

Was the Explosion powerful enough to turn him into ash!? Riku's thoughts wondered, terrified by the results of the battle.

But the battle wasn't over yet.

"Hey! Axel!" A voice bellowed out from above.

Axel instantly gazed upwards; suddenly, Roxas' Keyblades appeared from the darkness flying fast towards him. Axel tried to parry them as best as he could but they instantly began a flurry of strikes from

every direction possible, making them impossible to stop. Axel didn't know what to do; the Keyblades were attacking at an impossible speed and they were heading from all random directions. Just then, they suddenly shot up into the sky. This was followed by Roxas appearing from the darkness above and dropping towards the dazed Axel, executing the final attack. Using his Keyblades by his side, he swiftly swung them round opposite directions and caused them both to collide into Axel from both sides, finishing him off instantly.

Axel fell down to his knees, weakly dipping his head. His appearance quickly turned back to normal, with his Final Form showing no more. The fire-arena disappeared slowly and the light in the room began to lift up high. It was revealed that the room they were in was in fact an exact replica of the Basement Hall from Twilight Town's Mansion. Roxas then reverted his own appearance back to normal and gazed sorrowfully towards the fallen Axel. Axel's body began being engulfed in darkness, but his body was somehow trying to resist it.

"No ... not yet ... I need to ... do one more thing." Axel's voice whispered, refusing to be erased.

"Axel ..." Roxas felt pain lurch in his chest, wishing there was something he could do to help Axel.

"Roxas ... is that ... you?" Axel called out in a dying tone, his head lifted slightly.

Roxas then ran to his side, feeling he should be there for him.

"Yeah, I'm here." He answered lightly and softly, kneeling by his side.

"Roxas ... remember our ... conversation?" Axel tried to ask, wheezing in agony.

"Yeah, but we didn't finish it." Roxas nodded truthfully. "What were you going to say to me?"

"There is ... one way to ... kill him." Axel wheezed in pain. "But you need ... Sora."

"Sora?" Roxas echoed. "But at the moment he's ... a Heartless!"

"I know ... his heart is shattered ... but not gone." Axel tried his best in his state to explain. "... Never gone."

"Really!? So we can get him back!?" Roxas hastily asked out, hopes began to lift inside him.

"Heh ... yeah, but it ... will be difficult." Axel chuckled weakly. He then lifted he head up to see Roxas, showing that his black eyes had completely disappeared. He then pointed to his chest, "Just remember ... you do ... have half of his heart."

"I do!? But Naminé told me I had ... someone else's heart." Roxas answered with surprise and confusion.

"She never did ... get to tell you ... everything. It seems that ... you have a heart of your own but ... it seems that ... you carry half of ... Sora's as well." Axel struggled to explain. Lightly, he put a hand on Roxas' shoulder, "Please, Roxas ... can you do me a favour?"

"Anything ..." Roxas replied with a nod, feeling pain welling up inside him.

"Whatever ... you do ... do not get ... erased ..." Axel struggled to say the last words. "I'm thankful ... I got to ... see my best friend ... one last time."

Just before his body disappeared, he showed off a slight but truthful smile. He was finally happy.

The darkness overwhelmed Axel, leaving no trace of him left. Roxas just knelt there, gazing towards where Axel used to be. He felt Axel's hand slip away from his shoulder. Axel was gone. Roxas didn't move. He refused to move for a moment. After a while, Riku slowly stepped forward to his side, feeling sorry for him.

"Roxas ... are you okay?" He asked cautiously.

Roxas took in a deep, meaningful breath and got to his feet carefully and shakily.

"Yeah ... we best move on." He nodded, but hid his eyes from Riku's view.

Riku just about saw a tear drop from his face, falling to the floor. Riku sighed, wishing he had his memory back so that he had a better understanding on how Roxas was feeling.

But just as when they began to head towards the next door, the room suddenly shook like an earthquake, rumbling violently. Both Roxas and Riku tried their best to keep their own balance, but it

was close to impossible. Just at that moment, black smoke began to circle around them like a tornado. “W-What’s going on!?” Riku called out in terror, squinting his eyes in the oncoming darkness.

“I don’t know, just be careful!” Roxas answered loudly, shielding his eyes from the smoke.

Suddenly, both of them flew up into the air, disappearing from sight into the darkness above.

Next thing they knew, they had returned to the Dome room, right in front of the 4 doors. The door with the chain symbol suddenly began to chain itself up tight. Large chains crossing over to door, refusing to allow any access into the rooms both Roxas and Riku had just been in.

“Wha..?” Roxas slurred, struggling shakily to his feet, gazing towards the locked up door. “What about Xigbar, Luxoid, Sīax, and Xemnas? Weren’t we meant to fight them too?”

“Well, best be thankful we’re not going to.” Riku answered, shaking his head to gain his sight back.

“What do we do now?”

Roxas stood there, completely confused by what just happened to them. He then turned to the next door: The Sword. What challenge would await them this time?

“This should be the next door we go through.” Roxas confirmed, studying it carefully. “I think.”

“Well, we wouldn’t know until we try.” Riku commented with a light shrug.

Roxas grasped hold of the door with the sword symbol, but hesitated for a moment.

“Is something wrong?” Riku curiously asked him, wondering why he halted.

“It’s just ... what both Naminé and Axel told me.” Roxas answered lowly, feeling the heart beat inside his chest. “Whose heart is it that I carry?”

Riku shrugged, “I don’t know, this whole thing is just gibberish to me.”

“Heh ... thanks for the input, Riku.” Roxas chuckled, having his spirits lift slightly.

He then pushed open the doors, and headed in, Riku followed from behind.

Then suddenly, as the doors slammed shut, the room lit up in a flash. Both Roxas and Riku’s jaws dropped when they caught sight of what they had now entered in. It was no arena. It had been the remains of a battlefield! There was no ceiling, but a golden yellow sky. Roxas and Riku began to examine the plain wasteland; thousands of Keyblades were wedged in the dusty ground, battered and broken. The whole area was haunting; it felt as though ghosts were ready to jump out at you. Roxas took one step further, but then swiftly turned around. The door had disappeared! They were trapped in the dead battlefield.

“How do we get out?” Riku asked cautiously, gazing towards where the door used to be.

“I’m sure there must be a way to get back. The symbol of the door showed a Blade of a Sword, while the phrase connected to it stated, ‘The Blade has been shattered’.” Roxas recited, recapping from when he read the poem from behind Xaphire’s Throne.

Roxas continued to examine the battlefield. Was this what it meant by the Blade shattering? Was it the remains of a forgotten War? But what was it they had to do to continue on further? The questions kept on popping up in Roxas’ mind, refusing to disappear.

Roxas then sighed, feeling that this whole situation they were in was nuisance. But then, as Roxas began to explore the place, flashes of images appeared clearly in his head. The Images showed the battlefield, same as it stood now. But he saw images of various warriors fighting: Xigbar was there fighting against someone, but in different garments and a slightly younger, healthier look. There had been a boy in black, dark, gloomy garments and a round helmet, battling directly against Roxas. And then, there had been a strong, brown-haired young man and a beautiful, blue-haired youthful girl standing tall right by his side, protecting him in some way. Roxas clutched his head tightly, not knowing how or why these images were suddenly appearing. The last image he caught sight of had been a horrid-looking, eerie, bald man reaching for a heart-shaped blue moon high above in the sky. After that, the images disappeared from his mind. Roxas steadily opened his eyes, catching sight of the battlefield he was now standing in.

“That was ... random.” Roxas stated cautiously, breathing heavily.

Somehow, part of him felt like he knew those warriors very well, as though they were a family to him. The events that took place in the images also seemed to feel as if they happened sometime within Roxas’ past. But Roxas knew that those events were not from his own past! So, had the event in those images originate from the original bearer of the heart inside of Roxas?

All that Roxas could do though was just shake his head with confusion.

“Roxas! Come over here and check this out!” Riku suddenly called out to him from afar.

Roxas noticed Riku kneeling down, examining an object of some sort. He began to rush over towards Riku, dropping to his knees to check out what Riku found once he arrived. He had then been surprised to see a unique-looking amulet of some kind, buried slightly in the dust. It seemed to have the shape of a star, shaded green and with a metal plating round the edges. The Amulet also had a heart-shaped metal in the middle, gleaming of the reflected light rays from the sky. Roxas picked it up from the ground and took a good look at it.

“What do you think it could be?” Riku asked him curiously, gazing upon the Amulet with wonder.

“I think this is ... a Wayfinder Amulet.” Roxas answered back in a wondrous tone.

Roxas didn’t know where the name of the Amulet came from, but it just seemed to have appeared from the back of his mind.

Just as Roxas answered, the sky unexpectedly turned as dark as night. Roxas and Riku looked at each other in shock and confusion and then turned back to gaze towards the sky. Then both their eyes suddenly widened with horror and jaws dropped once again in realisation. The WHOLE sky had filled up with countless of Heartless falling towards their position! From the simple Shadows to Great Behemoths; all of these Heartless were the opponents Roxas and Riku had to defeat! Thousands upon thousands of enemy Heartless dropped to the ground around Roxas and Riku, eyes locked onto them as targets from every direction possible. Roxas and Riku cautiously rose up to their feet with disbelief showing across their faces.

“This is just ... INSANE!!!” Roxas bellowed out in horror, grasping tightly onto the Wayfinder Amulet.

There had been no way out of this situation, they had to fight these Heartless! Roxas and Riku hastily summoned out their Keyblades, preparing to attack the surrounding Heartless. Roxas and Riku then nodded to each other with confidence, knowing this had to be done. Knowing they were ready, Roxas and Riku both leaped swiftly towards the Army of Heartless, grasping tightly on their Keyblades, unleashing the first moves.

19 - Fallen Origin

Sora eyes slowly flickered open, feeling a sudden halt in his falling. He gazed up to the pitch-black sky, gasping upon realizing why he stopped falling. His arm was caught by a silver gauntlet, whose body seemed to be completely engulfed in the darkness to the point of only the gauntlet being visible. Sora was speechless. Who was this being before him? Why save him from falling further into the darkness? Is he a friend or a foe?

Just then, the gauntlet began to pull Sora into the wall of oozing darkness. This caused him to panic for a moment, feeling as though this was part of his submersion into eternal darkness. But as the gauntlet pulled, a bright light began to appear from it, swiftly growing in brightness. Sora didn't know what was going on, all this had been confusing him greatly. He instantly squinted as the bright light became blinding. Suddenly, it felt as though his whole body had been thrown like a ball, tumbling through the air. Unexpectedly, Sora collided against a ground of some sort; it had a soft yet grainy feel. Sora slowly opened his eyes, not knowing what to expect. Sora caught sight of his surroundings, and gasped instantly with wonder of the world he had just entered. He sat up to gain a clearer view, awestruck by the environment around him. The sky was showing that it was night time, with the clear and diverse sky showing off thousands of different stars. Sora has not seen the sky since the last time he was on Destiny Islands, just before he had been dragged into the vortex. This had felt like it had been forever since the chaos happened. Around him, there were various sharp pointed cliffs towering over him, as though they were alive. To Sora's right, there were two small, miniature waterfalls falling freely towards a clear, healthy pond. There were a few torchlights scattered across a few of the cliff's walls, laminating the area. Sora steadied himself to his feet, trying to gain strength back into his muscles. He gazed around, feeling as though this had been a pleasant dream.

"They call this place 'The Land of Departure'." A sudden yet familiar voice called out cheerfully and calmly.

This caused Sora to jump out of his own skin unexpectedly; not realising there was another person with him. But upon hearing the familiar voice, who was not Vanitas'; Sora swiftly switched round, expecting to see his own Nobody, Roxas, before him. But who he caught sight of wasn't Roxas. A boy about Sora's own age stood before him in metallic, unique looking clad of armour. The armour's various features were similar to the gauntlet Sora had seen. This included a light, tough-looking helmet in contrast to Vanitas' own. Sora could tell this boy was a friend, but slightly disappointed that it wasn't who he thought it had been.

"Am I not who you were expecting to see?" The boy wondered with a cheerful voice, having noticed the slight disappointment in Sora's face.

"Oh ... sorry. I thought you were someone I knew." Sora apologised innocently. "May I ask for your name?"

"Unfortunately, I cannot tell you that. You see, I can't seem to recollect my own name at this moment in time." The armoured boy shook his head sadly.

"That's a shame." Sora commented, his eyes dipping. But then he brightened up instantly, "So, have I truly returned to the living?" He wondered, his eyes beaming with excitement.

The armoured being shook his head again, "this is a fragment of my own memories structured to shield your soul from fading forever into darkness." He explained, crossing his arms. "Take it as a sort of base camp."

"I see..." Sora nodded, saddened but had expected to hear that answer. "Is there any way to return to

the living?"

"It's possible but can only be done from the outside. So, all you can do is wait and see." The boy answered pleasantly.

"Well, I'm glad that I'm here rather than falling forever in darkness." Sora chuckled, feeling appreciative of being in this world. "Thank you for this."

"No problem. You saved my own soul from fading away 11 years ago, so I decided to return the favour." The boy laughed.

"Wait, I did!?" Sora echoed with startle, caught out by what the armoured boy told him. "I honestly don't remember about this!"

"You were only 4 years old at the time, and you have lost a significant number of memories during you time falling in the darkness." The boy pleasantly explained. But then began to speak in a serious manner, "Unfortunately, this place is only a temporary memory fragment. Meaning that once time is up, we'll both return to the dark abyss."

"How long have we got?" Sora wondered cautiously, hoping for a decent amount of time.

"We both have only a day." The boy answered with distaste. "This means that we have a lack of time to prepare ourselves."

There was a moment of silence at that point. Sora's eyes locked onto the armoured boy with surprise, trying to read his motive.

"What do you mean by 'prepare ourselves'?" Sora then asked with hesitance.

The armoured boy took his time to answer, as though he was trying to think of the best way to answer.

"Follow me; I wish to show you something." The boy finally spoke, twisting round to lead the way.

Sora glared at him oddly, cautiously wondering about what the armoured boy was planning to show him. But Sora gave in and followed the boy, treading on the path between two towering cliffs. As the two pressed on, the path they followed began to twist and turn around boulders and cliffs. Sora continued to wonder about where he was and about this boy in armour. Everything continued to feel more mysterious, but also it began to feel more familiar to him. It was as though he had been here before, as though this was his home once before. But that was also the problem; Sora's home had always been Destiny Islands. So why was it that he kept feeling this place was his home once before?

Sora then switched his sight back towards the boy in armour who led the way towards their destination. The boy was silent, the only thin making a noise was his footsteps and clattering of his armour. Sora kept on feeling that this boy was the most mysterious out of the Land of Departure; his familiar voice, the things he had been saying, and his similar personality. Sora couldn't figure out who he was. Just then, the boy halted his movement and casually lifted his head, gazing towards where they were heading towards. Sora stopped beside him and followed his gaze, wondering why they stopped. Instantly, Sora's mouth fell open with shock and awe. What they gazed upon was a large, speed out Castle situated between various tall mountains. Chains attached from the Castle to these mountains hung loosely, swaying slightly from the wind. Its cathedral-like windows reflected the moonlight, releasing numerous colourful auras into the horizon. The Castles style gave it a very homely and comfortable feel, as though it would literally welcome guests into its magnificent building. A courtyard situated in front, with stairs leading up to the Castle. The boy switched his view towards the mountain underneath the Castle, with Sora following his sight. It seemed that in order for Sora and the armoured boy to reach the Castle, they would need to walk up a large spiral staircase leading up from underneath the building. The boy began to stroll towards the direction of the Castle, not speaking a word. Sora almost didn't notice the boy walking off due to him being so silent, only just hearing the small clattering sound from his armour.

"Huh ... H-hey! Wait up!" Sora called out, beginning to run so he could catch up to the boy.

Suddenly, Sora felt something grab the back of his clothing, catching him off guard. Within a second, several hands caught him from behind and threw him to the ground. The boy in armour abruptly turned

to find out what was happening. Realising the problem, he swiftly ran to Sora's aid. Sora did not hesitate as he brushed off the enemies who were holding him down, releasing a swift swipe of his Keyblade of Darkness. Leaping to his feet, he turned to face these new enemies and examined them in full detail. Sora realised straight away that these enemies were not Heartless, nor were they Nobodies. These creatures had a different emblem tattooed on their bodies, shaped as though two scythes overlapped each other to form the outline of a heart. Sora tightened his grasp on his Keyblade, feeling somewhat edgy by their appearance and how they moved about.

"What are these things?" Sora hesitantly whispered, his eyes locked on these new enemies.

Just at that moment, the armoured boy leapt past him towards the creatures, weapon in hand. Sora noticed that the weapon the boy grasped had been in fact a uniquely shaped Keyblade. The way he gripped onto the Keyblade had been different to other Keyblade Wielders Sora had come across in the past. The boy struck the enemies with a backhand attack, which seemed to be his style of fighting. The boy smoothly turned round and struck the creatures with a powerful but swift swing of the backhand Keyblade. With that, the creatures backed away, cautious about facing the boy.

"They're known as the Unversed." The armoured boy stated, keeping eyes locked on the creatures.

"And if they are here, then that means Vanitas has broken through the barrier into this world."

"Huh!? But, how is that possible!?" Sora wondered, shocked and confused.

"These creatures are part of Vanitas' actual being." The armoured boy began to explain. "Meaning that he has complete control over the Unversed and no matter how many time we destroy these things, they'll just flow right back into him. "

"Then, how was he able to get into this world?" Sora asked cautiously.

The armoured boy took a moment to think, and then spoke, "Vanitas is a smart guy; he must have somehow used the Unversed to gain access."

Suddenly, the enemy Unversed leaped in to attack, catching the both of them off guard. Sora retaliated the moment he came into contact with the Unversed, striking his Keyblade into the creatures with full force. The Unversed disappeared from sight, causing Sora to feel relieved. Meanwhile, the armoured boy evaded the incoming Unversed, allowing him to gain the advantage. With a swift turn, he was able to catch the Unversed with his back-hand Keyblade, defeating them instantly.

"One-hit kills? Nice!" Sora cheerfully spoke out with a fist-pump, feeling the ease from that fight.

"Don't let your guard down, Vanitas purposely made them weak." The armoured boy hushed him, gripping his Keyblade tightly. "He's toying with us."

"But what should we do?" Sora curiously wondered, "We have no idea on where he is or what he's planning."

"Well, he isn't being very thoughtful on his own whereabouts." The armoured boy answered coldly.

Sora glared towards him with a clueless expression. The armoured boy pointed out towards the Castle. Sora followed the direction of where the armoured boy was pointing, switching his sight to the Castle. Upon the spire of its tallest tower stood Vanitas' figure, his arms crossed and a dark smile strapped across his face. He was waiting for them as though eager to clash Keyblades.

"Hmm ... I wonder what he wants with us." Sora lightly commented, curious on what was in Vanitas' mind.

"I don't know; he was never the type of person that would express his own intentions." The boy replied, who seemed as curious as Sora. "But right now all we can do is press on and meet him at the finish line."

"But would we be running right into a trap?" Sora argued, doubtful on the armoured boy's idea.

The boy switched his sight straight towards Sora, as though staring at him straight in the eye, "Does it look like we have a choice?" he argued back.

Sora shrugged, not knowing what to do at that moment in time. The armoured boy then immediately

began to sprint towards the Castle, Keyblade tight by his side. There had been no warning that he would do this, and so caught Sora off guard.

"H-hey! Hold up!" Sora yelled out, calling after him. "Will you PLEASE stop leaving me behind!?"

Sora ran to catch up to the armoured boy, being careful that his Keyblade was still by his side. The two Keyblade warriors continued to follow the path as swift as they could as they headed towards the Castle. Sora constantly had a keen eye on the Castle, but he could see that Vanitas never moved from his position, continuously watching them from above. Sora bit the inside of his lip; he could feel Vanitas somehow dragging him back by unnatural pressure. But all he could do for now was brush it away and ignore any of Vanitas' influences and torment.

"Sora! To your left!" The armoured boy shouted out from ahead.

Sora instantly noticed the Unversed leap towards him upon the armoured boy's call. He swiftly tensed his grip on the Keyblade and waited for the right moment to strike. Once the Unversed were close enough, Sora struck with a devastating spin. The Unversed caught by the blade and instantly disappeared in defeat. Sora took no time to recover and continued to follow the armoured boy towards the Castle. After a while of running, both Sora and the armoured boy halted to a stop as they finally arrived to the foot of the staircase leading up towards to Castle. Both of them examined the spiral staircase swiftly and assessed the situation they would be in.

"It seems we may have to fight our way to the top." The armoured boy concluded, spotting some Unversed poking out from above.

"Well, that doesn't seem too bad." Sora responded in a positive tone, shrugging as though they would be a piece of cake to beat.

"The one thing you shouldn't do is get cocky with Vanitas or the Unversed." The armoured boy warned, his head switched round towards Sora, "Don't forget that he's toying around with us, underestimating him would be the last thing you would want to do."

Sora drew back slightly, realising what the boy meant, and gave out a small, serious nod. The two of them took one last glimpse of the spiralling staircase just before they began to hastily ascend.

"One more thing: try not the fall off of the staircase!" The armoured boy called out loudly, leading the pair up the staircase.

"Right, I'll keep that in mind." Sora answered back, keeping himself close to the inner wall as they ascended.

They continued to swiftly climb the spiral staircase, Keyblades grasped tight ready for the upcoming conflict. Sora took a glimpse of the mountainous surroundings as he pressed on, allowing him to clear his mind of a moment. He had just enough time to think things through; about what he was going to do once, and if, he defeats Vanitas. But as he began to think, his mind suddenly wondered about what has been happening back in the living worlds during his time away. He began to worry about Riku, wondering if he survived the battle they both had with Xaphire. Hoping his was safe and well. This, in turn, caused him to wonder about Xaphire, about the progression of his plans and how much time Sora had left to prevent this plan from reaching a catastrophic conclusion. Finally, he wondered about Kairi, hoping more than anything she was safe back in Destiny Islands and not involved with all of this.

"Unversed incoming!" The armoured boy suddenly bellowed with warning, causing Sora to snap out of his worrying trance.

The armoured boy had been correct; several Unversed flew in from above to attack them. With the Keyblades firmly in their grasps, the two Keyblade warriors began to clash with the Unversed while still ascending the staircase. Sora swiftly struck his Keyblade of Darkness into one of the larger Unversed; but, unlike last time, this one strike didn't defeat the enemy. The armoured boy inflicted several strikes to a few of the smaller Unversed, but this only stunned them.

"They're much tougher to defeat now!" Sora called out towards the armoured boy in front, continuing to

push on up the staircase.

"I knew Vanitas was toying with us!" the armoured boy bellowed back, sounding as though he had been frustrated about the situation.

Sora and the armoured boy continued to brush away incoming attacks by the Unversed, having no intention of facing them head on due to the time limit they had stuck in their heads. Sora wished to properly defeat the Unversed but he remembered from what the armoured boy had told him that these enemies were a part of Vanitas' being. And so if the Unversed had been defeated then they'll just return to Vanitas straight away.

At that moment, the armoured boy got caught by one of the Unversed that he struck down earlier, causing both the Unversed and the armoured boy to slip off from the staircase and began to fall towards the ground far below them. The armoured boy hastily retaliated and grasped onto the edge of the staircase, preventing him from falling. He swiftly took a glimpse of the falling Unversed below that had caused the surprise attack. Dangling from the edge of the spiral staircase, the armoured boy noticed Sora arrive to his aid, holding out a hand.

"I'll be fine, just keep going!" The armoured boy commanded him, refusing the help up.

"You saved me from falling into eternal darkness; it's time I started to return the favour." Sora stated to the armoured boy in a positive tone, giving out a cheesy smile as he continued to hold out his hand to help.

The armoured boy took a small moment to think; he then reconsidered the help and grasped onto Sora's arm, being hoisted up back onto the spiral staircase. Sora hoisted the armoured boy with much strength as he needed; knowing him and the armoured boy had a decent amount of trust in each other. Once they succeeded, they took a moment to gather their strength back, taking in long breaths of relief. They then nodded to each other and pressed on, Keyblades grasped strongly by their sides. They finally reached to top of the spiral staircase, after fighting through more of the Unversed on the way up. Upon their arrival, Sora noticed they had entered a large, circular courtyard. As Sora became immersed with the new surrounds, he noticed that various, large chains were wrapped around pillars surrounding this courtyard. Sora then focused where the chain originated from; the Castle stood high above the two Keyblade warriors, towering over the courtyard. Sora couldn't take his eyes off the elegant detail on the whole Castle up close; everything in this world made him feel out of place, and yet it also felt homely to him for some reason. When examining the Castle more closely, Sora began to feel a case of 'Déjà Vu'. He began to gain sudden flashbacks; but it wasn't of this particular Castle, it was another Castle. Sora caught sight of images that showed his younger self walking up and entering the Castle with Donald and Goofy by his side. There were images showing some of Organization XIII's members, Axel included within the pack. But these flashbacks didn't last for long. They swiftly disappeared from Sora's mind, causing him to have more questions rushing through his head. Why had he been shown those flashbacks? When did it happen? Why 'that' Castle?

"I can't see Vanitas anywhere." The armoured boy suddenly stated, stepping up towards Sora. "He must be waiting for us inside the Castle."

Sora instantly jumped up with fright, not expecting the armoured boy to appear. He hesitantly switched to the boy's direction.

"R-Right!" Sora stuttered, nodding with a shaky reaction.

The armoured boy glared at him blankly, but he turned and led the way towards the Castle entrance without a word spoken. Sora took a moment to gather his own thoughts, the images repeating in his mind so he didn't forget about what he saw. He then ran to catch up with the armoured boy, who had just entered the Castle entrance.

Sora's mouth fell open upon amazement of the inside of the Castle; it's high, rich halls dazzled with a strong, light welcome. The cathedral-like windows and walls added to the peaceful, light-hearted tone of

the Castle's interior.

"Vanitas is most likely up the stairs towards the Throne Room of the Castle." The armoured boy pointed out, directing Sora to the stairs in the distance. "You'll need to use every power you have you're going to stand up to him."

"W-Wait ... what about you?" Sora wondered curiously.

"There's a weapon in this Castle I need to find that may give us an advantage." The armoured boy answered, turning his head towards a door at the side of the Entrance hall.

"Ok..." Sora hesitantly nodded, feeling odd about the situation.

"Trust me, we'll need it." The armoured boy stated confidently, suddenly bolting off towards the side-door.

"H-Hold on!" Sora hastily shouted out, caught out by the boy rushing off.

But the armoured boy had already disappeared out of sight.

Why do I have the feeling this isn't going to end well? Sora's mind hesitantly doubted.

Sora climbed to the top of the stairs, entering the largest room in the Castle: Land of Departure's Throne Room. The room had a similar feel to the Entrance hall below, but a darker feeling seemed to be battling for control. Upon Sora's arrival, he instantly noticed that Vanitas was nowhere in sight. At first Sora thought that he was somewhere else in this Castle, but then he changed his mind upon feeling a dark aura loom around the room. Vanitas was hiding somewhere within this room. Sora cautiously began to search around, checking every side and corner as precisely as possibly. He also checked his back in case Vanitas tries to backstab. Eventually, Sora halted his search and stood in the middle of the Throne Room, cautiously gathering his thoughts.

All of a sudden, Sora twisted his body to face towards the ceiling of the Throne Room, bracing with his Keyblade of Darkness in his grasps. Blades clashed against each other in an instant, ricocheting upon impact. Sora instantly caught sight of his own reflection; but instead of his own serious expression, the dark reflection showed of a horrid, insane smile. Sora hastily leapt back, keeping his eyes locked on Vanitas' movements. Vanitas coolly leapt toward the direction of the Throne, lowering himself to a sitting position. He laid back against the Throne with mocking eyes and expression, chuckling deeply with an intimidating smile.

"You certainly have good reflexes." Vanitas sarcastically remarked, leaning his head back lazily.

"Certainly an improvement from our last conflict."

"Stop messing around!" Sora bellowed to him, swinging his Keyblade in anger. "I'm going to end this now!"

"Why? So you can return to the living worlds? So you can save your pointless friends from certain destruction?" Vanitas mockingly questioned, leaning forwards as his eyes began to stab into Sora's being. "Sorry kid, but it isn't that simple."

"I know that! You're in my way from the process!" Sora argued somewhat confidently.

"Heheheh ... that's not the point I'm getting at." Vanitas chuckled lowly. "This Xaphire guy is no pushover, especially after your failure of a battle against him a while ago. And from what I've seen so far, he's just pushed up his standards ten-times higher."

"What do you mean?" Sora hesitantly asked, not looking forward to what about to come.

"Well, from what I've seen through the eyes of your Heartless ... he's inflicted significant damage to your friends." Vanitas answered, showing off his horridly mocking smile.

"Wh ... WHAT!?" Sora roared in shock. "What has he done to them!?"

"(Sigh...) He's inflicted severe amnesia to that Riku kid and left your weak nobody Roxas with him beaten up." Vanitas began to explain, sounding as though he found it a hassle to answer. "Oh ... and he's taken your girl – Kairi, was it? – hostage with your Heartless under his control."

Sora could not believe what he had been hearing, stepping back hesitantly with eyes wide open in utter shock. "N-no way ..."

"Tch ... how he treat's her shows that he knows his evil." Vanitas stated, nodding in approval as he stood back to his feet. "But his motives ... sicken me."

"What ... do you mean?" Sora then asked, shock still running through his body.

"The idea of a Universal Apocalypse is ridiculous and stupid." Vanitas answered with spite, looking away in anger. "He should be using those powers and strength of his for ruling and playing with chaos, not trying to end everything with it!"

Just at that moment, Vanitas abruptly leapt towards Sora with his Keyblade ready to strike. Sora hastily retaliated with his own Keyblade and both clashed against each other.

"So ... what are you going to do about this 'Xaphire' guy?" Vanitas began to ask on the other side of the two conflicting Keyblades. "Whatever it may be ... I feel like helping you with it."

20 - Forgotten Link

Roxas flew through the air and collided against the dusty ground, bouncing uncontrollably across the dead wasteland. He hastily recovered and skidded to a halt. He fell to his knees as he gasped for air, gripping his two Keyblades tightly. His cloak and clothing were ripped in numerous places, while various cuts and scrapes covered various sections of his body. He gazed around the various Heartless that were still roaming the battlefield. Hours upon hours of fighting, both Roxas and Riku were able to defeat most of the thousands of Heartless that appeared before them, only the last few hundred remain.

Unfortunately, these groups of Heartless were the largest and toughest of the lot.

“Wow ... they’re persistent.” Roxas wheezed, shaking his head to keep hold of his concentration.

Just at that moment, Roxas caught sight of Riku falling across to his side from a conflict with a Behemoth Heartless, shown to be as beaten up as Roxas had been. Riku rose hesitantly to his knees, coughing and wheezing in sheer pain.

“There’s no end to this, is there?” Riku moaned, struggling to speak.

“What? Are you backing down already?” Roxas jokingly mocked, lightly chuckling with the pain surging through his body.

Riku showed off a slight, confident smile as he struggled to his feet, “Me? Never, I’m just catching my breath.”

He stood tall above Roxas, chest tensed out as he drew in a deep, meaningful breath. Riku reached a hand out towards Roxas with his confident smile still roaming strong, offering assistance to help him to his feet.

“What about you? You seem to be slacking.” Riku lightly teased, showing off his cool smile.

Roxas shook his head smiling back coolly, “Tch! Get real.” He answered back, accepting the assistance.

Roxas grabbed hold of Riku’s arm, his two Keyblades in the other hand, and hoisted himself up from the dusty ground. Whilst brushing himself off, Roxas began to analyse his surrounding carefully. He instantly noticed that the various Heartless surrounding them had been waiting patiently for the two Keyblade Warriors to attack. Roxas couldn’t understand this; Heartless would normally attack to kill no matter what condition their opponents seemed to be in, but these particular Heartless looked as though they were waiting for a command of some sort. It had been as though they were puppets being controlled by the master.

“What are they waiting for?” Roxas wondered oddly, confused as to why the Heartless were acting this way.

“I don’t know ... but I’m not going to waste an opportunity like this!” Riku hastily assured, his whole body suddenly tensing up.

“Hold on Riku, we don’t know wha—” Before Roxas could finish, Riku had leaped back into combat.

“WAIT! RIKU!”

Within a few seconds, Riku had already begun his attack against the various large, remaining Heartless. He launched himself high off of the dusty, dead, sandy ground and controlled his body into a spinning strike. Instantly, as though automatically, the opposing Heartless swept their large, bouldering arms against Riku’s incoming attack. Completely taking Riku by surprise, He swiftly evaded the large arms and doubled back to gain distance. He glared towards the Heartless with both disgust and confusion, regaining his balance and preparing for another attempt.

Roxas also couldn’t understand this abnormal behaviour, but not just about the Heartless’ movements

... Riku's as well. Although Riku seemed in his usual, amnesia-like state; Roxas gained the feeling that something had been drawing Riku in, causing him to become more aggressive, more determined and more reckless to fight. Roxas glared closely as he noticed Riku's body shudder, as though he had begun to react against a conflicting power. At that same exact moment, every one of the surrounding Heartless began to lift their head skyward, gazing blankly towards the hazy sky of the wasteland. Black mist from the various Heartless began to seep to one specific point through the thick clouds. Within a single flow, the clouds began to spread apart, slowly revealing a blue, heart-shaped moon shining with glory over the Keyblade Wasteland. Suddenly, Roxas' mind snapped with the same image of the moon in his mind when he first entered the area. This, in turn, caused Roxas' head to throb with pain. He swiftly tried to shake the pain away, knowing that this shouldn't be the time for experiencing any painful and unknown flashbacks. But the moment he stopped shaking his head, he began to hear a very loud and peculiar sound.

Ba-Dump ... Ba-Dump ...

Roxas' head began to gradually lift, eyes wide and shaking instantly with fear. He had never felt a powerful and tormenting presence throughout his whole existence until now.

Ba-Dump ... Ba-Dump ...

Riku's mind began to scream in agony, seemingly bellowing out for the one thing that it desired the most; the lost memories. Riku staggered on the spot, trying his best to keep control of his own body and mind. He continuously found hazed out images fly past that were far too difficult for him to work the detail out. Riku's head suddenly shot up with eyes glaring towards the heart-shaped blue moon, feeling this strengthening presence somehow connecting with the shattered Chains of Memories in his mind.

Ba-Dump ... Ba-Dump ...

All the various remaining Heartless that surrounded the two Keyblade Warriors began to disappear into the rising dark mist, seeping away as sacrifices towards the Heart-shaped blue moon. Within a short time frame, the dark mist gradually began to take physical form underneath, releasing shadow over the vast Keyblade Wasteland and unleashing horrifying sound and tremors that could drive humans into fear and insanity.

Ba-Dump ... Ba-DOOM ...

"That moon is ..." Roxas finally began to realise, glaring past the forming beast towards the Heart-shaped, blue moon.

"I know that moon ..." Riku murmured hesitantly, something deep inside his mind had been showing him the hazed images, but there had been a specific object within these images that stuck out in clear view. "... KINGDOM HEARTS!" They both bellowed out in unison, their eyes both wide with terror and revelation.

Within that split second, the whole of the Wasteland began to erupt with a horrendous earthquake, everything in sight shaking up by the devastating tremors. The monstrous beast underneath Kingdom Hearts had completed its formation and began to move about freely through the sky, gaining use of its new limbs and body. The details were almost impossible to work out through the thick mist that surrounded the beast's whole being. What both Roxas and Riku were able to recognise seemed to be two monstrous wings gliding through the mist and four sets of claws that could grasp anything up to the size of Behemoth Heartless. Both Riku and Roxas were frozen with fear, eyes locked onto the ferocious beast trying to understand what it had been and how it came into existence. The misted beast swiftly change direction with its wings and began to fly closer towards the two Keyblade warriors. Roxas could catch a glimpse of two large, serpent-like, blood-red eyes that locked onto both him and Riku; ready to kill its prey. Roxas swiftly switched his sight to Riku, noticing instantly that he had been unable to move whatsoever. Riku began to clutch his head again; his mind continued to be affected by the misted beast's glare. Roxas knew they were both in a critical position with the misted beast ready to strike.

Roxas had to think and prepare to react. But before he had been able to make his move, the misted beast suddenly swooped in for the kill. Screeching sounds began to grow louder as the beast flew closer towards its prey, the speed the beast flew at had been unbelievable. Retaliating, Roxas hastily leaped towards the frozen Riku, instantly grasping onto his sleeveless jacket and launching them both out of the way from the beast's swift attack. Both Roxas and Riku had just been able to dodge the beast's claws by the skin of their teeth, tumbling across the dusty ground due to the momentum of the dodge. The misty beast began to swoop up and round as swiftly as possible, preparing for its next strike. Roxas leapt back up to his feet, hastily trying to regain his own balance. Riku struggled to his feet, feeling the pain in his mind still restricting his movement and senses. Roxas assisted him to regain his footing whilst keeping a sharp eye on the misted beast. Images continued to flash through both Roxas and Riku's minds: Roxas' consisted of the past conflict that seemed to somehow be connected to him, whilst Riku's had been more of the blurry images of his own, forgotten past.

"What is this creature?" Roxas wondered cautiously, gripping onto his Keyblades ready for the next strike by the misted beast. "It doesn't seem to be related to the Heartless or Nobodies ..."

"Whatever it is; this 'thing' isn't going to give us any time to relax." Riku commented in a frustrated tone, slouching slightly as he had trouble gasping for air and recovering his strength. Even so, he still kept his own Keyblade close, ready to make his move.

Roxas swiftly switched his sight to Riku, noticing that he seemed to be in no shape to fight the beast. "I suggest you sit this one out, Riku." Roxas recommended to him calmly, concerned about his condition. "The way that you are right now; you wouldn't last long against this creature's attacks."

"I'm not going to stand aside and become useless as you fight that 'thing' on your own." Riku refused him, shaking his head as his body raised to a strong stance. "We might have defeated hundreds of those monsters just a moment ago ... but that doesn't mean I'm completely spent!"

Just then, the misted beast swooped in for another strike, this time even faster than the last. Roxas and Riku turned swiftly as they noticed this and hastily dodged to the side as the beast's claw attempted to grab them.

"That isn't what I mean! I can tell completely that you're being affected by this creature! If you hesitate for a moment, you're finished!" Roxas continued to warn him, instantly leaping back to his feet after the winged beast passed. "Don't be reckless!"

"DON'T JUDGE ME!" Riku roared back in anger, eyes flaring with frustration. "I may have lost all my memories but I am not weak! If I have to show you to believe me, then I will!"

Roxas drew back in shock by Riku's outburst, not expecting him at all to lash out like that. Roxas then sighed sorrowfully, shaking his head slightly to rethink about the situation.

"Just ... be careful." Roxas smiled sadly, not wanting to start a needless conflict between the two of them.

"... Just don't get in my way." Riku stated spitefully, now focusing his attention towards the misted beast.

Roxas stepped out of the way as Riku charged towards the misted beast's direction, Keyblade ready in hand for a clash with the monstrous creature. Roxas then began to carefully analyse the misted beast, trying to spot any weakness or vital areas that could give them the upper-hand. The problem about this had been that the thick mist around the body of the beast prevented Roxas to figure out any openings. The misted beast then began to swoop in for another, devastating strike, this time locked completely onto Riku. Riku instantly caught sight of, and hoped for, the misted beast's concentration towards him as the main prey. He swiftly halted to a controlled stop and drew his body into his main battle stance. Then, with his free-hand raised towards the beast, he began to clench it into a tense fist, taunting the creature that he will not cower away.

"I don't care if I'm an enemy or prey to you, all I want to know is why you are teasing me with these

blurry images from the memories I've lost!" Riku called out to the incoming beast with a dagger-like glare, both his Keyblade and free-fist raised towards the creature ready to clash. "So allow me to warn you now ... even though I have lost those memories ... THESE POWERS I HOLD SHOULD NEVER BE UNDERESTIMATED!"

As if time itself had completely slowed down, Roxas glared with complete shock from afar whilst he watched Riku slowly open his raised fist during the same moment as the misted beast opened its two front claws. Riku and the misted beast had locked eyes on each other, refusing to turn away. Suddenly, Riku's open hand began to show off a dark-purple aura, mist of the same texture seeping out from the palm of his hand. With slowed-down time; the beast's claws began to wrap around Riku's body, it had been undeniable that Riku could not escape now. But, this had been where Riku began to make his move. With his free hand still engulfed in dark aura, Riku grasped onto the top claw of the beast and launched himself up towards the thick mist close above, completely slipping out from the beast's clutches unscathed. Although the mist had been too thick for Riku to see the true detail of the beast, he swiftly noticed that the beast wasn't the only living thing hidden within the mist. Out of nowhere, a blade shot towards him from the mist without any warning. Riku instantly parried it with his Keyblade, not losing any of his focus whatsoever. Roxas, who still did not move at all due to the shock of watching Riku's in action; just noticed a white, glowing cloak appearing through the thick mist for just a second. Riku then instantly grasped with his free hand what he guessed had been the head of the beast and threw it down to the dusty ground with all of his might. This unexpected turn of events caused the misted beast to collide against the ground with no resistance. The whole of the Keyblade Wasteland began to erupt like another earthquake; various Keyblades that had been lodged in the dusty, dead ground began to shatter into pieces due to the powerful tremors. Riku swiftly doubled back in order to recover for his next clash and to figure out where to strike next. Roxas hastily rushed up to where Riku had been standing when he snapped out of his shocked state.

"Riku, that was immense!" Roxas complimented cheerfully, still unable to believe that Riku could perform something like that in his current amnesiac state.

"Like I said before, don't judge me just because of my condition." Riku stated to him tensely, stretching his shoulders to ease off any stiffness in his body. "Just because I have amnesia doesn't mean I'm useless."

"Right ... sorry." Roxas apologised sadly, feeling rather regretful that he couldn't use Riku's assistance as much as he should have. But he knew why he couldn't use Riku's help, "I'm just looking out for your safety. Right now this creature is using your own memories against you, something Xaphire had set up purposely to play around with your mind. Make one wrong move and the creature would have the advantage."

"And what about yourself? I've seen you hesitating in this place because you're being affected by memories playing around in your head." Riku countered, knowing about Roxas' problem. "You should think about yourself more before thinking about others."

"Mine is more complicated ... but I'll try." Roxas reluctantly answered, but decided to conclude the subject. "But right now we need to take down this creature in order to stop this and proceed."

Riku nodded instantly in agreement, and the two began to rush towards the thick mist that covered the dazed creature. They began to figure out a strategy to defeat the creature whilst they drew in to attack. "Just before you took down the creature, I noticed a person in a white cloak buried within the mist."

Roxas began to explain as he ran beside Riku, remembering the figure in the mist attacking Riku before he took out the misted beast. "My guess is that he (or she) maybe the one controlling the creature."

"So you spotted it too? Yeah, that is my thoughts exactly." Riku nodded, his eyes locked onto the thick mist where the beast lay dazed. "I suggest one of us should concentrate on the cloaked person whilst the other should concentrate on the beast."

Roxas chuckled slightly, knowing what to answer, "I feel you should do the honours."

Riku's head instantly switched round to Roxas, his face beaming with delight. "I'll be sure not to mess this up!" He assured Roxas with determination, picking up his speed towards the misted beast. With one last nod to each other for confirmation, that leapt towards their target. Their idea had been plain and simple: Roxas would concentrate on the misted beast itself whilst Riku clashed with the cloaked figure controlling the beast within the mist. Roxas knew that even though Riku would be better suited for attacking the beast itself, especially after showing off his potential earlier, the cloaked figure seemed to be linked to Riku's lost memories in some way or another. Right now, Roxas could only hope that they both can make this out alive. He certainly didn't want to lose another friend.

Riku instantly performed a strong leap straight into the mist with his Keyblade ready in his grasp, not hesitating whatsoever. Roxas then heard the familiar ricocheting sound of metal that meant Riku began to clash blades with the opposing cloaked figure. Roxas began to think about where he should execute his assault. First of all, he would need to take out the wings so he could keep the misted beast grounded. After that, he would need to find the source of the mist and get rid of it entirely. What he would do afterwards would be based on what happens after the mist clears. With these instructions repeated throughout his mind, Roxas launched his body towards the nearest wing. Both Keyblades grasped tightly and ready to strike, Roxas' eyes locked onto the wing with determination. As he drew in closer towards the stem of the monstrous wing, Roxas swiftly raised his Oathkeeper Keyblade and struck it forcefully into the wing, creating a sort of grip against the rough texture. He then began to continuously hack his Oblivion Keyblade against the stem of the wing, hoping to at least damage it enough to become unusable. As he began to slice down, he felt a sudden shudder flow through the whole wing, causing him to lose his balance slightly. Roxas hastily tightened his grip on his Oathkeeper Keyblade, steadying his body and cooling himself down. He then began to feel movement in the wing's joints. This had been when he realised: the misted beast had finally recovered from its dazed state. Roxas knew he had better work fast in order to disable the wings, otherwise he would be in for a very wild ride.

Within the thick mist, Riku struck his Keyblade against the opposing weapon with as much force as he could bear. Due to the lack of visibility, the opposing blade had the advantage of attacking from any point of the whole 360 degree radius around Riku. Thankfully Riku had been able to prevent most attacks from inflicting damage towards him as he parried whatever struck his way. Even so, Riku still hadn't been able to catch a glimpse of where his actual opponent struck from due to thick mist. Also, even though Riku continued to clash against his opponent from on top of the beast, he couldn't even gain anymore hints of the detail on the creature. Riku needed to think for a solution as soon as possible otherwise he would continue to be at a disadvantage during this whole battle. Suddenly, a blade shot towards him from above, closing in to cleave its opponent. Riku swiftly drew his Way to the Dawn Keyblade upwards in order to parry the incoming blade. As the two weapons collided against each other, Riku had been able to gain a small detail from the opposing blade. This had in fact caused Riku to gasp with surprise. The opposing blade had been shaped and detailed in a very similar fashion as Riku's own Way to the Dawn Keyblade, the only differences being that it did not contain the additional white wing and had a slightly different styled handle. Just at that point, a name instantly popped up inside his mind: Soul Eater. Just when Riku began to try and recollect where he heard that name before, the opposing weapon began to perform several jabs against Riku from various directions. As the first struck him in the shoulder, Riku began to evade and parry the sudden flurry of jabs. After a while of consecutive clashes, Riku began to feel irritated by the thick mist completely cloaking his opponent.

"Stop hiding in the mist, you COWARD!" Riku bellowed out, attempting to draw out his opponent from hiding away.

Suddenly, Riku began to feel a large rumble beneath his feet, causing him to almost lose his balance. As he tried to steady his feet, the opposing blade unexpectedly pierced him in the back. Riku lurched forward and fell to his knees, caught completely off-guard by the attack. A short moment afterwards, Riku had been thrown completely by a sudden momentum. With as much strength and energy that he had in his procession, Riku lunged his Keyblade into the thick, scaled, dark coating of the beast. He felt the misted beast begin to flail about with movement, waking up from the daze with a powerful, terrifying temper.

The misted beast began to stand on its four, monstrous, crushing legs and started to stretch out the full extent of its body. Roxas began to feel his whole body lift high up to the clouds in the sky, holding onto his Oathkeeper for dear life. He had been able to do some significant damage to the stem of the wing but it hadn't been enough to disable it entirely. Roxas tried his very best to stay grasped onto his lodged Keyblade as he continued to dangle like some sort of stuck puppet. The wing began to flutter as the misted beast tried to brush off anything irritations.

"Gah! This is CRAZY - Woah!" Roxas roared as his whole body had been flung around in various directions, trying his best not to lose grip of his Oathkeeper Keyblade.

Riku tried to gain a decent grip on his feet to stop his body being flung about as the monstrous winged beast shifted about. His teeth bear and agony surging through his wounded back.

"Man, this is such a drag!" Riku growled as he continued attempting to regain control of his body. All of a sudden, his Keyblade that had been lodged within the beast abruptly released itself. Riku gasped in surprise as his whole body flew across the thick mist, unable to see anything around him. Within a small second, Riku collided against the same tough, scaly texture of the beasts back, rolling uncontrollably about with no sense of direction whatsoever. He hastily threw his arms about to try and grab anything that could hold him down. Unexpectedly, he had been able to use his Keyblade as a sort of hook against a sharp ridge. Riku's eyes began to adjust to find out what he had caught onto: it seemed to be a type of ridge created from the body of the misted beast. Something peculiar then caught his attention; behind the ridge, a large, beating bulb grew and shrank as it released the same mist into the sky from the body of the beast. Riku's head clicked with sudden excitement and determination: he had found the source of the mist that engulfed the air. He instantly knew what he had to do; he hastily dragged his body towards the bulb and grasped it tensely with his free-hand. He drew in power from his body towards his free-hand, causing it to become engulfed with dark aura. He then took in a few deep, meaningful breaths, preparing to disable it completely.

"Time for me to level out the playing field." Riku remarked coolly, chuckling slightly.

He then strengthened the grasp on the beating bulb, and wrenched it out with everything he had. Riku roared with determination as everything he put into dislodging the bulb had been released. Once the bulb had been released from the body of the beast, Riku swiftly crushed it within the palm of his hand. The bulb dissolved into darkness, unable to release the mist anymore. Riku teeth clenched tightly as he felt victorious by disabling the cause of his and Roxas' disadvantage in this battle.

A monstrous, horrific roar of agony from the beast erupted throughout the Wasteland, causing both Roxas and Riku to flinch. The wings began to pick up the speed and ferocity as the beast tried to desperately shake of the two Keyblade warriors. Roxas continued to try and hold onto his lodged Oathkeeper Keyblade with no intention of letting go. But, unfortunately, it had been no use.

"No ... No, NOOOO!" Roxas bellowed out as his eyes widened with sudden fear.

The Keyblade's handle slipped out of Roxas' grasp, causing him to shoot straight up into the sky. His arms and legs flailing uncontrollably, Roxas continuously attempted to calm the speed of his flight. He constantly tried to transform into his Final Form, but his level of power had been too low for him to

successfully execute the transformation. With only his Oblivion Keyblade in his grasp, Roxas could only hope for a miracle that he could get out of this situation without fatal consequences. His body then halted in mid-air, hovering for a few seconds peacefully with the wind breezing past.

"... Oh boy." Roxas murmured under his breath, his facial expression showing off with realisation what began next.

His body began to slowly drop for the first second, and then instantly picked up the pace with no warning. His body plummeted back down towards the dusty Wasteland filled with dead, shattered Keyblades. It hadn't been long at all till he had closed in towards the monstrous beast, now completely exposed to the light of Kingdom Hearts' rays. This monstrous beast happened to be very similarly detailed to various dragons, such as Dragon Maleficent. It's dark and horrific scales counteracted the light blue rays from Kingdom Hearts, horrific and sharp limbs including a deadly tail that could crush most things by contact, and a large, horrific head with teeth that could turn bodies into mush and eyes that feels like it could pierce into the core of souls. In size, it certainly seemed to be at least 70 times the mass of Behemoth Heartless. Roxas drew in close to the ground, but a sudden gust of wind unexpectedly began to blow. At first, he had been curious with why wind began to blow so suddenly, but his answer arrived very soon after. The tail of the beast had begun to flick round towards Roxas, heading for direct impact. With the Oblivion Keyblade in hand, Roxas could only brace whilst the crushing tail came into contact. As though dozens of rock had abruptly been thrown against him, the crushing tail of the beast struck him with a head-on collision. The devastating impact caused Roxas to fly like a raging missile across the landscape, the bones in his body varying from cracked and shattered completely by the colossal force. After a large distance of gliding, Roxas lifelessly fell towards the dusty ground and rolled to an eventual stop.

Riku could finally take in his surrounding once again as the thick mist disappeared from sight. Still grasped onto his Keyblade with all of his might, he carefully dragged himself to his feet whilst the beast underneath him lashed about hastily. Riku could feel the strain in his whole body from what he had just gone through. But what he had mainly been concerned about had been the wound on his back from the opposing blade that pieced him. Speaking of opposing blade, Riku wondered where his hidden opponent ran off to. Riku swiftly check his surrounding to find his opponent: no one seemed to be in sight. Where was his enemy? Where did Roxas go!?

Riku tensed his grip on his Keyblade, ready to defend himself against anything that would harm him. Keeping mind of his balance, he moved carefully across the back of the monstrous beast. Riku felt that there was still a presence in the atmosphere, watching his movement like a predator. He also began to worry about Roxas; not knowing where he was and if he had been safe daunted Riku.

"What is going on?" Riku murmured cautiously, constantly changing his direction of view.

Suddenly, a rough, gloved hand calmly rested on his right shoulder and a voice that sounded like it came out of the darkness itself echoed close behind him.

"Maybe you should rely more on those senses of yours." The cold, eerie voice suggested, chuckling deeply.

Riku whipped round, slicing with his Keyblade towards the direction of the eerie voice. There had been no one there. Riku's head continuously switched from side to side to find the person who spoke. Then the same voice echoed once again.

"Are you afraid?" The voice whispered curiously.

Riku twisted round once again, this time to find that he had now become face-to-face with a tall, dark man with a terrifying smile. Suddenly, Riku's mind snapped in agony.

"I ... I know you." Riku stuttered painfully, his free hand pressed against his head. "Xeh ... Xehanort: Seeker of D-Darkness!"

“Hmph. Very well remembered for someone with the case of amnesia.” The dark man chuckled deeply. “But ... do you remember your opponent?”

He then pointed over towards the head of the monstrous beast. Riku cautiously switched his sight towards the direction Xehanort had been pointing. A white-cloaked figure strode proudly over towards Riku from the distance. The weapon Soul Eater tightly in his grasp, the cloaked figure seemed ready to attack. Riku raised his Way to the Dawn Keyblade slightly ready to clash blades. But as Riku made the first move by lunging forward, the cloaked figure easily brushed the Way to the Dawn Keyblade aside and aggressively grasped Riku round the neck, pointing the Soul Eater blade towards the position of his heart. Riku ended up into a stalemate, both him and his opponent holding each other by the neck aggressively and ready to kill with their weapon.

“Wh-WHO ARE YOU!?” Riku roared out at his opponent, hastily gasping for breath.

The opponent stayed silent, no noises coming out of him at all.

“How’s about I give you a hint.” Xehanort eerily spoke from behind Riku, arms crossed with satisfaction.

He trod past Riku without any eye contact, and grasped the hood of his opponent.

“Say hello to the bearer of your memories.” Xehanort stated clearly, throwing back the opponents hood. Riku’s eyes instantly widened with shock and confusion. Who he laid eyes upon had been like gazing at his own exact reflection, except that the reflection had the intention to annihilate the original.

“Say hello to the Riku Replica.”

Far away, the wind peacefully whistled as it passed through the Keyblade wasteland. Roxas just continued to lie on the Wasteland ground, far away from Riku and the monstrous beast. Eyes completely shut and no movement throughout his body whatsoever. His Organisation cloak fluttered calmly in the wind, clothes ripped and body severely damaged. He was completely lifeless.

21 - Resolve

Roxas continued to lay helpless on his back, unable to move any of his limbs at all. The area around him had been engulfed with a completely plain white surrounding, no object in the distance at all and no echoes of sound whatsoever. Roxas struggled to think; he didn't know what had happened or what condition he ended up in. Had he been fully erased or just been knocked out? Had Riku been able to hold up in the battle on his own? And what should he do now?

All these questions continued to appear in his mind, yet he could not find an answer to them even if he had been able to move. Roxas attempted to lift each one of his limbs for any signs of movement ... but this itself had been no success. After several attempts to move, Roxas finally gave up and sighed in frustration. Roxas then began to gaze towards the plain white emptiness above, trying to clear his mind. Tap ... tap ... tap ...

Roxas' body instantly shivered with fright, the sudden echoes appearing from absolute silence caught him off-guard completely. The taps, or footsteps, continued to echo around him as they grew louder and closer. Roxas noticed in no time that these footsteps were coming from behind him, causing him to try and lift his head back as he wondered who it had been. But as he tried to lift his head back to find where this sound had been originating from, his neck began to strain intensely and in turn caused him to give up on trying. As the footsteps drew in closer, Roxas began to feel increasingly edgy and nervous, not knowing who had been approaching him from behind.

"Wh-who's there?" Roxas called out tensely, his anxious voice echoing in the distance as it conflicted against the echoing footsteps. "Speak!"

The moment he called out, the footsteps stopped suddenly in an instant. The surrounding blank area returned to its initial silence, reverting back to the area's empty atmosphere. Roxas began to sweat, beginning to feel rather disturbed by this whole scenario.

"Right now you should be at least grateful that you survived such a horrific collision with that tail." A sweet, familiar voice finally echoed back; completely blowing away Roxas' anxiousness and in turn leaving him totally shocked and relieved at the same time. "If you didn't brace yourself in time, it would have been the end for you the moment that tail made contact."

Upon that moment, a light shadow loomed over Roxas, breaking his sight away from the complete emptiness surrounding him. Roxas instantly smiled the moment he lifted his head to catch sight of the girl who called back to him.

"You certainly know how to keep up that mysterious aura of yours, Naminé." Roxas joked with a small chuckle, continuously feeling relieved to gaze at such a beautiful sight.

Naminé had leant over Roxas from behind as her smooth, bright blond hair began to hang freely by her shoulder. From what Roxas could see, Naminé had been showing her usual, caring smile as she giggled quietly.

Riku glared horrifyingly towards his Replica, both still locked in the stalemate as they continued to grasp onto each other's necks and their weapons held ready for a fatal blow. As everything kept silent, the breeze began to blow strongly across the plain of the Keyblade Wasteland. The Monstrous Beast had settled down on the dusty ground, waiting patiently for any command by its master. Upon the top of the Monstrous Beast, the battle continued to unfold. Xehanort: Seeker of Darkness watched the two struggle against each other in their locked stalemate, smirking horribly due to his amusement with watching both Riku and the Replica give off such an intense atmosphere. He silently stood back and continued to

watch the entertainment commence.

“How ... how is this possible?” Riku stuttered nervously, unable to comprehend this whole situation. As Riku spoke, he also began to try and struggle his way out of the stalemate, finding a weak point that could break him free. “How could there be a fake me!?”

The Replica kept silent for a moment longer, hiding his face behind the long, silver hair. Unexpectedly, a horrific, soul-piercing laughter began to echo the surrounding battlefield, causing Riku’s whole body to shiver in terror. This laughter gradually grew louder and more insane, causing even the Monstrous Beast below to become restless. This laughter had been coming from the Replica, unable to control himself at all for some reason. The Replica lifted his head up into towards the sky above, letting out all the laughter in his body. Riku didn’t understand what had been going on, but began to feel the laughter pierce his ears painfully. He tried to budge himself out of the Replica’s grip but it tightened round his neck the moment he tried, causing him to gasp. In turn, Riku instantly tightened his own grasp of the replica’s neck, keeping the stalemate balanced. Instantly after, the Replica abruptly stopped the insane laughter and locked his sight back towards Riku, showing off the smile of insanity.

“A fake ...” The Replica finally answered, still madly chuckling away. His horrific, dark smile continued to burn in Riku’s mind, causing him to hesitate. “... Yes, that is what I am. But, is that what I should be?”

“W-what do you mean?” Riku nervously questioned, trying to keep his focus with the situation. “How could you be something other than a fake me?”

“Heheheh ... It fairly simple, really.” The Replica began to explain keeping his strong grasp on Riku’s neck. “First of all, how could I be the fake when I have the memories of the original? Second, how cou – ACK!”

The Replica had suddenly been interrupted by a sneak attack by Riku. Hoping that this had been the correct opportunity, Riku had struck his Way to the Dawn Keyblade into the side of the Replica underneath the arm that had been grasping his neck. With this, the Replica had reacted to the attack and loosened his grip on Riku, his Soul Eater Weapon even dropped due to the retaliation. Riku knew this had been his crucial opportunity. With everything he had, Riku swiftly swung his leg round to kick the Replica in the same place he had struck with his Keyblade. But before his boot could come into contact with the target, the Replica’s had suddenly grasped Riku’s ankle tightly. Riku eyes widened with shock, he then began to hear the familiar horrid chuckles echo around him.

“How sly of you; interrupting me in the middle of my explanation.” The Replica eerily spoke out, lifting his head slowly and showing off an eerie smirk. “It’s seems as though I’m going to have to teach you some important manners.”

With that, The Replica placed all of his strength in his arms, grasping hold of Riku’s leg as tight as possible. Riku hastily tried to kick away from the Replica but this had been near impossible. The Replica then swung round with an immense amount of might backed up inside the muscles of his body, causing Riku to lift off of the Monstrous back of the Beast completely. The Replica span continuously with a staggering speed from what could be seen as him using Riku as a sort of Hammer Throw. Xehanort stood back further but continued to what the event with amusement, laughing eerily due to the whole situation occurring. Within one last strong swoop, The Replica let go of Riku’s ankle and threw him towards the sky above. Without even thinking, Riku instantly attempted to recover himself with some success, but became terribly dizzy due to the whole situation. Riku carefully landed onto the back of the Monstrous Beast, trying to recover from the severe dizziness. He then began to hear the Replica continue his so called ‘explanation’.

“So back to what I had been saying; how could I be the ‘fake’ if I have the original’s memories and the original does not have any memories whatsoever? That would just seem too ridiculous.” The Replica continued, treading slowly to the recovering Riku as he shrugged off any strain left by the earlier throw.

“S-so ... are you saying that I might be ... t-the ‘fake’?” Riku murmured with trouble, struggled back to

his feet as he tried to get rid of the dizziness. "I r-refuse ... to believe such nonsense!"

"Believe what you will; in the end though, it would only seem more natural that the fact would rise over the opinion." The Replica proudly towered over Riku, eyes locked like arrows aiming for the target menacingly. "To think the day where the 'copy' would rise triumphant over the 'original' may have finally arrived."

With that, the Replica swiftly grasped Riku by the collar and held him down against the Monstrous Beast's back with as much might as possible. Riku retaliated as hastily as possible with grasping the Replica's arm in an attempt to pry it away. As this continued on, they swiftly began to clash weapons with each other, attempting forcefully to overthrow the other as much as possible. Blades ricocheted destructively as the two flailed their weapons against each other. Riku tried to defend himself from the Replica's attacks whilst at the same time prying the arm away from holding his body down, making sure not to lose any of his focus. As he did this, a question appeared crystal clear in his mind, something that he needed to get off of his chest. In desperation, Riku hastily kicked with all the force in his body, hoping to break himself away from the bloodthirsty Replica. Riku's boot jabbed into the Replica's side, right where the wound from earlier had been. The Replica roared in agony, losing his strength and focus. Riku instantly pried the Replica's arm away and struck his Keyblade into his opponent's shoulder, feeling both determined and relieved. The Replica hastily leapt back in an instant, hoping to recover from Riku's sudden counterattack. Riku lifted to his feet, breathing heavily from the clash. Keyblade in hand, Riku glared towards his opponent with deadly eyes, knowing not to hold back. The Replica, on the other hand, grasped the wound on his side and gasped for air, struggling to breathe. Even with this, the Replica still had his eyes locked fully onto Riku. Observing the whole event, Xehanort could not help but smile menacingly throughout due to the amount of enjoyment he had been getting out of it.

"Tell me: What is your reason for fighting me?" Riku began to question the Replica, wishing to know the full story of why the Replica wanted to desperately take him down. "You go on about 'fake' overthrowing 'original' due to memories, but for what cause? I need to know the detail to understand the reason to fight."

The Replica's expression abruptly lit up with surprise, but then began to turn rather glum. Riku gazed with confusion, watching his own Replica showing such an expression caused him to wonder more curiously on what had been the Replica's motive. He then heard an unusually sad chuckle coming from the Replica.

"I guess that is the right question to ask, especially for someone with amnesia." The Replica stated solemnly, showing off a more familiar expression that Riku could relate to. "Ever since our last clash in Castle Oblivion; I may have accepted myself as being a fake but I could not shake off the desire for more. I refused to fall as a failure."

Riku nodded lightly, taking in what the Replica had been trying to say. But then his mind opened up another blurry flashback. Although this had been as indescribable as the others, Riku had just been able to make out two figures clashing weapons in front of a familiar mansion-like building. Riku's abrupt hesitation from the sudden flashback had been vital, as the Replica used this to his advantage. Without any hint or sound, The Replica sped towards Riku and struck him in the chest with the Soul Eater blade, causing Riku to stumble backwards from the force and become completely breathless by the sudden shock. As he tried to recover his lungs, an eerie voice whispered from behind.

"But in order for me to succeed; I cannot allow myself to be forever stuck in the shadow of the other." The Replica sneered; his eerie voice caused Riku to shiver horribly. "Only one 'Riku' can rise towards success."

This statement caused Riku to react hastily, leaping out of the way no matter if the Replica would have actually struck him or not. Landing with a safer distance from the Replica, Riku glared at him with cautious eyes. The Replica rose to his feet, showing off a proud yet serious stance. Both had eyes on

each other, refusing to be distracted by their surroundings. And then, the Replica raised his free hand towards the sky, ready to snap his fingers.

"I will not be a meaningless 'puppet' anymore." The Replica stated, eyes locked on the target. "It's time we took this battle to the sky."

With that, the Replica snapped his fingers, allowing the sound of the snap to echo throughout the Wasteland. The moment Xehanort heard the snap; he began to fade away, knowing what would follow. But before disappearing completely, Riku just heard Xehanort mutter under his breath.

"It's time for the main event." Xehanort chuckled, crossing his arms in satisfaction just before finally disappearing from sight.

At that moment, Riku felt a sudden jolt from the Monstrous Beast underneath his feet. The Monstrous Beast shuffled and stretched with absolute enthusiasm, roaring out with anticipation. It began to flutter its wings vigorously, ready to take flight. Riku slowly knelt down to place his free hand against the back of the Beast, bracing himself for what was about to happen. The Replica, however, stood strong and firm on top of the Beast whilst also refusing to show any hesitation in the situation. The Monstrous Beast shuffled back slightly, correcting its positioning, and then shot towards the sky with no warning at all. Riku managed to be able to grasp onto the back of the Beast securely, but his feet were slipping from behind due to the intense speed of the Beast. As he lifted up his head, he instantly noticed that the Replica had not moved from his place whatsoever. Instead, he began to wield his Soul Eater Blade with it pointing towards Riku, intending to attack him then and there. Riku could then spot Kingdom Hearts glaring brightly from behind the Replica, giving him a strong, powerful glow.

"If you want these 'memories' back, then you'll have to strike me down!" The Replica bellowed out, bearing his teeth horridly and he began to laugh menacingly.

With that, the Replica leapt towards Riku, swinging his Blade round with the intent of striking Riku down with one blow.

"Ever since we entered this 'Keyblade Graveyard' room, both Riku and I have been getting images flash through our minds." Roxas explained to Naminé, giving out the details whilst still unable to move from the blank-white floor. "From what I could guess, Riku seemed to be getting images from his past. But concerning me, I've been getting these images that don't even belong to me."

Naminé had sat down next to Roxas, drawing her knees up to her chin with her arms wrapped around her closed up legs. She had been nodding and asking questions about the situation Roxas and Riku had been stuck in. Throughout the duration of their time, Roxas had been describing and explaining to her everything that had happened to the two Keyblade wielders since Roxas and Naminé last met each other. When Roxas spoke about his fight with Axel, there had been a clear sign of bitterness as he spoke; this caused him to take pauses on occasions to allow his emotions to calm down. After that he spoke about the recent conflict and how he ended up the way he currently was. It had seemed that Naminé knew about his collision with the tail of the Monstrous Beast but not the full details. When Naminé listened carefully to Roxas about his and Riku's recent memory sparks, nodding slowly and silently beside him. Then from out of nowhere, Naminé expression sparked up with realisation, her eyes widening with surprise as she had placed together the info she had gained from Roxas.

"Could it be ... that Xaphire re-created 'him'?" Naminé began to wonder to herself out loud, showing off a curious yet slightly afraid expression as she sat up with a straight figure. "But that shouldn't be possible; he was destroyed back in Castle Oblivion."

"Who's 'him'?" Roxas questioned, gazing towards her with confusion.

"Riku's Replica, or as the Organization called him: 'Repliku'." Naminé answered, turning to him with a serious expression.

"Replica!?" Roxas bellowed with shock, knowing that word all too well.

“That’s right, a replica similar to Xion.” Naminé nodded, knowing what began to appear in his mind. “They were both part of the ‘Replica Experiment’ Programme Vexen had been working during his time in the Organization. When he had been assigned to Castle Oblivion with Axel, Marluxia and the other 3 Members, he created the Riku Replica to use as an object for luring Sora’s into their clutches ... Something I reluctantly assisted with.”

Roxas tried to take in everything from her explanation, although the last statement struck him off-guard. A second afterwards though, Roxas understood that Naminé had been helping out with the plan against her own will.

“How did the Replica end up getting destroyed?” He then wondered, remembering her stating that the Replica had eventually met its demise back then.

“He met up with the ‘original’ Riku in the Castle and fought him till the Replica eventually fell.” Naminé stated, showing a glum expression as she spoke. “I thought he would have left in peace, but after your memory spark situation; I’m positive Xaphire re-created the Replica as a way of taunting Riku about his lost memories and a way to stall the both of you from tracking Xaphire down.”

The moment Naminé spoke that last statement, Roxas groaned with sudden frustration, “This ‘Four Doors’ game Xaphire’s been stalling us with is annoying me to no end.” Roxas growled, “All it has been up until now is ‘fight this’ and ‘fight that’, and deciphering a riddle that makes no sense whatsoever!”

“You sound like your giving in.” Naminé noticed instantly, turning to him with her saddened expression. “I thought you were Sora’s Nobody; someone who would never give up in a conflict as serious as this.” “Yeah well, when I was a part of Sora, there had been time where even he considered giving up on his battles.” Roxas moodily admitted, trying not to make a huge fuss of his current thoughts, “At the moment, I just feel like this whole ordeal is repetitive and getting us nowhere. And now here I am, stuck with a broken body and completely useless.”

Both of them sighed, and a moment of silence drew upon them. Roxas gazed up towards the blank-white sky above, trying to clear his mind. Naminé, on the other hand, hugged her legs and sat in a closed up position, trying to think of what to do.

“So, how would Xaphire be able to re-create the Replica?” Roxas eventually questioned, turning his heat towards her. “He may be cunning, but I wouldn’t think he would be as intelligent as that ‘mad scientist’.”

“But that’s it; Xaphire has a staggering amount of intelligence that he would use to be able to control whatever that maybe in his grasp to his maximum advantage. From past ‘Replica’ programmes to controlling armies of Heartless and Nobodies, he will use whatever’s necessary to complete his goal.” Naminé explained, using what she knows from the info she had gathered on the Organization’s Number XV. “He would probably have used the abandoned Replica machine in Castle Oblivion to re-create the Riku Replica, using the data Vexen had recorded as reference. After that, he probably inserted sections of Riku’s lost memories into the Replica’s artificial DNA.”

“Wow, talk about being stubborn.” Roxas murmured lowly, feeling even more confused and frustrated than before. “And that some precise guessing you did, Naminé.”

“It’s only a theory.” Naminé shrugged lightly, showing yet attempting to hide a slight smile. “Besides, if the ‘original’ Riku destroys the Replica, those memories would revert back to its original owner from what I have gathered.”

Roxas’ head shot up from this sudden statement, “Are you serious!?” His voice rose with surprise.

“It’s a strong possibility, but that’s only if he defeats the Replica.” Naminé nodded, although showing a lighter tone, something held her back from properly smiling. “Also this would not recover his memories completely, it would speed up the pace for when I repair the chains when you reach Castle Oblivion.”

“Well, at least’s there’s some positive outcome.” Roxas lightly sighed with relief.

Naminé sweetly smiled, happy to see Roxas with a positive outlook, but soon the smile dropped as she looked away. Even though she tried to hide it, Roxas instantly caught sight of it and grew rather curious as to why she began to act this way.

"Is something the matter, Naminé?" Roxas asked her, "You've been looking down for quite a while now."

"It's ... nothing you should be worrying about." Naminé stuttered, knowing Roxas had enough problems on his mind.

"It is if it's concerning you." Roxas replied stubbornly, not allowing her to hide away her problems. Naminé blushed slightly the moment after Roxas spoke back, feeling rather grateful he was looking out for her.

She let out a small sigh, and then began to speak her mind, "It's just that ... I've lost the ability to connect with Kairi."

"What!?" Roxas bellowed abruptly, shocked by what she had admitted. "But how is that possible? You're meant to be Kairi's Nobody!"

"I know that!" Naminé loudly spoke out, trying to hush Roxas' outburst. "Not long after I last met up with you, I tried to link up with Kairi so I could check up on her. But I found out that I failed to connect with her and I've become completely separated from her being entirely."

"No way ..." Roxas couldn't believe what he had been hearing. With Naminé being unable to connect with Kairi, Roxas knew instantly that Kairi was now in trouble. Drawing in a meaningful, determined breath, Roxas stated out, "I can't let this happen."

"But you're in no state to solve this and I can't help you in my current form." Naminé argued back, reminding him that she is only able to talk with him through a type of telepathy and is unable to reach him physically.

Roxas shook his head, "If Sora found out Kairi was struck down, taken hostage, or even worse; then both Sora and I would have failed to keep our promises to protect those we both care about." Roxas strongly stated, knowing full well how Sora would feel about this situation. "If Sora loses Kairi ... then I would lose you, and I refuse to watch another one I care about fade from existence. I'm not going to stay stuck here like a useless corpse, and I'm not going to turn back on my resolve!"

Roxas then noticed Naminé whip her head away from facing Roxas, closing herself up tightly into a ball and began to shake violently. Roxas then began to hear the one sound that he had detested the most: the sound of her weeping sorrowfully.

"Y-yet I'm the one w-who's useless." Naminé sobbed, beating herself up. "I c-can't help you physically. I can't save Sora. I c-couldn't even keep my original persona safe! All I've been doing is telling you what to do and where to go."

Roxas watched her hide away in a curled up ball and weep, although it was hard to tell whether or not she had actually been crying due to how silent she was. Roxas sighed heavily, and then noticed that Naminé had placed her hand against the blank-white floor to keep herself upright in her curled up position. With all of his might and pain, Roxas stretched his own hand out and softly grasped hers, feeling her delicate palm close around his own. He began to sooth the back of her hand with his thumb whilst keeping a gentle grip. Naminé lifted her head ever so slightly and watched Roxas sooth her carefully, hoping to lift her worries.

"You talk about being unable to help due to your current 'position', but you have guided me through ordeals that could have broken me. Not just here but all the way back since we met in that digitized Twilight Town. Knowing that you were by my side, you kept me from losing myself when things got low and allowed me to feel like I was my own being." Roxas thoughtfully soothed, fully aware of how helpful she has been. He then began to smile towards her, lightening up the atmosphere around them, "And besides, you've have a very important role coming up soon with repairing Riku's chains of memories."

So getting all teary about being useless certainly won't get us anywhere."

"Yeah, that's true." Naminé smiled, nodding in agreement, "But-"

"No Buts!" Roxas snapped. "No matter what object is obstructing us, we can overcome it."

The two of them fell silent for a moment, trying to read each other's emotion. Roxas then turned to gaze towards the blank-white sky above them, taking in a deep, powerful breath. Suddenly, his body tensed up and shook violently as he began to critically concentrate on what he was about to do. Naminé's eyes widened with shock as she noticed him prepare for what she knew was about to happen.

"No, don't do that! It's Impossible!" Naminé yelled out, trying to prevent him from continuing, "If you attempt that, you'll just make your condition worse."

"Well ... there's no harm in trying." Roxas replied back, gritting his teeth in the process.

Whilst still holding Naminé hand, Roxas placed his free hand on the floor beneath him to give him solid stability as he began his attempt to break out of his paralysed position. Naminé could only watch as he continuously drew in more power in his body. Roxas began to let out a low growl and the whole area began to shiver due to the almighty force Roxas placed in his body. At first it seemed like no use; but after a while, progressing seemed to finally show up. Roxas's back began to rise from the floor, arching up as though it was literally being resurrected. Roxas' growl grew stronger and louder and he continued to place more pressure in his body. He refused to let go of his resolve, no matter what stood in his way. With one last push, Roxas slammed his free hand against the floor yet still kept hold of Naminé's hand with his other. Just at that moment, Roxas threw himself to his feet, finally regaining control. Naminé gasped with shock, gobsmacked by the successful outcome.

"See, this is why you should never doubt me." Roxas chuckled, giving out a cheeky grin to her. "It's seems we both should keep one thing in mind: we should always have a positive mind-set."

It took Naminé a while to take in what just happened, but ended up smiling back cheerfully. Roxas properly turned to her, still holding her hand yet this time with confidence.

"So, are you ready to head on together?" Roxas asked her, smiling with the confidence he had now gained.

Naminé nodded cheerfully, "Yeah," showing that she could now once again depend on Roxas and, more importantly, herself. Roxas pulled her up to her feet, helping her stand beside him. As he did this, light began to blind his surroundings, catching him off-guard. Just before everything completely disappeared, Roxas caught sight of Naminé's confident smile one last time and her voice echoing around him.

"Thank you. Roxas."

Roxas' eyes abruptly flew open. All at once, unbearable pain surged through his whole body, causing him to gasp horridly. He knew now that he had returned to reality, although not in the best way. Roxas noticed instantly that he was in the same position as he had been in the dream he had. He examined his surroundings carefully; he noticed the same deserted wasteland with thousands of Keyblades lodged tight in the dusty ground. He saw the same dark clear sky with the blue Kingdom Hearts overseeing the whole surrounding area. Roxas then lowered and caught sight of both his Oblivion and Oathkeeper Keyblades lying motionless by his side. Roxas took in a few deep breaths, trying to sooth his own, broken body from the agony that continued to surge through him. Then with the best of his abilities in his current state, he grasped hold of both Keyblades and began to concentrate.

"Curaga!" Roxas roared at the top of his voice, tensing up the muscles in his body.

In no time at all, rings of green auras engulfed Roxas' body, beginning to heal him straight away. Roxas then began to feel every section of his body repair as a staggeringly fast rate, causing him to also realise the extent of damage the Monstrous Beast's tail had done to his body. After a short while, the healing had been complete with nothing left damaged at all. Roxas took in one last breath and hoisted himself to

his feet, feeling the stiffness in his body. He began to feel the dusty breeze of the wasteland brush against him, giving him a refreshed mind. Stretching himself out, Roxas continued to think about one of Naminé's statements.

"If the 'original' Riku destroys the Replica, those memories would revert back to its original owner." That gave Roxas the motivation to strive forwards. Keeping everything that Naminé stated in his mind, Roxas began to locate the Monstrous Beast and Riku's position. This did not take him too long as he spotted the Beast gliding through the dust filled sky in the distance. With his eyes locked on the target, Roxas leapt into action and ran towards the location of the Beast, his Keyblades grasped in both his hands.

Riku swayed his body hastily to dodge the Replica's oncoming attack, trying not to lose his grip on the Monstrous Beast's back as the Beast continued to soar skywards. The Replica swung his Soul Eater weapon but just missed Riku by a short distance. The Replica then swiftly dug his feet into the back of the Beast, causing friction and steadiness in his recovery. The Monstrous Beast had been flying at a staggeringly fast rate, something at a normal being wouldn't be able to handle. This, of course, meant that Riku struggled to keep a firm grasp on the back of the Beast, no matter what he tried. Finally, the Beast stabilised and began to level its flight, allowing Riku to find his feet again. Riku swiftly leapt to his feet, the strong rush of wind blowing through his long, silver hair. The Replica locked his eyes on Riku once again, not allowing his target to escape his sight. Both Riku and the Replica tightened the grip on their weapons and leapt to clash with each other. The two weapons ricocheted off each other instantly, sending the two off balance slightly. They both recovered themselves and clashed blades in a second attempt, refusing to falter.

"It that all you have?" The Replica taunted, giving out a low chuckle under his staggering breath.

"Rather pathetic for a Keyblade Warrior."

"This is nothing!" Riku spat back, gritting his teeth as his struck the Replica as strong as possible in the chest where he had momentarily let his guard down.

The Replica stepped back, gripping his chest from where Riku had struck him. He then shook his head tensely, beating himself up due to not noticing he had let his guard down. The two the swiftly continued to clash a series of blows against each other, concentrating solely on the battle at hand. That had been until Riku heard a sudden call out to him below.

"OI, RIKU!" A familiar voice roared from the distance.

Riku hastily pushed the Replica back and turned to locate where the call out came from. It didn't take him too long to spot Roxas sprinting alongside the Monstrous Beast, somehow catching up to the speed of the Beast's flight.

"Roxas!?" Riku bellowed out in surprise, "Where have you been!?"

"I was preoccupied!" Roxas called back, chuckling light-heartedly, but instantly turned serious afterwards. "Keep concentrating on your opponent! I'll take down this beast!"

Riku nodded in agreement, but as soon as he turned to face the Replica, he had been struck in the shoulder by the Soul Eater Blade. Riku staggered back, pressing his free-hand against the wound that had opened up. He heard the Replica begin to laugh manically, causing him to grit his teeth in anger. Having no time to recover his wound, Riku hastily began to clash his Keyblade against the Replica. Roxas noticed Riku get struck by his opponent, apologising in his mind about distracting Riku.

Oops ... Sorry Riku.

He then turned his concentration towards the Monstrous Beast, locking his gaze on its head. Roxas then tensed up his body, still running alongside the Beast, and roared, "Final Form!"

His body and Organization clothing instantly transformed into his Final Form attire, seeming as though his cloak hadn't been damaged whatsoever. Roxas's legs lifted and began to soar at a constant pace,

rivalling the Monstrous Beast's own pace of flight. With eyes locked on target, Roxas twisted his body and shot towards the Beast, his Keyblades soaring by his side ready to strike.

Riku ducked as the Replica jabbed his weapon forwards, missing the target at the last second. Riku then hastily shoved his whole body forward, tackling his Replica to the Beast's back. He then swiftly executed a flurry of strikes, targeting weak points on the Replica. The Replica, in turn, parried most of the oncoming strikes, only missing a few of the lesser attacks. The Replica then kicked back, forcing Riku out of the way so he could recover to his feet. Both Riku and the Replica then once again clashed their blades together and began to execute several blows on each other. They were both evenly matched, unable to come to terms as to who is the better warrior. As Riku fought, he had something on his mind from an earlier statement from the Replica:

"How could I be the 'fake' if I have the original's memories and the original does not have any memories whatsoever?"

Riku began to consider who he actually was: real or fake. Finding it ridiculous, he hastily placed it to the back of his mind and continued to clash with the Replica.

Abruptly, the Monstrous Beast jolted its body, causing both Riku and the Replica to lose their balance slightly. They both turned to the head of the beast and caught sight of Roxas attacking the Beast, attacking various points where he felt had been weak and vulnerable. Riku used this chance to deal damage towards the Replica, lodging his Keyblade into the Replica's back. The Replica roared in agony and dropped to his knees, wheezing horribly due to the vital strike.

Roxas continued to clash his Keyblades into the Beast with all of his might, trying to locate the weak points, but with barely any success. He then hastily decided to change his tactics upon realising that using normal attacks wouldn't inflict much damage. He swiftly dodged the Beast's sudden incoming claws and tail. Just then, Roxas knew the one attack that would end this completely, but could cause some unnecessary consequences in the process.

"I see how it is." Roxas murmured cheekily, tensing up his body. "It looks like I'm going to have to bring out the big gun."

Instantly, Roxas soared to a safe distance, keeping the constant speed to match the Beast's own. "Riku! Watch yourself!" Roxas bellowed out with warning, indicating of what he had in store for the Beast.

Riku caught sight of him and nodded back, prepared for what was about to happen. Roxas locked his arms towards the Keyblades beside him, charging himself up. The Keyblades then began to engulf in a bright white aura, giving out strong vibrations in the process. With that completed, Roxas swooped in to begin his technique. He soared past the Beast in a diagonal spin, allowing his Keyblades to inflict large gashes in the rock-hard skin of the Beast. He then twisted his body and swooped in for a secondary strike. The Beast could not dodge in the air due to the speed of the attacks. After a series of repetitions with his attacks, Roxas swiftly flew back towards a safe distance. He swiftly threw out his arms the moment he stabilised himself. His Keyblades span in front until the tips faced each other. A small orange aura grew in between the Keyblades, spinning about at an unbelievable speed. Roxas's body tensed up even further to the point that his muscles began to strain, but he refused to lose his concentration no matter what the cost. The aura maximized its growth to the size of the Beast's head. Roxas was ready to unleash it.

"Obliteration: Ragnarok!" Roxas roared out, throwing all of his power into the attack.

Riku grasped the Replica's hood and leapt off of the Monstrous Beast's back. Riku knew he was saving his opponent, but he knew this wasn't over yet.

The Ragnarok aura shot towards the Beast, splitting up into several aura's in the process. The auras collided into the Beast's, exploding severely upon impact. The Beast roared loudly, causing Roxas to wince as he braced his ears. After several of the Ragnarok shots collided into the Beast, the Beast

began to lose its ability of flight. The Monstrous Beast fell towards the dusty ground, crashing against the ground like a meteorite. Finally, the Beast lost its consciousness and faded away into mist.

Roxas felt the sudden urge of relief; sighing at the thought of accomplishment. He then noticed Riku and his Replica falling towards the dusty wasteland. He leapt into action and swiftly flew to catch the both of them, grasping them by the back of their clothes. He placed them down safely on the dusty ground and reverted himself to his normal Form.

Riku recovered his footing on the ground, feeling off-balance due to his time on the back of the moving Beast. He then turned towards his Replica, who had been kneeling on the dusty ground, shaking violently. Riku felt somewhat sorry for him, knowing how his Replica had always desired a true life rather than a like of a fake.

“Why ...?” The Replica spat out, refusing to make eye contact with the victor. “Why did you save me!? I am your replica. I am a FAKE!”

Riku wondered that himself: Why save his copy from his demise when he is just a fake? But then it occurred to him. He stepped closer towards his Replica and gave out his hand to help his opponent to his feet, smiling towards him. The Replica became confused because of this.

“I saved you because you are not my replica,” Riku stated proudly, keeping a serious yet light-hearted tone about him, “... you are my Nobody.”

22 - Curse of a Nobody

“I’m ... You’re Nobody?” Riku’s Replica echoed with a confused tone, unable to grasp the concept. “Are you mocking me!?”

The Replica brushed away Riku’s hand in spite, refusing the offer to help him up to his feet. He felt threatened by how Riku had been acting so kind to him all of a sudden.

“No, far from that.” Riku replied back, stepping back to give the Replica space. “When I had visions of my old memories, I had trouble with picturing the details due to them being blurred out. But I heard voices that spoke out key words such as ‘Heart’ and ‘Nobody’.”

“... And your point is?” The Replica shrugged tensely, glaring towards Riku with distaste.

“My point being that I may not have my memories, but I am able to figure out the connections behind those words.” Riku began to explain, eyes locked on his Replica hoping for an understanding between the two of them. “From what I gathered, Roxas is a part – technically a half – of someone and that they are connected by Heart and Mind. And so, looking at it from our point of view, you have my memories and so you would be considered a part of me.”

From a small distance from the two, Roxas watched with cautious eyes. He had been weary as to whether or not the Replica would attack again, considering that he has a close link with their current main enemy: Xaphire. Roxas took in a few, deep breaths to calm his mind; feeling the breeze of the Wasteland brush against his cheek. He took a slight interest into what Riku had to say, knowing that they hadn’t discussed much about the role of Nobodies whilst Riku had been in his current amnesiac state.

All of a sudden, the Replica began to laugh somewhat menacingly, causing both Roxas and Riku to step back warily.

“Hahahaha ... that’s quite the theory you have there, and a part of me wishes that to be completely true.” The Replica stated in his dark tone, but lowered his sight due to knowing the faults in that theory.

“Unfortunately you’re missing a few crucial elements; Nobodies are created naturally from the remains of people who had lost their hearts in the Darkness. Due to this, they would eventually fade away or return to their original bodies ... but not me. No, I was artificially made as a lab experiment, copying your memories and appearance only to be used as a puppet for whatever schemes the Organization had up their sleeves. No matter how much I crave to be a true person, I’m just a petty doll.”

The Replica dipped his head down, feeling useless and obsolete among a Being who he had copied and a Nobody with the strong resolve to help others. Roxas understood what the Replica meant completely, reflecting on the hardships his old friend Xion had to go through. But then both Roxas and the Replica had been caught out by surprise with Riku suddenly giving out a frustrated sigh.

“So what if you were artificially created, being controlled as a puppet through all of your short life shouldn’t drag you down.” Riku spat out tensely, showing off that he was completely serious with what he had been saying. “If you hold a piece of what the original being had been missing, you are certainly a part of that person; naturally or artificially.”

The Replica glared towards Riku in spite, trying to process everything in his mind. A moment after, he shook his head lowly and began to lift himself up to his feet. Riku watched as the Replica struggled in agony to stand up, all the injuries burning and stinging his body. Finally, the Replica stood up strong, panting due to the amount of struggle he had to put himself up with. He then continued to converse with Riku, still showing off a dark expression.

“You have a fair point ... but did you ever consider if I would ever want to become a part of you?” The

Replica began to argue back, refusing to accept Riku as his own original being. "You might have forgotten, but whenever we met during the events in Castle Oblivion a year ago; I told you that my one goal had been to become 'original', not an artificial look-a-like that hides in your shadow or even a section of your pitiful being."

Riku gazed towards his Replica, feeling rather sorry for him. He finally began to understand the Replica's sole desire: to break free from his chains that held him back from experiencing life of a true being and to gain peaceful memories of his own. Riku then began to shake his head, brushing away the sorrowful feeling that stuck in his mind. He needed to find a way to convince his Replica that joining him is the only solution for them both: allowing Riku to regain fragments of his memories as well as allowing the Replica to experience a worthwhile life.

Roxas took in everything that had been discussed during this somewhat 'debate', finding that both Riku and his Replica had shared fairly valid points. But something within this debate tickled Roxas' mind, mainly concerning the Replica's arguments. Was he afraid to accept Riku as his true being? Or had he been holding back due to his ties with Xaphire? In any case, Roxas finally decided to step in and convince the Replica with his own views and experiences.

"I agree with you, Repliku." Roxas spoke out clearly, stepping in to the conversation with his chest high and mighty. "At least, that is what I would have said if we met during the time I was still in the Organization."

Riku and The Replica switched their sights onto Roxas the moment he spoke out. Riku's initial reaction upon hearing Roxas' words caused him to feel completely betrayed, eyes wide with shock and mouth dropping open in disbelief. But then Riku realised what Roxas had actually said and hastily looked away in awkwardness. The Replica on the other hand, raised an eyebrow in curiosity, trying to find some sense in Roxas' words. Roxas turned directly towards the Replica with eyes locked on the target, refusing the Replica to escape his gaze.

"Before I merged with Sora, I always had people mocking me for being a Nobody and just a worthless shell." Roxas began to explain, keeping up his serious tone. "I knew that I was born from the shell of another being, but all the teasing and mocking during my time as an Organization XIII member drove me to the point that I desired to be an individual. The phrase 'I am me, nobody else.' kept on repeating in my mind as time went on. But during that time, I began to lose everything; the friends I cared about and the respect I tried to hold onto. In the end ... I gave in. I merged with a dormant Sora, and allowed him to become complete once again."

"It must have been torture for you ..." The Replica commented back, taking in everything the Nobody spoke about. "Something like that gives me more of a reason to refuse becoming a part of another being."

"It's funny ... because merging with Sora was a huge relief for me." Roxas lightly smiled, showing off that he truly meant what he said.

"... Excuse me!?" The Replica muttered in sudden disbelief, caught off by the surprise.

"I'm speaking the truth." Roxas nodded strongly, showing off a natural positive expression. "During my time as part of Sora, I was able to experience his memories and the care of those around him. I admit that it wasn't the same as being around my own friends but how Sora interacted with those around him allowed me to refresh my mind. I was able to meet new people whilst also seeing some old friends, even if they can't physically see me. And so, as long as I'm a part of Sora, I can stay close to those I care for and enjoy the life I have been given."

The Replica became hesitant, struggling to decide what to do. Roxas turned and nodded back at Riku, who was grateful for the help.

"T-that's a lie." The Replica fought back, trying to stand by his initial statement. "You just watch as someone else plays out their life, unable to do anything. What's the point in any of that!?"

Roxas lowly shook his head, "You're not getting it, are you? If you try to live a life as you are now, you would only suffer the Nobody's curse and allow erasure to become inevitable. It was exactly the same for me. In the end, joining with my original self was the only answer, and it'll be the same for you."

"S-stop it!" The Replica spat, unable to keep calm any longer. He slowly stepped forward and instantly began to lash out. "I WILL NEVER BE ANYONE ELSE! I AM MY OWN BEING!"

The Replica abruptly summoned the Soul Eater weapon into his grasp and swung the Blade to strike Roxas, aiming for a fatal blow. Roxas swiftly summoned his own two Keyblades, but suddenly felt a palm push him out of the way. He instantly noticed that Riku had pushed him out of the way and prepared to take on the Replica once again. Riku had already summoned out his Way to the Dawn Keyblade and swung it to clash against the oncoming attack.

The moment the two weapons collided, the sound of sharp metal shattering began to echo across the Wasteland around them. As Roxas regained his footing, his eyes suddenly widened with disbelief. He caught sight of the exact moment the two clashed. The Soul Eater Blade shattered apart the moment it ricocheted off of the Way to the Dawn's blade. He wasn't the only one caught out with disbelief, the Replica's eyes widened with devastation and horror as he could only watch his weapon shatter before his very eyes. Riku on the other hand, did not show any reaction or emotion. It seemed as though he eyes continued to concentrate on the impact of his strike and what the Replica would do next.

The Replica couldn't control the force of the momentum he had executed, causing him to stumble on his feet. Riku swiftly stepped aside as the Replica stumbled past uncontrollably. Finally, the Replica tripped and collided to the dust-covered ground, coughing due to the amount of dust he suddenly inhaled. Riku's eyes were locked on his Replica, feeling somewhat pitiful for his opponent.

"W-wha *cough, cough* b-but how...!?" The Replica stuttered in his disbelief, unable to understand how his weapon shattered so easily all of a sudden.

Roxas stepped closer with his eyes still wide with shock of what happened, "No way ... Is it starting already!?"

"Wh-what do you mean by 'it'!?" The Replica spat out, demanding as to what's going on.

Riku switched his sight towards Roxas, wondering as to what's happening to the Replica.

"Your body is already being affected by erasure." Roxas stated, beginning to feel horrible by the Replica's soon-to-be demise. "If you don't merge with Riku, your existence will be fully erased."

"HUH!? B-but I'm artificial! How can an artificial being – a puppet – be erased from existence!?" The Replica bellowed as he punched the dusty ground in refusal, eyes burning with arrogance.

"It's because no matter if you're artificial or natural, a being with no heart is a barely-lingering existence." Roxas stated in a serious, clear voice, desperate to get through to the fading Replica. "This is the Curse of a Nobody: fated to fade from memory and existence."

"You have to join with me!" Riku demanded his Replica, holding out a hand towards the fading vessel in desperation. "There's no choice anymore!"

"B-but I..." The Replica struggled, his body beginning to weaken.

"Repliku! Do you wish to fade into nothing!?" Roxas bellowed in frustration, taking everything he had to help the Replica. "Or do you wish to create your own memories!?"

He did it. The Replica's mind finally snapped, giving out a small gasp in revelation. He swiftly sat up and locked eyes on both Riku and Roxas.

"F-fine, I'll merge." The Replica nodded, although struggling due to the deterioration of his body. "But this better be worth it."

Roxas nodded to him, smiling with pride.

The Replica used all of his strength as he pushed himself up back to his feet, his feet stumbling slightly as he tried to regain balance. He then stepped forward cautiously towards Riku, who's hand froze in place as he continued to reach out towards the Replica. The Replica stopped and glared down towards

to hand, the strong desert wind whistling around his ears. Panting with exhaustion, the Replica's eyes shifted its gaze from Riku's hand to his eyes. Roxas suddenly felt as though there were mirror images of Riku, albeit wearing different attires. The Replica took in a deep breath to be sure this had been the right decision to make.

"Do you swear that this wouldn't be regretful?" The Replica questioned with a serious tone, eyes locked on Riku.

"I swear it." Riku nodded truthfully, return the serious atmosphere the both had been generating. The Replica nodded back positively, knowing now that there was no turning back. But just before he could begin the merging process, there had been something that crossed his mind that he needed to get across.

"Just so you know; I only have sections of your memories stored in my mind." The Replica confessed, feeling this was necessary for the 'original' Riku to know.

"I guessed as much, I would think it would be more difficult to have all of my original memories stored in such a short timeframe." Riku smiled, understanding the situation.

The Replica shook his head, "It isn't the amount of memories though; it's the type of memories I hold that's the problem."

Riku cocked his head slightly, somewhat confused of what he meant.

Unfortunately, he had no time to ask further about what he meant due to the Replica beginning to completely fade from existence. The Replica noticed this time, almost losing his footing due to his loss of strength. As he regained himself, The Replica switched his sight over to Roxas. Roxas gazed towards him with wonder, trying to grasp what he had meant. The Replica gave out a small, respectful smile and straightened out his posture, showing that he was now ready for the merging process.

"Well, you'll see what I mean soon enough." The Replica finally spoke, switching sight back towards Riku.

With that, the Replica grasped Riku's hand as though he was respectfully shaking it and closed his eyes peacefully whilst he calmly inhaled the air. Within that moment, bright light engulfed The Replica's body and began to rise towards the sky with magnificence. Roxas and Riku watched as The Replica's body faded away and finally merged with the true Riku, allowing The Replica to experience a true life and Riku to regain sections of his own memories. It did not take long for this process to be fully completed. The moment it all finished, Riku slowly drew in breaths to regain his bearings. Roxas smiled with relief as they had finally resolved the situation and finished the 2nd Door of this ridiculous game. But as Roxas began step forward, Riku began to clutch his head in sudden agony.

Riku was gasping as the sheer pain surged through his mind. He felt Roxas place hands on his shoulders, shaking him to regain control of his senses and shout out to him with worry. But Riku could not hear a word of what he said, struggling to hold on to his own consciousness. Abruptly, he began to see images and scenes flash through his mind, this time as clear as day. They were his memories; more specifically, they were the memories of the time he was associated with Xehanort and the side of Darkness. Riku had been reminded of the events that took place during the time he searched to regain the heart of a girl: his friend, Kairi. And he was reminded of his betrayal from his best friend and the conflict between his own arrogance and his best friend's will power. But he still could not remember the name and appearance of his best friend, still seemingly all a blur.

Roxas continued to shake Riku on the shoulders, trying to get a response out of him.

"Come on, speak to me Riku." Roxas muttered with a tense gaze, trying continuously to snap him out of it.

Finally, Roxas heard a desperate gasp, much to his own relief. Riku began to pant and breathe heavily as he properly regained his consciousness and senses. Riku hastily began to look around, trying to be sure that he was back in reality. Roxas watched him carefully, making sure that he was healthy and

safe, but also that he was still himself. He began to wonder how much memory Riku regained and the content of the memories. Roxas then stepped back to give Riku more space as he began to calm down. "Wow ... that was rough." Riku muttered breathlessly, finally feeling like he was back in reality. "How are you feeling now?" Roxas began to ask, allowing Riku to take the questions at a slow and steady pace. "Are there any improvement to your memories?"

"Yeah, some parts are clear now." Riku answered tiredly, closing his eyes and soothing his head. Roxas nodded to him; Riku's answer related to The Replica's statement before he began the merging process. Roxas then took a moment to think things through; he needed to know what specific memories Riku had regained and how this could affect his personality and emotions.

"... These memories ..." Riku began to murmur, still soothing his head. "They're full of Darkness ... and terror."

"Do you know when those memories were recorded?" Roxas questioned in reply, finding this the best possible chance find the answers he requires. "What were you doing in them?"

"These happened ... about a year ago now." Riku recollected, trying to figure out everything about these returned memories. "I was connected ... to the Darkness, I controlled the Heartless and devoured everything in my path to reach my goal. I ... betrayed my friends. I allowed hatred and fear to control me all because I desired to be strong."

Roxas' mind suddenly snapped with realisation: He remembered his time as a vessel of Darkness! This began to worry him. Riku may turn against him if Xaphire or anyone tampers with his mind. This then caused Roxas' mind to burn with revived determination to get Riku to the memory pods in Castle Oblivion before the Darkness overtakes his consciousness once again.

"Is this ... really me!?" Riku then anxiously questioned as he looked towards Roxas, beginning to feel unsure about his returned memories.

Roxas swiftly locked his eyes onto Riku and shook his head with a serious tone.

"No! That was who you were." Roxas stated with his determined expression, "Those memories recollect a time in your life where you took the wrong path. But you realised that had been the wrong choice to make and you changed back to how you were supposed to be: an ally of the Light." Riku was silent for a moment after Roxas' statement, taking in everything that he said with acknowledgment.

"I believe you." Riku finally answered back in certainty, smiling cheerfully.

Roxas sighed as he continued to feel relieved, chuckling away as he could let his worries pass away. But then something stuck on his mind that needed to be asked.

"You said that you had betrayed your best friend ... do you remember who he is?" Roxas wondered curiously, hoping for the answer he was guessing.

"Unfortunately, no I don't." Riku shook his head lowly. "I still don't even know what he looks like."

"Darn ... ah well, at least you know you have a 'best friend'." Roxas sighed with disappointment, feeling that he had his hopes too high.

"... But I do remember Kairi." Riku admitted with a small smile.

Roxas jumped up surprise; this wasn't what he had been expecting, but this certainly had been a pleasant outcome.

"Well, with that settled, I think it's time we found the exit." Roxas cheerfully concluded, stretching his body out with enthusiasm.

Riku nodded in reply and then moved his sight to search around the dusty wasteland.

"But err ... which way would that be?" Riku curiously began to wonder, unable to find anything in amongst the thousands of surrounding dormant Keyblades.

"That ..." Roxas spoke out in reply, looking around as well. "... is a very good question."

As they continued to wonder about the direction they should head, the sound of the wind began to grow

louder and stronger in force. Roxas raised his arm to cover his face from the oncoming gust.

“What’s going on now?” He asked, gritting his teeth and squinting his eyes tightly in order to keep the wasteland dust from flying in.

“Roxas! Look!” Riku hastily pointed out, noticing movement amongst the Keyblades.

Roxas followed with his eyes where Riku pointed out to and focused on the crowd of Keyblades in that specific point. Suddenly, Roxas gasped due to the sudden shock from what he gazed upon. The Keyblades were degrading into the dust! Flakes and dead debris began to break away from the Keyblades, weakening their individual strengths and potentials. And then ... Every Keyblade in the Wasteland shattered into dust. Both Roxas and Riku couldn’t believe their eyes; all the Keyblades that stood tall in this ‘Graveyard’ just died away into nothingness. But then, as the dust cleared away; three lone Keyblade stood together strongly. It had been as though they were a family together, refusing to break apart and die out. Roxas and Riku gazed towards the three Keyblades with wonder. But then Roxas’ eye lit up with sudden curiosity, unable to leave the Keyblades as they were. He suddenly leapt into a swift run as he headed towards the three Keyblades, something rattling around in his mind whilst he ran.

“Roxas, Hold up!” Riku called out, finding this sudden outburst odd for Roxas. He then wondered to himself, “What’s up with him?”

Finally reaching the three lone Keyblades, Roxas skidded to a halt and inspected them with full concentration. He heard Riku running up to a halt beside him, but kept his sight locked strongly on the Keyblades. Riku stepped closer to him, gazing at the Keyblades with curious eyes.

The three Keyblades were designed vastly differently from each other: the middle Keyblade, and also the tallest, had a broad, golden texture to show that it had been powerful to use against opponents. The left Keyblade had a smooth, ocean blue texture to give it an easy to wield yet magical style of use. And the final Keyblade on the right had a light, bronze texture to give the idea that it had been a fast and swift weapon yet also quite complicated to use due to the type of handle it had. Roxas continued to inspect the three Keyblades thoroughly, having this odd feeling that he had seen these before. This feeling was the exact same when he entered the Keyblade Graveyard and from when the images appeared in his mind. Riku also had felt as though he had seen these Keyblades; specifically the tall, broad centre Keyblade. It caused him to feel nostalgic, even though he could not put his finger on why he felt that way.

As Roxas’ eyes locked onto the smaller Keyblade; he began to relate to it, as though it used to be his own. He began to place a hand over the handle and base of the Keyblade. Eventually, he took a firm grasp on the handle, gripping it in a way that he would wield it back-handed. But just before he could fully wield the weapon, the images from before began to appear in his mind again.

“Argh, AGAIN!?” Roxas groaned, beginning to gasp in frustration.

Riku just noticed Roxas speak out in pain; he was just about to ask him what happened but then felt a surge of pain enter his own mind. But unlike before, only one scene appeared in his mind. It had been set around the time he was very young and still wondering about the outside world. He could see in the scene of a towering man holding out the same Keyblade that Riku sees before him, and that he had placed a hand on it with determined expression. With that, Riku fell to his knees, losing consciousness within seconds of the scene appearing in his mind.

Roxas, on the other hand, caught sight of one last image. The image consisted of three friends smiling together as they gazed towards the sky above. A brown-haired, tall man; a dazzling, blue-haired woman; and a spiky blond-haired, young boy standing together peacefully. Roxas then began to lose consciousness himself, but was able to speak out three familiar names.

“Terra ... Aqua ... Ventus.” Roxas murmured sleepily, taking one last glimpse of the three Keyblades.

Just like Riku, Roxas fell to his knees wearily, unable to hold onto his consciousness any longer. Finally,

his whole body dropped to the dusty ground and the whole of the Keyblade Graveyard disappeared into the distant darkness.

23 - Fight Back

The Organization's Number XV: Xaphire strode out from the Dark Portal, keeping a tense stance as he surveyed his surroundings. Taking in a deep, exaggerating breath; his smiled and began to laugh in a dark tone. This, however, had been forced out. He couldn't care less for anything, only his ultimate goal. This forced out expression disappeared in an instant; causing him to show a blank, cold glare.

"Castle Oblivion ... oh how I have missed this place." Xaphire shook his head as he spoke, changing his expression as though it was a lifeless mechanism. "It's an honour to return to such a place that's so ... foul, cruel and irritating."

As Xaphire had stated, he had entered the halls of Castle Oblivion. The surrounding walls were marble white, giving a mysterious sensation where in fact it was full of lies and darkness. On either side on the hallway, marble-like pedestals stood tall and proud. Towards the end of the hallway were a series of stairs leading towards the next floor of the Castle.

"You sound like you haven't been here in a while." An exhausted, broken-hearted female voice called out from behind Xaphire, echoing throughout the halls.

Xaphire slowly turned his head towards the source of the voice, and gave his usual, cold glare. Instantly, a dark, human-figured Heartless had exited the Dark Portal. Behind it, a girl with long, pinkish-red hair had followed against her own will. The Heartless had a tight grip on the girl's wrist, refusing to release unless ordered to.

"Unfortunately, you would be incorrect." Xaphire broodily answered, his eyes continued to pierce the girl mentally. "I was just here a few days ago, in fact. However, every time I visit, I wonder why the Organization kept such a pathetic place as their 2nd base of operations. For now though, it seems this will be the base for the '2nd Phase' in my plan. I do hope you'll be able to assist me ... Kairi."

Kairi reacted back with an enraged scowl, disgusted by Xaphire's attitude towards her. The Heartless stared blankly towards her, showing nothing in terms of expression or emotion. Kairi gave a worried glimpse back towards the Heartless, not knowing what to do, only questions forming in her mind.

"I've been wondering about a few things that I want answers to." Kairi began her questioning, hoping to gain more understanding on the situation she had been caught up in. "Firstly; why did you take away Sora and Riku from the Islands and then kidnap me? Secondly; what is my purpose with this 'great plan' of yours? And thirdly; what will you do with me once my purpose is fulfilled?"

"Interesting, so you've become curious about my scheme?" Xaphire chuckled in his dark tone, giving off his usual sarcasm.

"No, you just haven't answered all my questions." Kairi spat in detest, frustrated by Xaphire's mocking.

"Well, only a fool of a 'bad guy' would allow their plans to be leaked to a vessel of the opposing side."

Xaphire stated with a terrifying grin, continuing to mock anything that comes to mind. "However, I will answer your 'third' question: once I'm finished my use for you, I'll just dispose you like the piece of filth that you are!"

Kairi abruptly bit her lip, keeping a cool mind as she was bombarded by Xaphire's insults. Xaphire's attitude caused her patience to be push to the tipping point; it wouldn't be long before Kairi would completely lose her temper. But Xaphire seemed to be all for crossing that boundary.

"For now, I want you to continue with your act as the weak Damsel in Distress, waiting for your heroes to come rescue you." Xaphire continued with his insults, his horrific grin etching into Kairi's mind.

"Seeing as that what you're only good at doing, I'm sure any fool would run to save you."

"Shut up ..." Kairi murmured under her breath. "I'm not weak ... I refuse to be the Damsel in Distress

anymore!"

There had been a tense moment of silence, Xaphire glaring towards her as though he would strike at any given moment. The Heartless kept a blank stare as it continued to hold onto Kairi's arm. Kairi, on the other hand, continued to hold her ground, desperately trying to gain full control of the situation.

"Fine." Xaphire abruptly answered, breaking the tension as he began to close his eyes and nod his head. "I see how it is ..."

Kairi had abruptly been caught off guard by this, retaliating with a confused expression. Just then, a snap of Xaphire's fingers suddenly echoed throughout the halls of Castle Oblivion. The Heartless suddenly reacted to the snap and stared directly towards Xaphire.

"Sora ... stand aside!" Xaphire instantly commanded, signalling the Heartless to move out of the way. The Heartless, or 'Sora's Heartless', released its grip on Kairi's arm and did as it was told to. Kairi watched as the Heartless stepped out of the line of sight between her and Xaphire. Within that next moment, Xaphire stepped forward towards the cautious Kairi; he kept up a tough, careless expression as he drew in closer. Kairi's foot shuffled back, ready to run if anything happened to her. Finally, Xaphire halted his advance and towered over Kairi, glaring down as though he was looking at an object that was in his way.

"From what I have gathered through Sora and Riku's memories; you are the '7th Princess of Heart', is that correct?" Xaphire questioned Kairi, even though he would ignore anything Kairi would say, "Now then, would you like to know the importance of a Princess? They are there to get caught up in a mess so that they can gain the attention of their saving 'Prince'!"

As Xaphire began to abruptly bellow, Kairi hastily braced herself for the worst.

"And from what I have seen through these memories; you have already been a 'Damsel in Distress' twice and waited around so that either Sora or Riku could run and save your pathetic hide!" Xaphire continued on his rant, becoming gradually more aggressive. "Face it; your soul purpose is to be the useless 'Damsel'! To add to that, you think you would help out in fighting with your friends but your attempts are WEAK and absolutely FLAWED! In the end ... YOU ARE NOTHING!!!"

Just at that moment, Kairi had unexpectedly placed a foot forward, refusing to take in anymore of Xaphire's vile insults.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Kairi roared, slamming a foot to the floor, "If that is how you feel, then I don't care! Sure, I may be a burden to Sora and Riku; but I'll continue to learn and grow as someone more than just a 'Useless Princess'! I'll help them fight, and I WILL STAND ON MY OWN TWO FEET!" Drawing in a deep breath, Kairi finally felt strong and triumphant for once. But as she glared towards Xaphire ... her confidence completely dropped. Xaphire's expression did not change in the slightest! He still had the cold, mocking glare.

"How interesting..." Xaphire murmured in a dark tone, completely blank in expression and showing a horrifying gaze. "So you're 'that' type of Princess."

Abruptly, Xaphire grasped Kairi's shoulder aggressively with one hand and summoned one of his Great-swords in another. He swung his weapon effortlessly and suddenly began to threaten her with the Blade close to slicing her throat open. Kairi reacted with a gasp, attempting to pry herself away from the man's tight grasp. Sora's Heartless stood idly in the distance, completely oblivious. Xaphire then gave out a low, terrifying chuckle with a grin that could scare any living being.

"You always do surprise me." Xaphire began to murmur, but Kairi could hear that his voice began to grow into the tone of a roaring lion. "You act upon your own but you just fall flat! You are just an embarrassment! So, I suggest you keep your mouth SHUT and do as I say! Do I make myself clear?"

Kairi trembled as she breathed heavily, unable to fight back. She kept silent but began to feel droplets of sweat seeping down her brow and cheeks. However, she refused to speak. Xaphire's grasp tensed up against her shoulder, causing a surge of pain across her whole arm. The Blade edged closer towards

her neck to the point of touching her skin, blood drawing out from the fresh cut.

“Let me repeat myself ...” Xaphire murmured, placing more pressure against Kairi. “Do I MAKE myself CLEAR?”

Kairi slowly nodded, feeling that it was no use fighting back at that moment in time. Xaphire finally released his grasp, feeling triumphant in putting Kairi in her place. Kairi, on the other hand, fell to her knees as she placed a hand against the cut on her neck. Her heart racing and breathing heavily, Kairi felt completely broken. Her self-esteem had completely crumbled away. Xaphire simply turned and began to step towards the steps leading towards the next floor.

“Well, now that that’s finally settled; we cannot afford to waste anymore more time with this pathetic bickering.” Xaphire stated gloomily, refusing to look back towards Kairi. “It’s time that we headed towards the top of the Castle.”

With a fast snap of the fingers, Sora’s Heartless automatically began to move towards Kairi. Kairi hid her face behind her long hair in humiliation as she allowed the Heartless to grasp on her arm and escort her. She struggled to her feet as they began to follow Xaphire up the steps.

Kairi continued to feel completely lifeless as the three ascended the stairs of Castle Oblivion, her mind unable to process anything. She knew that nothing could save her from Xaphire and reviving Sora was out of the question. She glanced over the Sora’s Heartless, feeling sorrowful that she couldn’t do anything for him. She began to think back to the time where her, Sora and Riku, were living a simple life. The times where there weren’t any life-threatening situations, conflicts that decided the fate of worlds, and events that drew them apart. The simple life they used to lead.

But as they began to reach the 7th Floor the Castle Oblivion. A spark began to light up in her mind; the answer to the question she had long forgotten about.

How, and when, had I been taken hostage? Kairi wondered in her mind, realizing that she could only remember the days leading up to the kidnap.

She closed her eyes and separated herself from the real world once again, but this time to recollect what truly happened to her. And then finally, she found that memory.

“Hey, Kairi! Are you coming to school today?” Selphie called out in her usual, loud voice.

She had been knocking on the door of Kairi’s house, Tidus and Wakka both accompanying her. After her talk with Kairi the day before, Selphie thought that there could be a chance that Kairi may have broken through her gloom. But as they waited for a response, there was only silence. Selphie turned round towards Tidus and Wakka, who were both showing sorrowful expressions.

“Let’s go, Selphie.” Tidus spoke out, feeling that it wasn’t worth it. “Kairi may still need some more to recover from Saturday’s Crisis. We’ll knock for her again tomorrow.”

Selphie hesitated, glancing back towards the door of Kairi’s house. She then finally nodded, knowing that it was a possibility. They began to make their way away from Kairi’s house. But as they turned to face the street, the house’s door suddenly clicked open. Selphie, Tidus, and Wakka turned towards where the sound had come from and suddenly gasped in delight. Kairi had emerged from the door in her school uniform and bags, even though she looked as though her mind was very distant. As she caught sight of her three friends, she gave out a forced yet pleasant smile. She closed the door from behind and stepped up towards her three friends.

Throughout the day, Kairi had stayed rather distant from anyone at the school. Keeping secluded from others, no student or even teacher approached her during the school hours. Kairi didn’t mind this, feeling that the place was needed for her. However, she also knew that students were talking about the incident behind her back. At times she could hear comments from a distance such as, “did they disappear on purpose?” and, “I bet they’re gone for good this time.” Kairi struggled to keep herself calm whenever someone made such remarks, gritting her teeth silently and shaking with agony.

During lunch, she sat with Selphie, Tidus, and Wakka. The other three ate their food at their own pace, but Kairi couldn't even touch her food. Her face lowered, causing her hair to cover her expressions. The other three noticed her and began to feel sorrowful, glancing towards each other with worry. Selphie shuffled her seat closer to Kairi, an arm reaching around to comfort her.

"Kairi ..." Selphie sighed with sadness, wanting desperately for her friend to lighten up again.

"Did you hear what they've been saying?" Kairi began to mutter, her whole body shivering. "The looks they been giving me ... it's so painful."

Tidus, who sat opposite, began to suggest, "Maybe it's best for you to go home, I'm sure you'll feel better after ..."

"No ... I promised myself that I wouldn't skip school." Kairi shook her head abruptly, beginning to struggle forming her words. "Sora and Riku wouldn't want me to act weak."

"But Kairi ..." Selphie attempted to change her mind, even though she knew this was Kairi's own choice.

"It hurts ... I miss them ..." Kairi began to murmur, biting her lip and tearing up. "I want them back ... I want Sora ..."

As school finally drew to a close, Kairi began to make her way home. She told the other three that she wanted some space to clear her mind. They accepted her decision but wished her a safe journey back. As Kairi turned a corner, she noticed the sun begin to dip behind the building, causing an evening aura to illuminate the streets. Kairi took in a deep, meaningful sigh and pressed on. Everything around her was somewhat quiet; there was barely any people about, and no sounds echoing throughout the streets. At first Kairi felt in was a calming atmosphere for her, but then realized this was very strange. The streets would normally be very pact during this time, considering that the school had just finished. Kairi began to scan the environment, feeling wary about this situation at hand. Just then, Kairi felt a sudden shadow engulf her whole body. She swiftly leapt forward, almost stumbling on her feet. She turned to find out who had caused the shadow to appear. She caught sight of a large, powerful figure standing right in front of her. The figure was hooded with a long cloak, causing his or her face to be hidden completely.

"You were the one who's been following me for the past few days ..." Kairi realized, tensing up her body. "Whoever you are and whatever you want, I won't be a part of it!"

The cloaked figure didn't move, just glaring at Kairi in a sense that she was the sole target. Kairi cautiously stepped back, desperately thinking of a way to escape. The cloaked figure then began to slowly step closer, holding out a hand as though offering something to Kairi. Kairi hastily span and ran, hoping to escape the from the cloaked figure's sights. However, this was hopeless. She suddenly collided against what felt like a huge wall. Stumbling back, Kairi soothed her head, noticing blood trickle down her face. As she scanned what was in front of her, there were no initial signs of objects preventing her escape. But, as she examined closer, she realised that the whole area had been barricaded off by invisible barriers. She switched back, facing the cloaked figure once again. The cloaked figure had, to her complete shock, appeared close up in front of her. With once swift move, Kairi attempted to serve her way from the figure's grasp. As she did this she flexed out her right palm, hoping that she could fight back. To great success, the Keyblade that Riku had given her instantly appeared in her grasp. Feeling refreshed and hopeful, she stood strong and aimed the Keyblade close to the opponent's neck. The figure just stood there, not even turning their body to face Kairi. Instead, he began to speak.

"Interesting, so you're not as vulnerable as I expected." The Cloaked Figure chuckled with his deep, menacing voice, his body completely frozen. "I'm quite surprised, considering that you are a useless damsel."

"I refuse to be taken hostage." Kairi shook her head sternly, showing a determined yet serious expression. "Whoever you are ... I suggest you leave."

"Why...?" The Cloaked Figure raised his head slightly as he spoke, seemingly showing some

heightened interest. "I thought you 'wanted' to see your friends again."

"Wha...!?" Kairi leapt in horror, realising the situation. "You were the one that caused the Crisis!? What have you done to Sora and Riku!?"

Suddenly, the cloaked figure slowly turned round, finally facing his opponent. Kairi hastily struck her Keyblade into the figure, refusing to hesitate. Even though she had asked those questions, she couldn't allow a repeat of the past. But, to her frustration, the cloaked figure dodged the attack without any sign of effort. The figure then grasped Kairi around her neck and lifted her up, refusing to show mercy. Kairi began to choke, unable to control the situation.

"You may have a Keyblade but you have much to learn before you can truly wield such power." The Cloaked figure snarled, his menacing teeth showing underneath the dark hood. "It seems you do have some uses though, I'll give you that."

Without any warning, the cloaked figure smashed Kairi directly towards the ground, causing her to collide her head against the solid floor. Not only did this cause her a strong head injury but the floor itself cracked significantly from the sudden force. Instantly, Kairi completely lost her consciousness. Her mind drifted into darkness, with the voice of the cloaked figure echoed around her.

"The chaos of your 'island' was only the beginning, my young Princess. Soon, all worlds will witness the catastrophic events unfold ... and all 'three' of you will help towards this heart-stopping finale."

Returning to present day, Kairi opened her eyes. Having finally recollected the full events that occurred prior her capture, she nodded to herself with a sad yet understanding expression. She then examined the area around her, knowing that it had been some time since they began the trek towards the top of Castle Oblivion. The room she was currently progressing through had then same style and atmosphere as the lower floors. However the structure seemed to be slightly different. She then scanned ahead, catching sight of Xaphire silently leading the way and Sora's Heartless directing her. At first, Kairi felt as though she could attempt to break free and escape. But she knew straight away that she couldn't run anywhere nor could she fight in her current situation. With a sigh, she decided to keep patient and wait for the correct time.

After a while, Xaphire halted movement as the three reached a final door. He turned towards Kairi with a low sneer.

"Through this door lies a unique room, one that your 'other half' could recollect." Xaphire stated, showing no emotion in his speech as usual.

"M-my other half ...?" Kairi echoed, glaring with a confused expression. "Do you mean Naminé?"

"That's correct." Xaphire nodded, but then continued on in a mocking tone. "However, you are currently unable to access her memories. It's a shame; I would have personally loved to see your shocked face."

"I don't understand ..." Kairi shook her head, unable to grasp anything that Xaphire spoke of. "What do you mean by I 'cannot access Naminé's memories'?"

"I see ... so you haven't noticed?" Xaphire wondered, giving a slight cocky smile. "Naminé is no longer a part of you. You and she were split apart whilst you were unconscious; meaning that you two cannot connect to each other anymore."

Kairi gasped in shock, it did not occur to her that Naminé wasn't inside her heart anymore. She had felt emotionally normal, nothing felt as though it was missing. But now that she knows this, she suddenly realised that her chest felt unnaturally empty.

"W-where is she now!?" Kairi raised her voice, causing it to echo across the room they were currently in. "What have you done with her!?"

"Right now she is exploring a world full of nothingness ... a place where she truly belongs." Xaphire

chuckled, even though he continued to constrain his expressions. "Right now though, the room through this door will be where you'll be locked up for the time being."

Kairi's head sunk, feeling at a loss for words. Sora's Heartless glared towards, seemingly curious. Xaphire glared with disgust, finding Kairi's emotions rather repulsive. With that, he turned and pushed the door to the room open. The three followed through into the room. Kairi raised her head and examined this 'prison', only to show a sudden surprise. The room was rather large and suited the similar design like the rest of the Castle. But within a corner this room, there was a single chair that stood on its own. Surrounding this chair were various sheets of paper, whilst a small bird cage with a plushie doll inside hung loosely from the ceiling. Kairi stepped closer towards the chair whilst showing a curious expression, feeling the Heartless' grasp slowly slip away. She knelt down and examined the sheets. To her surprise, they were drawings, showing various settings and characters. Xaphire watched with boredom, crossing his arms and beginning to think on what to do next. Sora's Heartless watched idly, waiting for the next command. Kairi stood back up, switching towards Xaphire with a sudden change of emotion.

"This was where 'she' stayed, correct?" Kairi wondered curiously, however trying not to show any signs of weakness. "You and your Organization imprisoned her here."

Xaphire nodded, but decided not to speak about. Instead he shrugged and began to head towards another doorway in the room.

"I don't have time for such idle chatter." Xaphire sighed, passing Sora's Heartless as he spoke. "This room will be locked and Sora will stand guard over you. Right now I must prepare for the '2nd Phase'." Kairi glared sharply as Xaphire left the room, her teeth gritting intensely inside her mouth. As the door closed, Kairi sat down on the chair silently, gazing towards the pictures on the floor. At first everything was silent, but this only lasted for a few minutes. Just then, she began to breathe heavily, trying her best to hold back her emotions. Tears began to stream down her face, trying to break through.

Sora's Heartless curiously stepped up closer towards her, tilting its head with a wondrous gaze. Kairi heard the Heartless' footsteps and hastily wiped away the tears from her face, showing that she was in control of her own emotions. She raised her head and locked her sight to Sora's Heartless, giving a very forced smile.

"I must look terrible, don't I?" Kairi spoke to the Heartless, giving a sad chuckle. "I guess he was right by saying I was 'pathetic'..."

The Heartless continued to gaze towards Kairi, seeming as though it was listening to what she was saying.

"(Sigh...) why is this happening to us, Sora?" Kairi continued on, slanting over on her chair. "We keep on getting separated like this, and I'm always the one that gets in the way as a Damsel in Distress. Even when I tried to defend myself, I just get beaten instantly like I'm nothing. And now, you're gone and Riku is stuck in that 'other' Castle ... What do I do, Sora?"

Everything fell silent; Kairi desired a reply, but knew too well that it just wasn't possible.

"Fight ... back ..." a familiar voice suddenly echoed out.

Kairi slowly lifted her head, her eyes suddenly lighting up in shock.

"What ... was that?" She gasped, eyes locked back on the Heartless.

Sora's Heartless suddenly lurched back, placing a palm against its face. It knelt down and began to shake and scratch violently. Kairi lifted up from the chair, her eyes full of disbelief. Roaring noises began to echo out from the heartless, screaming in agony as it seemed to battle from within. Just then, the darkness from the body began to peel away and disappear. As it continued, colouring and texture began to show through.

"Y-you need to ... fight back, Kairi!" The voice suddenly spoke out from the Heartless.

It then lifted its head, causing Kairi to gasp in complete shock. The left side of the Heartless face had

withered away, showing a face Kairi had longed to see. She began to openly weep, but not of sorrow ... but with joy.

“SORA!?” Kairi cried out with a wide eyed expression, unable to hold back her emotions anymore.

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“You want to help me out!?” Sora echoed with a completely shocked reaction, almost letting his guard down due to it.

He swiftly separated his Keyblade from the clash against Vanitas, executing a huge leap backwards to gain distance from his opponent. Vanitas lowered his own Keyblade as he watched Sora draw back, giving off a dark, horrific grin whilst shrugging his shoulders. Sora could not read Vanitas’ thoughts; every time his inconsistent expressions show, it seems more like an enigma. Sora began to slowly sidestep, gripping his Keyblade tightly as he kept his sight locked towards Vanitas’ direction. The atmosphere continued to tense up within the Land of Departure’s Castle Throne Room; the footsteps echoing eerily as the two circled one another with caution. Just then, Vanitas began to give out a dark laugh, finding Sora’s reaction priceless.

“HAHAHAH! ... Wow, the look on your face is golden!” Vanitas laughed loudly, his horrific voice echoing the room and causing chills down Sora’s spine.

“Y-you have to be lying!” Sora roared out, his anger suddenly rising. “Associates of the Darkness always lie!”

“Is that so...?” Vanitas teasingly questioned, giving off a dark, cocky grin, “Well I can tell you this right now: the proposal is no lie.”

Sora drew back in disbelief, his mind riddled with uncertainty. Vanitas glared towards Sora with dark and cautious eyes, giving an aura that Sora’s next few words were going to be crucial.

“That ... cannot be all there is!” Sora abruptly bellowed out, feeling uneasy about Vanitas’ offer. “Offers like that always have some sort of catch behind it!”

Vanitas’ eyebrow suddenly rose up with curiosity, finding Sora’s words intriguing. Sora, however, kept with a cautious stance, making sure that he wouldn’t be fooled by the darkness. Vanitas silently nodded, a small dark chuckle escaping his voice.

“You’re very perceptive, Sora.” Vanitas horridly grinned, his golden-yellow eyes piercing into Sora like daggers. “Yes, there is something I want out of this deal, but it isn’t something I’m able to explain at this moment in time.”

“Then how am I going to be able to trust you!?” Sora lashed out, finding this unbearable.

Suddenly, Vanitas span around to face the Throne, spreading out his arms as though he was worshiping it.

“All I want right now ... is to destroy the one who tarnishes the name of Darkness!” Vanitas announced with great ambition, his horrifying grin widening upon gazing towards the Throne. “Xaphire will perish ... and I will once again become the face of Ultimate Darkness and Despair!”

Sora stepped back cautiously upon hearing Vanitas’ words, unable to keep a clear mind. He began to thoroughly consider the offer Vanitas had proposed, wondering whether it would be a safe idea. Both he and Vanitas wish for the same outcome: to defeat Xaphire. However, they both have completely different perspectives on the matter, even if the two of them are the exact same in physical appearance.

“I can see it in your eyes, Sora.” Vanitas continued on, taking a step forward slowly yet proudly.

“You’re desperate. You wish to return to your friends and save them from their perils. However, you know in your heart that you need me ... all you need to do is push yourself out of your own comfort zone. I may not like this idea myself either, but at a time like this ... there is no other way.”

Sora glared with caution, unsure if the decision he was about to make was the correct one ... but Vanitas was right; he was desperate ... Very desperate. Sora lowered his head, biting the inside of his lip as he

thought hard. As he continued to think, Vanitas began to show a jaded glare, beginning to feel this was wasting time for him. Finally, Sora drew in a deep breath and answered.

"I ... I will take up the offer." Sora murmured lowly, instantly showing guilt in the decision.

"NO!!!" A sudden distressed voice bellowed out.

Both Sora and Vanitas switched their sights towards the ceiling of the room, showing instant shock. Within a second, a figure had fallen from above, two Keyblades in hand, and swung to strike down Vanitas. Vanitas, in turn, had barely any time to retaliate and struck above with his own Keyblade. Within a split second, the weapons had all clashed. Sora, watching from the distance, could not tell where any of the weapons had struck but he knew instantly that damage had been inflicted. In no time, the two separated from each other. Sora caught sight of the figure landing close to his side, recovering to a strong stance with ease. It was the Armoured Boy from earlier. However, something was not right as Sora began to examine his armour closely. The helmet was severely damaged, allowing Sora to catch a small glimpse of the boy's face: Blond, spiked hair; blue, bright eyes. The appearance instantly caused Sora to think of Roxas, but knew this was not him. However, examining the Keyblades the armoured boy had wielded; only one of them was his own backhand Keyblade. The other was a grey-coloured Keyblade, resembling an old-fashioned style including 'E' shaped teeth.

"You may as well reveal yourself ... Ventus." Vanitas called out, giving a dark, cocky grin. "I'm sure our Sora here has had it with secret identities by now."

"V-Ventus!?" Sora leapt up with surprise, the name suddenly ringing a bell. "You mean ... you're that 'glow' of light I met back then!?"

The armoured boy was caught by surprise, finally remembering his name.

"That's right ... that was my name." he gasped, removing his helmet as he gazed to the floor with realisation.

Upon analysing his revealed face, Sora was completely mind blown. He knew that there were similarities between the armoured boy and Roxas, but it still took him by surprise that they were exactly the same in appearance.

"I ... am so confused right now." Sora slowly admitted, gazing at Ventus with large eyes.

"For now ... let us just agree Roxas had some 'inspirational' image tips from our good friend here."

Vanitas teasingly spoke out. "It's just like I had done with your appearance ... except that I made it cooler."

Sora placed a palm against his forehead, trying to snap his mind back into reality. Vanitas, however, changed the subject to the Keyblade Ventus had been holding.

"Tch! You really thought that would hurt me!?" He mocked, pointing towards Ventus with scorn. "That old Keyblade is useless without its maste, all it is now is a large paperweight!"

Ventus kept a calm mind as his eyes locked onto his enemy, feeling provoked to continue the attack against Vanitas. That was ... until he abruptly switched to Sora.

"What in the world were you thinking, taking Vanitas up on his offer!?" He suddenly bellowed in frustration, gritting his teeth as he brought the subject back into the conversation. "You DO realize he had left you to perish a while ago!"

Sora stepped back with sudden fright, not expecting Ventus to have a go at him.

"I know..." Sora spoke out as he looked down solemnly, feeling horrible about the decision he had just made. "But ... no matter what way I look at this, I need the most help I could get if I could defeat Xaphire."

There was a moment of silence; Ventus was astounded by Sora's answer. Sora couldn't believe he would allow himself to set a deal with someone as dark and selfish as Vanitas. Speaking of whom, Vanitas seemed to have been the only one to enjoy the outcome, giving a snarky smirk and a small chuckle.

“So you are a clever boy after all, Sora.” Vanitas spoke out, complimenting the decision. “There may be hope for us all yet.”

“I still cannot trust you though.” Sora suddenly commented, refusing to feel overtaken. “The deal doesn’t sit right with me; how am I able to truly trust you?”

Vanitas’ smirk suddenly dropped, giving off a rare serious expression. Even Ventus had been caught out by this sudden change.

“If it’s that much of a deal to you ... I can reconnect your consciousness to your Heartless body.” He admits, giving out a small, frustrated sigh. “However, this can only be temporary due to the amount of Unversed power I need to muster up.”

“W-wait, you mean that I can return to the living!?” Sora blurted out in shock, his jaw dropping with surprise.

“Yes, but it’ll take time to prepare.” Vanitas continued, finding it somewhat annoying.

Sora took a step back, taking a moment to allow for the realisation of hope to sink in. This was it. He could see everyone again; Kairi, Riku, and possibly his own Nobody: Roxas; even though this could only be a short time. Suddenly, however, Ventus hastily snapped him back to the situation at hand.

“Sora, don’t drop your guard, your friends are still in trouble.” Ventus told him, giving out a swift reality check. “You’ll never know what will happen the moment you hit the world of the living.”

“Not only that, but your Heartless is still under Xaphire’s control.” Vanitas added, thinking strategically.

“It will be a struggle to gain control from him. If we’re going to stand a chance, we need to do this at the most beneficial time.”

Sora nodded, understanding the situation with confidence. Ventus glared at the two of them with caution, feeling as though this situation was a double-edged sword; it could succeed or backfire at any time. For now, Ventus kept silent, but became ever so cautious if anything were to happen. Instead, he decided to ask a question that sat in his mind.

“So ... what will we do whilst we wait for this ‘right opportunity’?” He questioned towards his nemesis whilst giving an unfavourable glare, finding it disgusting that he has to ally with the dark being.

In retaliation, Vanitas gave back a mocking grin, knowing that Ventus had no choice but to comply with the deal. To answer the question, he gave a small shrug whilst chuckling away.

“Well, it’s simple.” He answered back, gazing directly towards Sora. “We train this fool and enhance his attacks.”

Sora became hesitant at first as Vanitas spoke out, however acknowledged that this was the only way for him to stand a chance against Xaphire and his overpowered attacks. He then noticed Ventus turn him and lean slightly closer.

“I don’t like this at all.” He whispered silently, feeling unsettled about this whole situation. “I’ve known him for years and he would never cut a deal like this. There’s more behind this than meets the eye, I swear it.”

Sora kept silent as he took this into perspective; however he knew that he could not go back on his deal.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to save everyone from Xaphire, even if it means having to accept this deal.”

Sora assured him, giving out a serious expression. “But ... if ‘he’ goes back on this deal, I will show no mercy.”

“Suit yourself.” Ventus nodded in acceptance, deciding to walk away rather than pursuing this further.

Sora watch as Ventus walked up to and leaned against one of the Throne Room’s walls. Sora wondered why he was doing this, giving off a confused but also curious expression towards his direction.

However, this had been answered instantly and Sora felt several piercing jabs strike him in the side.

Sora flew across the room from the momentum of the sudden attack, colliding against the floor within seconds.

“ARGH!!!!” He bellowed out in agony, clutching his side as he lay across the marble floor.

He rolled his head towards the origin of the attack, instantly noticing that it had been Vanitas who had struck him with his swarm of Keyblades.

“W-why did you do that!?” Sora shouted out, dumbfounded by the unexpected assault.

Vanitas stood in the distance, grasping onto his Void Gear Keyblade and showing a strong yet mocking expression.

“You have to be prepared for any encounter you come across, even at the most unexpected of times.”

Vanitas lectured on, keeping up a strong stance as he strode up to the damaged Sora.

Sora glared cautiously towards him, feeling his whole body shake in agony from the surprise attack.

However, with the strength that he had, Sora took to his feet once again. His eyes were locked onto the swarm of Keyblades that flew around the Throne Room, analysing their every move. Tightening the grip of his own Keyblade, Sora drew in a deep breath and cooled down his mind.

“Fine ... I’m ready.” Sora finally spoke out, his eyes glaring with determination. “Give me everything you’ve got.”

Vanitas gave a curious look, not expecting a response so determined. However, this had instantly changed to giving out his usual dark grin, amused.

“Interesting ... let’s dance.”

The next few hours had been a constant battle throughout the whole of The Land of Departure’s Castle throne room. The swarm of Keyblades shot from every direction that had attempted to catch Sora off-guard. Sora continuously evaded and parried the swarm, some with moderate success but others that had backfired on him. Several times he had been struck down and thrown by attacks that struck from nowhere. Vanitas, in the meantime, had looked on with a rather satisfied expression and an amused smirk. He hadn’t even needed to lift a finger in order to control the swarm. He stood in the distance with crossed arms and with no intention to involve himself. Ventus, however, began to truly worry. Questions flew into his mind that caused him to show signs of anxiousness. Was Vanitas actually helping Sora to build up his skill level or just torturing him for the pure enjoyment? And will Sora be able to gain new and effective skills before the time is up?

Up until now, Sora had been struggling to gain any improvement over this training Vanitas has placed him through. Alternatively, Vanitas had only been using his Keyblade swarm as an attack method with no variation. Ventus needed to do something; otherwise Sora would stand no chance towards defeating Xaphire and Vanitas would just continue to mess around. Hastily, he leapt from against the wall and treaded over towards Vanitas, keeping clear from the Keyblade swarm and Sora as he passed.

“Do you think this’ll really help Sora?” Ventus questioned Vanitas, showing signs of uneasiness.

“Like I said before, Sora needs to learn how to prepare himself for surprise attacks.” Vanitas answered, his eyes completely focused on the battle. “As I have observed Xaphire’s attack style, I’ve noticed that he tends to use attacks that are used to throw off the opponent’s guard. If Sora can become more aware of this then he would stand a better chance in the future when he returns to battle Xaphire.”

Ventus kept silent as he glared towards his opposite, still finding the situation odd that he would go to such lengths to help out someone who he would normally do anything in his power to destroy.

“So ... you’ve gotten soft, Vanitas.” Ventus then murmured, giving off a light teasing expression.

Within a sudden second, Vanitas had abruptly grasped Ventus around the neck and forced him to collide against the floor. Ventus was bewildered by the sudden turn of events, trying desperately to separate himself from Vanitas’ grasp. He then took notice of Vanitas’ glare; it had completely changed to being offended. The swarm of Keyblades in the distances had halted and switched aim towards Ventus; causing Sora, who began to show fatigue, to switch his sights in wonder of what had been happening.

“Me? Soft!? Whatever do you mean!?” Vanitas questioned back, gritting his teeth in fury. “My guess is you want to see some proof that I am as ruthless as I ever have been! Fine then ... we’ll have it YOUR

way!"

Ventus began to choke, struggling to pry Vanitas off of him. The grip kept on tightening, showing no mercy whatsoever. Ventus even struggled to summon his own Keyblade or the other Keyblade due to how tense Vanitas had been holding him down. Suddenly, Ventus caught sight of a pair of arms locking around Vanitas' torso. Within one move, Vanitas was wrestled to the floor, causing his grasp on Ventus' neck to break away. During that time, Ventus leapt to his feet, both Keyblades summoned in hand as he took stance. He noticed the one who had thrown Vanitas down had been Sora, who had now kept Vanitas locked in position on the floor. All of a sudden, Sora was forcefully thrown aside. The two of them leapt to their feet and summoned their Keyblades, prepared for conflict. Ventus kept his own Keyblade aimed towards Vanitas if he were to continue his assault.

"What was that all about!?" Sora bellowed towards Vanitas, completely confused as to why this sudden conflict had happened. "I thought you were meant to be training me! Not choking Ventus here to death!" There was a moment of silence between the three, all analysing each other cautiously. Both Ventus and Vanitas noticed the fatigue in Sora's voice as he had been panting and wheezing. Just then, Vanitas had been the first to move, losing his battle stance but not releasing the grip of his Void Gear Keyblade. Sora and Ventus both looked towards each other with caution, unable to determine whether it was safe to let their guard down.

"Whatever, I don't care." Vanitas sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "Once this is all over with, I'll be able to return to how I should be. The worlds will be beneath my feet and my enemies will perish." Sora and Ventus continued to watch as Vanitas turned his back and stepped away, still feeling cautious about what to do. This suddenly changed, however, as Vanitas' whole body froze. Within a flash, Vanitas' mood changed, he gave off a small smirk and a low chuckle.

"Well, Sora, it seems that you'll finally be able to see the living once again." Vanitas coolly spoke out, continuing to chuckle.

Sora instantly gasped, showing a small yet growing enthusiastic smile. Ventus turned to him and gave a small chuckle, feeling rather pleased for him.

"For me to connect you to your Heartless, I will need you to be secured." Vanitas continued, pointing out towards the Throne. "You'll be sitting on that throne for the time being. I will be using my Void Gear Keyblade to reconnect your heart, but this will mean that I'll be a painful process."

Sora nodded, he knew there would be consequences to this but he didn't care, he wasn't going to let this opportunity pass by. He swiftly stepped over and sat on the throne, feeling eager. Vanitas stepped in front of him, Keyblade tight in hand.

"Once you're connected, the Heartless will be fighting back against you, so you needed to keep it under control." Vanitas then explained, being sure to precaution him. "... are you ready?"

Without hesitation, Sora nodded with determination. He was ready for this. Vanitas then lifted up his Void Gear Keyblade, aiming towards Sora's heart. Within one swift action, Vanitas lunged the Keyblade forward and pierced Sora's chest. Sora gasped as the blade dug into him, instantly unable to breathe. The pain surged throughout his whole body, causing him to roar out in agony. Vanitas winced, feeling the force of the Keyblade shaking against his grasp. A black aura began to consume Sora, his chest completely engulfed. Suddenly, with a flash, everything froze. Sora fell into slumber as his head dropped and body slumped back. Vanitas released his Keyblade from Sora's chest, panting as he tried to recover his breath.

"What now ...?" Ventus questioned, stepping beside Vanitas as he looked over the unconscious Sora. "It's all up to him now." Vanitas murmured out, glaring as he continued to wheeze. "Whatever he does from this point on ... will bring us the answers we seek."

Sora gasped as he woke up, noticing that he was in a completely different atmosphere than before. The

whole area had been covered by a dark mist. He swiftly examined the area, unable to think about what he needed to do next. However, he began to hear a voice.

"... And now, you're gone and Riku is stuck in that 'other' Castle ... What do I do, Sora?" the voice echoed around him.

...Kairi!?

Suddenly, the dark mist grasped Sora's ankle, preventing him from moving. Sora tried to shake it off but it was locked tight.

"Argh ... K-Kairi!" Sora bellowed out, refusing to quit after going so far. "Listen to me! You need to fight back!"

The mist continued to engulf his limbs, moving up to his body in the process.

"You must fight back, Kairi! Fight back!!!"

Within that instant, the dark mist evaporated, causing the whole atmosphere to change from darkness to light. Sora gasped as he felt the light course through his body. He noticed that he had been kneeling, covering his face with his hands. As he loosened up, he examined his body. Nearly all of it was completely engulfed in darkness; however his left side was free from the corruption, showing his normal clothes and body intact. His right hand was complete black and oozing darkness; however, his left hand was completely normal once again. Sora gave out a sigh of relief, closing his eyes as he felt successful in overcoming the darkness.

"SORA!?" A voice cried out in joy.

Sora raised his head towards the origin of the voice. To both his shock and relief, Kairi had stood in front of him. Her eyes overcome with tears of delight as she had placed her hands in front of her mouth.

"I'm here, Kairi..." Sora spoke back in exhaustion, giving a cheery smile as he struggled to his feet.

Unable to hold back, Kairi threw her arms around him, breaking down completely. Sora nearly fell back from the sudden force from Kairi. However, as he kept his stance, he embraced Kairi. He felt her loving warmth sooth him, a feeling he hadn't experienced in what had felt like forever.

"It's you! It really is you!" Kairi cried, her face hidden under Sora's view as she continued to hug him.

"I-I'm so sorry, Kairi. I'm sorry I let go of your hand." Sora began to apologise, beginning to feel horrible about the event that occurred on Destiny Islands.

"I don't care, as long as I can see you again." Kairi sobbed, looking up at him with teary and red eyes.

Sora soothingly smiled back, refusing to end this moment. He began to examine his surroundings, noticing the familiar style of the room: crystal-white walls; marble pedestals; the large and empty atmosphere. He noticed a small cage hanging from the ceiling, with a small, blonde-haired doll sitting inside; as well as a small chair from behind Kairi. He couldn't think of the name of the place, but he knew it was a place he had been to before. Just then, his mind snapped suddenly. He pulled Kairi away slightly, causing her to look up to him, and began to show a distressed and serious expression.

"Kairi, what happened? Why are you here!?" he hastily questioned, desiring to know the situation at hand.

"I..." Kairi hesitated, finding this all sudden.

However, this could not be answered. Sora suddenly lurched forward with shock, gasping out in pain. For a brief moment, everything froze, Both completely horrified by the sudden turn of events. Kairi screeched as she caught sight of a blade passing through Sora's chest. A dark shadow began to appear from behind Sora, causing both of them to freeze in horror.

"I was wonder in where this sudden change of aura came from." A dark, horrific voice echoed around the room. "Who told you that you could return to existence, foolish boy?"

Sora struggled to turn his head, gritting his teeth in both agony and fury. However, he knew exactly who it was who had stabbed him. To the corner of his eye, he caught sight of the familiar face that he

despised with a passion. He felt the blade continue to pass through his body, agonising pain surging from the wound continuously.

“NO!!!” Kairi screamed out, horrified by the sudden outcome. “STOP THIS!!!”

“XAPHIRE!!!” Sora roared out furiously.

Xaphire took no notice of the two, continuing to plunge the blade into Sora’s back. No mercy or expression showing on his face whatsoever.

25 - Prideful Insanity

“GAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Vanitas and Ventus roared out in sudden agony, almost losing consciousness as they clutched onto their chests.

The world around them shook violently, mysterious rips rupturing in the darkened sky, releasing black mist into the Land of Departure. Within the Throne room of the Castle, the walls and ceiling began to crack and crumble apart.

Ventus and Vanitus both watched in horror, unable to grasp why this situation was happening. Vanitas switched his sight to the position of Sora’s dormant body, and that was when he realised what had happened.

“That absent-minded fool...!” Vanitas blurted out in anger, his teeth gritting together hard. “I gave the kid ONE instruction! ‘Be prepared for any unexpected encounters’! And LOOK at the mess he’s already made!”

Sora’s living body had been struck in the back by Xaphire, as shown by his chest showing a Blade tip; and thus, causing this ‘sub-conscious’ Land of Departed to receive collateral damage.

Ventus glanced over, his eyes wide with shock.

“Xaphire must’ve sensed Sora’s aura conflicting with the Heartless.” Ventus suggested back, steadying his feet. “At this rate, his body will fall back into the darkness.”

Vanitas sighed in fury as his body shook with rage, “... Fine then, I’ll just have to interfere!”

Summoning his Void Gear Keyblade, Vanitas stepped up towards the dormant body and pointed the weapon towards Sora’s chest.

“What are you doing!?” Ventus bellowed out in both shock and confusion.

“What does it look like?” Vanitas answered back, his expressions completely serious although a glint in his eye showed some hints of excitement. “I’m making my ‘Grand Entrance’...!”

Meanwhile ...

Sora stumbled to his knees, coughing and wheezing as he clutched his chest in agony. Kairi hastily knelt by his side, covering his wound and supporting him as much as she possibly could. Xaphire stood over the two with vacant, dead-like eyes; no emotion conjured within him whatsoever as he watched the boy suffer.

“I must hand it to you, Sora ... you’re certainly persistent.” The menacing Nobody murmured, clutching his two golden-blade great-swords that were by his side. “Whatever luck you may have on your side, I’ll be sure to dissipate it immediately.”

Kairi lifted her head as a horrified gasp escaped her, her glaring eyes stricken with terror. Sora, on the other hand, was far too wounded to react, his expression hidden away as his body drooped. He struggled to breathe, almost at the point of losing consciousness. Considering he had only just returned to his own body ... he couldn’t help but feel useless in this situation.

With a blade now risen high, Xaphire prepared to strike once again ... this time with the intention of ending Sora’s life once again.

With no evidence of hesitation, he struck downwards.

WOOSH!

“NO!!!” Kairi screamed out, embracing Sora in desperation of protecting him.

CLASH!!!

“What the-!?” Xaphire bellowed in shock, feeling his weapon suddenly jolt to a halt.

Kairi, having closed her eyes momentarily, had opened them to the shock of her life. Sora, his face still hidden from view, had parried the incoming blade with his own Keyblade of Darkness. The two weapons were now locked in place, forcing against one another in hopes of gaining the upper hand.

During this time...

“Heh-heh-heh-hee...” A low, dark-toned chuckle escaped from Sora, a menacing, alien-like aura suddenly engulfing him. “AH-HAHAHAHAAAAAAA!!!!”

Xaphire leapt back with the utmost caution, keeping a firm grasp on his weapons as he braced waited for a follow up attack. Kairi also drew back; completely oblivious to what was happening with Sora. With wide eyes and a stuttering tremble, she watched as he rose up to his feet.

All that could be seen at this point was a dark, menacing grin eclipsing his mug, the rest of his expression hidden away behind the fringe of his hair.

Just then, Sora leapt forward with incredible speed, targeting Xaphire with unyielding malice. Within the span of a few milliseconds, he had curved the Keyblade in a swooping arc with pinpoint precision.

Xaphire was just able to predict the incoming strike, adjusting the position of his sword accordingly.

The two clashed blades once again, Xaphire deflecting Sora’s Keyblade in an instant and following through with returning counter move. However, the effort was futile as Sora was able to simply evade the sword’s blade, using this opportunity to string a flurry of attacks.

Due to the immense momentum of both combatants, it was almost impossible to grasp a clear visual of the battle’s progression. The two were non-stop throwing attacks at one another without any signs of delay or fatigue.

That being said, Kairi found that there was something peculiar with Sora’s fight pattern, giving off a rather uncomfortable vibe regarding the matter. This, along with Sora’s manic laughter, made Kairi consider the possibility that his sub-consciousness was hijacked by some other identity.

At first, she thought this to be a case of his Heartless’ psychological influence, given that the darkness was still engulfing much of his body. Yet, the way he was throwing himself into the conflict and performing abnormal moves proved that this wasn’t exactly the case.

Whoever this entity was ... Kairi knew that his intentions were not favourable.

Finally, both Sora and Xaphire came to a momentary stalemate, Swords and Keyblade locked against one another without any desire of separating. Sparks were flying at every direction, showing the sheer intensity of their power.

Xaphire glared at his opponent with a disgusted snarl, finding this as a major inconvenience. Sora, on the other hand, continued to chuckle away manically, enjoying every second of this encounter.

It was at this moment ... that Sora raised his head and met eyes with his enemy.

Xaphire’s grimacing turned to a wide-eyed gasp, shocked at the sight of what stood before him.

“Aah-ha-ha-haa...! Where’s all those ‘fighting words’ you were waffling on about not too long ago? Could it be that you’ve lost a nerve?”

His gaze horrifyingly intense, the irises of Sora’s sharp piercing eyes had now shifted to a dark-golden sheen. Through this new, subtle transformation, Xaphire could see the dark, twisted heart that took form within Sora’s body.

“Tch!” Xaphire tutted arrogantly as he tensed up, “This is getting ridiculous...? Who – and what – are you? Are you a part of Sora’s heart that I was not made aware of?”

A twisted smirk grew from Sora.

“Heh-heh! Oh, trust me; Sora’s heart is basically a sanctuary for the lost souls at this point.” He admitted amusingly in a whimsical tone, toying with his opponent. “I admit ... it does get rather crowded in there sometimes.”

“You didn’t answer my question...” Xaphire growled irritably, finding the egotistical personality that

opposed rather annoying. “Who. Are. YOU?”

“Oh-hoh! Where are my manners?” Sora – or the entity seen to be Sora – teased in an exaggerated way, menacingly grinning at Xaphire.

Xaphire tensed up in caution, feeling the atmosphere around him grow immensely cold within a matter of seconds.

“My name is Vanitas: the embodiment of Darkness itself.”

“Van...itas...?” Xaphire murmured in echo, uncertain on how to approach this mysterious entity. “Well, ‘Vanitas’ ... If you want to get in my way, so be it. Just don’t think for a second that you’ve gained the upper-hand.”

“Oh-hoh! You don’t need to worry about that.” Vanitas snickered carelessly, strengthening his resistance against the two opposing blades. “You see, I don’t need to ‘think’ I have the upper-hand ... because I already I have.”

In that instant, Vanitas lifted up his free hand – still grasping the Keyblade of Darkness in his other – and summoned a mysterious secondary weapon shrouded in dark mist.

The confidence, cockiness, and lack-of-care in Xaphire’s eyes was now a distant memory, now replaced with sheer disdain for this new opponent. In retaliation, he readied his Blades as he prepared for a continuing bout.

“Let’s ... even up the playing field!” Vanitas yelled out with anticipation.

Flick! VROOM!!!

At the flick of his wrist, the mysterious secondary weapon in his left hand revealed itself in a flash. It was another Keyblade – the Void Gear.

Swish!!

“...Try not to blink!” Vanitas growled with a manic smile, taking on a duel-wielded battle-stance.

In immediate reaction, Xaphire’ eyes shot open.

“Wha-?”

BOOM!!!

Without a second of hesitation, Vanitas launched himself upon his opponent, both the Keyblade of Darkness and the Void Gear held tightly in his grasps. The power in his leap sent a colossal shockwave throughout the room, causing the entire place to shake violently.

Xaphire had no time to react, bracing with his blades crossed before him for the impact that was to come.

Feeling an abrupt sense of dread, Kairi – who had been watching the entire event unfold in complete shock and terror – took it upon herself to leap out of the way before she would be caught in the crossfire. It was the right move.

CLASH! VROOSH!!!

The two combatants collided in an instant, erupting in a rapid clash of blades that tore through the sound-barrier. The force of the collision itself sent both Xaphire and Vanitas through one of the walls of the room, causing it to explode into rubble.

Covering herself from the blast, Kairi dare not cast a glance upon the chaos in hope that she would not be caught in the crossfire.

At first, all she could hear was the clashing and the explosions.

...And then, silence followed.

“...Eh?”

Carefully, Kairi lifted her head from the cover of her arms, praying she had not gained a false sense of security.

To her surprise, neither Xaphire nor Vanitas were in the room. What was left in their wake was an obliterated wall crumbling before her. She had no idea what was happening and could only imagine the

chaos erupting from the two fighters.

Where ... did they go?

She curiously wondered where they had both flown off to – mainly in crippling concern for Sora's well-being ... even if the consciousness controlling his body was not Sora.

Zip-zip-zip...! Clash-Bang!

And then, the distant sounds of numerous blades clashing amongst one another began to erupt from far away.

Taking to her feet, Kairi felt the urge to run towards the fight – even though she was fully aware of the consequence.

"...I'm going to regret this." She murmured bitterly, kicking herself as she leapt into a swift run.

She passed through the large gap in the wall and followed the corridor towards the sounds of the battle erupting in the distance.

"...Nngh...!"

Suddenly feeling a cold hard floor before him, the woozy Sora groaned out.

"Sora!?" A familiar voice called out desperately, the sounds of feet rushing to his side.

"Ugh...! What ... happened...?" Sora questioned in his barely conscious state, struggling to focus his sights on his surroundings. "Kairi...! Is Kairi safe...!?"

"She's fine for now ... but you're in no shape as you are!" The voice revealed, helping him rise to a sitting position – albeit with barely any strength to hold the position. "Xaphire almost ended you right then and there! If it wasn't for Vanitas, all three of us would have ceased to exist!"

"...Vanitas!?"

In that moment, Sora's eyes shot open as full focus returned to him.

He was back in the Land of Departure – specifically, the Throne Room of the Castle. Beside him was a worried Ventus, supporting his body as an inkling of strength returned to him.

And sitting on the throne with the Void Gear Keyblade in hand ... was an unconscious Vanitas.

SLAM!

"I MESSED UP!" Sora bellowed in furious anger, slamming his fist to the floor. "I let my guard down the moment I was reunited with Kairi! I shouldn't have let myself get distracted like that!"

Feeling a sense of his pain, Ventus let out a solemn sigh in response.

"Don't worry, neither of us anticipated him intervening so soon." He consoled Sora, patting him on the shoulder. "All we can do for now is hope Vanitas is in control of the situation ... as much as it pains me."

The two glanced over to the unconscious embodiment of Vanitas, both feeling the strain of the situation taking its toll on them.

"YOU MAKE ME LAUGH!" Vanitas bellowed in manic excitement, zipping and spinning from numerous directions within a mere second. "You act as though you bathe in Darkness. That Darkness is your property."

He swung and struck both Keyblades at every chance available, all landing a hit on Xaphire's Great swords. Xaphire retaliated with rapid lunges and swings, aiming for his manic opponent yet unable to land a strike on him.

Vroosh!

"Well, let me tell you an itty-bitty secret..." Vanitas then menacingly whispered as he abruptly appeared

close behind Xaphire.

Xaphire turned in apparent shock as he caught a glance from the corner of his eye.

“...You’re a fraud.”

Lunge...! SLASH!!!

“HNNNGH!?”

With a fell swoop of both Keyblades, Vanitas landed a devastating strike on Xaphire’s back, sending him flying across the elongated hallway of Castle Oblivion. The Nobody hastily recovered in the blink of an eye, twisting and arching his body in order to land back on his feet.

Vanitas watched him soar with heightened anticipation, showing no remorse for his troublesome yet amusing opponent.

“Wait! Wasn’t there a special word for something like this?” Vanitas then asked in an over-exaggerated gesture, playing with the Keyblades in his grasp as he waited for the inevitable retaliation. “What was it again...? Oh Yeah! ‘Pathetic!’”

“You scuffed my cloak.” Xaphire muttered without a lack of emotion, flexing off the inconvenient aftermath of the attack. “...Well played.”

“Hm...?”

Raising a brow, Vanitas watched his opponent with a slight thought of caution, fully aware of his tricks. ...*Snap.*

Without a hint of warning, Xaphire leapt up into the air, his blades in tow as sparks began to ignite. Halfway up from the white floor below, he halted mid-flight and locked sights on Vanitas like daggers ready to rip its prey limb-from-limb.

Swinging his Keyblades into a floating battle-stance, Vanitas excitedly anticipated what his opponent was about to unleash. Grinning from ear-to-ear, his burst of insanity finally reached its peak.

And then, an ear-piercing burst of power ripped through the air.

Woosh! BOOM-BOOM-BANG!!!!

Xaphire unleashed a burst of overpowering speed as he shot towards Vanitas, his swords morphing into beams of light.

At the same time, Vanitas charged with his two Keyblades whilst an aura of absolute darkness engulfed almost his entire body.

The two collided, parrying each other’s weapons along with bursts of sparks erupting in their wake.

Dark Orbs emerged from Vanitas’ Keyblades, spinning and orbiting Xaphire as they loaded for an outburst of dark power. On the other hand, Xaphire zipped from one direction to another, expecting to throw his opponent off course.

After a flurry of executions, Vanitas veered back and threw his arms forward, sending his series of dark-embodied orbs towards his nuisance foe.

In a split-second, the orbs collided onto the unsuspecting Xaphire, exploding into a blackened mist upon their impact. Darkness filled the room immediately, completely blinding whoever was unfortunate enough to be in the hallway at the time.

“Where am I...?” Eerily asked the voice of Vanitas.

“Am I here?”

“...Or OVER HERE?”

What proceeded was a flash of weapons igniting at full fury, almost breaking reality at the speed of the attacks were powerful enough to break reality.

And then, the pitch-black Darkness morphed to a blinding light.

“How unfortunate...” Xaphire’s voice then murmured menacingly, as though anticipating a fatal end.

Bzzz...! KaBOOOOOOOM!!!!

At that very moment, a red solar-beam shot through the centre of the light, annihilating all in its path. The

beam expanded in devastation, sending what seemed to parts of the Castle's flooring into particles of worthless dust.

The light dimmed ... and everything returned to silence.

“*Huff ... huff ... huff!*”

Racing down the never-ending corridors, Kairi felt a rising sense of dread appear in her mind. The echoes of the battle erupted throughout the castle, growing louder and more intense by the minute.

Please be ok, please be ok!

She began to panic at the thought of losing Sora to the Darkness once again, knowing that she would never be able to recover from the despair.

Although it seemed impossible, she knew that intervention was the only solution at this point. It was barbaric, reckless, and impossible for success. However, deep down, there was a slight cast of possibility that the aftermath may turn in her favour.

Skid!

As she turned the corner, Kairi slid to an abrupt halt, her gaze caught in horror at the sight of the area before her.

“No way...!”

The entire floor had disappeared before her, leaving a never-ending pit of Darkness with no end in sight.

She hesitated, glancing over the ledge as she searched for the existence of either combatant. She listened and looked for any sign of them, narrowing her gaze towards the black abyss below.

There was nothing.

And yet, she refused to believe that they – or, to be exact, Sora – had disappeared completely.

She then drew in a deep breath.

“...I must be insane.” She muttered to herself breathlessly.

And then, after overcoming her hesitation ... she jumped.

KINGDOM HEARTS: Darkness Oblivion

By ZaronNitro

Submitted: June 12, 2009

Updated: December 23, 2013

Trapped in an unknown world swallowed in ultimate darkness, Sora and Riku must escape anyway possible! But someone lurks in the shadows ...

Its not the end of the world ... Its the end of the Universe!