

Final Confrontation V: Death and Rebirth

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After the Battle of Long Valley, the KH team reached the waning stage of their adventure.

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Chapter 1 - Assessment	2
Chapter 2 - Acceptance	19
Chapter 3 - The Chambers	31
Chapter 4 - The Colossus	35
Chapter 5 - Dormin	51
Chapter 6 - The Battle of Hu Lao Gate	57
Chapter 7 - The Greatest Warrior of the Three Kingdoms	67
Chapter 8 - Saiyans	77
Chapter 9 - Cause and Effect	92
Chapter 10 - The Gravity Chamber	103
Chapter 11 - Unexpected Chaos	115
Chapter 12 - The Battle of the Destiny Islands	138
Chapter 13 - Improvements	152
Chapter 14 - A Continuing Siege	157
Chapter 15 - Operation Destiny's Freedom	167
Chapter 16 - Peace Restored	177
Chapter 17 - Brother	188
Chapter 18 - Traverse Town	201
Chapter 19 - Endurance of the Orbs	206
Chapter 20 - Xemnas Battle Revised	217
Chapter 21 - The Final Test	229

1 - Assessment

Assessment

The death of Cuchulain had already lowered morale more than it had to. But now with Cunla's sudden departing from the team, it seemed as if their world was caving in. They didn't know where he would go or what would happen to him. They only knew that the boy would face a great deal of hardship along the way.

You think Cunla will be okay on his own? Sora asked.

There's no doubt about it. Riku replied.

I can't understand why he would just leave us. Ophelia said. He had a home amongst us.

Cunla's dealing with some major issues right now. His father died and now he has to undergo severe emotional stress. At times, being on your own is necessary to dwell on lessons you learn in the past and rethink your ideas. Cunla is attempting to mend the wound in his heart and soul. I can only imagine how long it will take, tussling with this grief. But it's up to him to decide on how fast these wounds will heal. -

I hate to interrupt your conversation, you three, Donald announced, but we're reaching Traverse Town. Prepare for a landing.

The gummi ship landed just outside the gates of the settlement. As it landed, the team saw Leon standing below waiting to greet them. The ship touched down, settling upon the ground. Rockets disengaged and all systems shut down, the team exited via the cargo hatch to meet up with Leon.

Hey, Leon, Sora said, What're you doing here?

Riku, Sora, he replied, I thought you guys would never get back.

What's the matter, something wrong? -

We picked up some refugees not too long ago. -

Refugees, Riku asked, What kind of refugees?

You guys better come with me. Leon brought the team to the second district hotel as quickly as he could. We placed them in both the red room and the green room so they could get a good night's rest. He opened the door and low and behold, there were children all asleep on the bed. At the table sat a lone individual. He turned around to meet the key bearers and company. It was Goten, relieved of his post at Oceansburg for a time being. He turned to see the team come in.

Riku, Sora, he said quietly, I'm glad you made it back.

Goten&? Donald uttered.

What're you doing here? Goofy added.

I was assigned to take care of these refugees for a while. The young Z fighter replied.

I guess Sneer didn't need you at Oceansburg, eh? Sora said.

Yeah, Goten made a sudden sigh. We heard about Cuchulain.

Yeah, Leon replied. Sorry about what happened to him.

Yeah& Riku replied. It's alright though. It was just his time.

By the way, where's that kid, Cunla? -

He left us too. Sora told him.

What, he left? -

He struck out on his own back in Ulster last night. Donald added.

The loss of his father was just too much to bear. Ophelia remarked. Sticking around us would've

caused too much pain.

We didn't know. Leon tried to be as sympathetic as he could. Sorry&

It's his destiny after all. We can't decide it for him. -

Just then, the team spotted another individual appearing from out of the red room. As the individual appeared from the dimness of the red room, the team came to realize that it was a young woman. A young lady they all knew too well. It was Olette.

Olette, Sora said, Is that you?

Riku, Sora, she replied, Good to see you again. She hugged the two of them before sitting at the table next to Goten.

What are you doing here? I wasn't expecting you of all people. Are you one of the refugees? -

Yes& -

What happened? Riku asked. Olette began to cry. She could only lower her head, not wanting to show her emotion. Riku turned to Leon and Goten. What's going on, what are Olette and the others doing here?

A convoy returned to Twilight Town, Leon explained, to make sure that things were going well since the Sanderson Affair and the penetration to the World that Never Was. But when they got there, the town was deserted. They touched down to see if they could find someone around. But there was not a single person about. Leon's fist started to clutch, he was tensing on what he was about to say next.

There was one structure, however, I believe city hall that was burned and still smoldered by the time our guys got there. The convoy troops examined the structure and noticed there were chains wrapped around the door handles of the entryway. They peered in to view what remained of the inside. What they found was& Leon could only turn away.

What did they find? Ophelia asked. Leon could not allow himself to speak. It was too horrible for him to say.

Leon&? Sora uttered.

They found over three hundred scorched bodies discovered in the structure. Goten said. This indicated that the people were rounded up from their homes, forced into city hall and burned alive when the building was set aflame.

The team gasped. The sound of such horrific a scene of death was gut-wrenching. The key bearers nearly wanted to throw up at the thought.

My God, Riku said.

Three hundred people were burned alive? Sora added.

Men, women, and children were locked in. Leon said. What reports say, they tried to escape through the windows, but were cut down by gun fire.

What kind of monsters would do this? Riku growled, gritting his teeth angrily.

We later found out that Kambrian forces under Admiral Delorion Rellantando had landed in Twilight Town more than a couple days before. We think that they were the ones who gathered the people into city hall and set the building aflame. -

But why would they do that? Ophelia said.

Apparently, Rellantando found out about you being there not too long before and how you were able to find a secret way to the World that Never Was. As a result, the Kambrians made Twilight Town pay, burning over three fourths of the population alive. -

Those who refused to go were killed. Goten replied. The convoy found some people dead in their homes.

Hayner, Pence, Olette moaned. She threw her head into her arms and wailed loudly, muffling her cries under her sleeves, They killed them, they killed them.

Hayner&and Pence&? Sora said. His eyes grew wide with disbelief.

They shot Pence. Those soldiers just shot him without reason. They shot him and killed him. He was only trying to protect us. -

We did all we could to help those who survived. Leon told them. The Alliance sheltered those remaining and dug graves for the dead.

Those bastards, Sora growled. Riku looked to find that his friend was starting to boil. Sora's fists were tightly clenched, his teeth grinding against one another. There was anger and hatred in his eye as the thought of those three hundred lost souls pounded at the back of his mind. In his fury, he drew out his keyblade. He then turned and punched the door open.

Sora, Donald said.

Sora, Goofy added, Where are you going?! But Sora didn't utter a word. He stormed out.

Sora, Leon sighed. Riku quickly ran after Sora.

Sora, he shouted, Where are you going?

I'm going to settle the score. Sora replied, his voice stressed with loathing. I'm going to settle the score once and for all. Kambria will pay!

Sora, The key bearer continued his way towards the gates of Traverse Town.

I'll take revenge for what Rellantando's done! I'll make him pay! I'll make all of Kambria pay!

Sora, stop, Riku ran over and grabbed hold of Sora.

Let go of me, Riku. -

Stop where you are! -

I said let go! Sora jerked his arm out of Riku's grasp. Riku didn't give in. He threw his arms underneath Sora's and locked him in place. He then threw himself on his back. Sora struggled to free himself.

Let go of me, Riku! Let me go! -

That's enough, Sora! Riku shouted. Listen to you, you're blind with rage! You go storming in and you'll only end up dead! You alone can't battle against Kambria!

I'm going to settle this, Riku! Now let me go! -

Sora, Sora, calm down, Riku held firm until Sora gave into exhaustion. Sora started to cry.

I hate you, Riku. I hate you. Why won't you let me go? He began to cry.

Sora, you know as well as I that storming in won't solve anything. You'll die if you just charge in. Don't do what Kira did when Athrun died. If you put your life in jeopardy and you get killed, then how can we close the doors that are still open? I can't do it on my own. And what am I supposed to say to Kairi when this is over? She hopes to find you alive, not in a box. -

Damn it, Riku. Don't you see? It's our responsibility. It's our fault that we put Twilight Town in that predicament. Those people died because of us. -

I know, Sora. But recklessly charging in doesn't change anything that's happened. -

Sora went limp and rolled over of Riku. Riku released his friend. Sora curled up in a ball, bawling his eyes out. Riku placed his hand on his back. Sora edged up to him.

It's our fault, it's all our fault. -

No, Sora, Olette said as she and the others gathered around them. None of this was your fault. We helped you because it was the right thing to do. It had nothing to do with our personal safety. You did what you had to do and we did what we had to do.

But& -

You have to let it go, Sora. Riku told him. It's too late to change the past.

I know, but it still hurts. -

If you want payback, Sora, then let's do it the way we were doing it before. We break the Imperial Axis up and cause them to collapse little by little. -

The question is how are we gonna do that? Donald asked.

Yeah, Goofy added. We still have to save the king and queen. And the only way to do that is take out

that Saber feller. But he ain't exactly a pushover.

Goofy's right, Ophelia said. We never even managed to touch Saber the last time we battled him. He's just too powerful.

Do you have any background on Saber, Ophelia? Riku asked.

Unfortunately, no, out of all the officers of the Midnight Faction, he's probably the most elusive, second only to Lord Sirius Viicous himself. -

What do you mean? -

No one has ever seen his face, ever. He always wears a mask, or helmet mask. Even I have never had the privilege of seeing Sirius Viicous face to face, despite my notorious reputation within the faction. -

The only option you have right now is to become stronger and learn more effective techniques that can counter Saber's skills. Leon proposed. It's the only way I know how to defeat a man like that.

But we know nothing about him or his skills. Sora grumbled. He stood up. Wiping the tears from his eyes, he looked to his friends. Let's face it, Saber is completely different from the rest of the Blade Generals. General Knives was easy because he was just a double swordsman. Using twin blades was all he knew. General Bayonet had us stumped for a while, but he used only special devices to give him an edge over his foe. Otherwise, without his fancy gadgets, he would have been easy to take down. General Dagger used manipulation, which was eventually overcome. General Scimitar was tough, but Cuchulain knew her background and managed to defeat her in the end. But Saber is another story. He uses no deceptive gadgets. He has no need to manipulate anyone to do the fighting for him. His expertise probably varies over a wide range of techniques. And above all, he knows how to scheme and plan and he's just as dedicated to his cause as we are.

Sora & Riku uttered.

Even if we did train ourselves to be stronger, we don't have enough time to excel dramatically. Even if we did use our time diligently, we'd only achieve so much and it may not be enough. Also, how are we to determine Saber's true strength when we've never seen his true ability? A quiet lull came over the team and their allies.

Sora has a point. Riku could only sigh. We have no background on Saber's history. We have no idea of his techniques and his skills. Even after confronting him a number of times before, it won't be enough to gain a grasp on his true abilities. -

Then how are we gonna fight him? Donald asked.

Perhaps we could get in touch with Sneer and ask him if he has any files on Saber stashed away somewhere. Leon advised. The Alliance references are usually the most reliable.

Then, let's try it. Ophelia added. We'll contact Sneer by means of the set up transmitter in the Third District.

The team was led to the vacant house in the Third District. It was there that the alliance had set up a communication station linked back to Oceansburg. The team was permitted to transmit their message. Within seconds the connection was made and Sneer was seen in his office painting another piece at his easel.

Well, well, he said, I wasn't expecting you to be back in Traverse Town so early. How did the remainder of the procession go in Ulster?

It went well. Sora replied.

That's not why we came to talk to you, Sneer. Riku said sternly. We need to know if you have any information on General Saber.

General Saber, Sneer browsed through his files. He pulled up a few archives. I'm sorry, boys, the information on him is very vague.

What do you know about him? -

As far as our archives, we only know that Saber is one of the leading front line generals of the Midnight

Faction. He also acted as a field tactician during the old regime of the Dark Empire, answering to the top brass of the Imperial council only. His vital information was strictly given to those of lordly status. Also, the name Saber was just an alias he uses to conceal his true identity. -

What is his true identity? Leon asked.

I don't know. Many of the Imperial files were destroyed after the Empire fell. The Imperials eliminated much of the data on their most elusive officers after the evacuation of Vandor. Saber was one of the officers classified. No previous data exist to this day. -

Are you sure about that? Riku asked.

I'm sorry, but I do wish you luck on your further investigation. -

Thank you& The transmission ended. Things looked gloomy for the team.

Now what do we do? Donald asked.

With no leads, there's no way to exploit Saber's weaknesses. Ophelia added.

Not necessarily. Riku said, snapping his fingers. I have an idea.

What is it? Sora asked.

Saber was a tactician of the former Dark Empire right? -

Yeah, -

Well, all we have to do is track down those who might have somehow been acquainted with him during that time. -

Yeah, you're right, Riku. -

At last we have a lead. Donald cheered

But how many Imperials do you know that would be willing to give away that vital information. Leon asked.

We might be able to ask Triiken. Ophelia advised. He was a formal Imperial.

That's right, Sora added, And he's an alliance officer now. He shouldn't have that much trouble telling us what we want to know. Maybe he could help us.

Hold on, Riku suddenly interrupted, Don't you remember, Triiken was only a general during the Imperial regime. Sneer said that Saber only gave vital information to the lords of the empire.

Great, Sora grumbled, his hopes dashed, that narrows it down then. Exactly how many lords of the former Empire do we know that would be willing to help us, if they're not dead already?

There is one man, Sora. Lord Lucien Exmortus Thundro. -

Yeah, Goofy added.

We know Thundro, said Donald. Maybe he could help us.

There's only one problem though. Leon implied, Do you know where this guy, Thundro lives?

Well& The team was stumped. They had no clue of where to find him.

Hey, wait a minute, Sora said. He turned to Goten. Goten, you were one of Thundro's students, right?

Well, uh& Goten uttered.

That's right, Riku declared, You were once Thundro's pupil. Maybe you could tell us where we could find him.

The thing is, Goten stalled for a moment, The thing is I was not meant to tell anyone where he lives. But Goten& Sora uttered.

Thundro made me promise that I was never to utter a word of where he resided. I& -

Goten, Riku said. We are dealing with a matter of life and death here. As far as we know, Thundro might be the only one who would be able to help us. You have to tell us where we can find him.

But I promised him. -

You have to tell us, Goten. There's no other option. Goten looked to his comrades. He didn't want to break his promise to Thundro, but at the same time he knew of what they were facing. He could only sigh, at the same time regretting what he was about to do.

You can find him near the Gilgazion springs in the Montroze Forest, located three hundred miles south of Gombria. It's the old secret hideaway of the Death Lords. No one knows of its location except for the Death Lords themselves. And I'm not sure you're aware of it, but Thundro is the only one left. -

Thanks for telling us, Goten. Sora implied. The young Z fighter only looked away.

Just be careful, you guys. Thundro may not receive you very well. He doesn't like visitors and might blow his stack. He's known to kill trespassers in that area, no matter who they are. So don't expect a warm reception when you get there. -

Oh man, -

Well, if the risk is too high, Riku explained. Then Sora and I will visit him alone.

Alone...? Donald asked.

But why do ya have to go alone? Goofy added.

We'll go with you. Ophelia replied.

No, Riku said. It's better that only two of us risk our lives instead of the whole team. For now, just sit back and wait for us to return.

But& -

This is something that Sora and I have to handle on our own. -

We have an old score to settle with Saber. Sora added. We don't want you guys involved.

Riku, Sora& Ophelia lowered her head. She suddenly felt the hand of her beloved Riku lay on her shoulder.

You don't have to worry about us. We'll be able to take whatever Thundro dishes out. He turned to the others. So are there any further objections to us going alone? Their friends were silent, some not willing to speak while others were concerned only for their safety. Then it's settled. Sora and I will meet with Thundro alone.

We'll be back before you know it. Sora added.

Well, Donald grumbled, It's not like we can stop you. Alright, just be careful.

Be very careful, you guys. Goten added.

We will, The key bearers replied in unison. They quickly withdrew to the gummi ship and fired it up. The team ran in pursuit. They stopped and watched as the two key bearers boarded the ship, closed the hatch, ignited the rockets, and waved farewell as they ascended higher into the atmosphere.

You come back alive, you two. Ophelia quietly thought in her mind. Your jobs aren't finished yet. In the gummi, both key bearers were a little anxious and apprehensive. They wondered if what Goten said was true. If Thundro did find them about his realm, would he kill them?

Now that I think about it, Sora said, Is this really a good idea?

There's no real option open for us. Riku replied. We need to know more about Saber. And if there's one Imperial out there that might be able to help us, it's Thundro.

Yeah, I know, but you've seen how cranky he can be. -

We'll just have to bear it. -

Yeah, -

The gummi sped off at warp speed, reaching for Oceanaria.

It took a little over than an hour for them to reach Oceanaria. Using the universal guiding system in the cockpit, the key bearers kept an eye out for the areas south of Gombria.

Well, Riku asked.

Nothing yet, Sora replied. He gazed at the navigation screen, then to the outside of the cockpit. Below them was a vast forest, which looked almost like a vast green carpet. That must be the Montroze Forest.

That's great, Sora, but where do we start looking for this Gilgazion Spring?

I m still looking, Riku. Keep your pants on. -

I hope Sneer doesn t get freaked out about us going missing. -

If Thundro kills us, then he ll have no other choice, but the freak out. -

Don t jinx it when we haven t even found the place yet, Sora. -

Sora kept browsing on the map until finally, a feature of a thin blue line, representing some natural water way, appeared on the screen. Its title was Montroze.

Bingo, Sora shouted, There it is, just three miles west of us.

Good job, Sora. Riku replied. Now buckle in. I m gonna land this thing.

The key bearers fastened themselves to their seats as Riku maneuvered the gummi down. The ship landed upon a bank of pebbles. Next to it, a stream of cool running water ran by. The ship nestled on the smooth pebbles. The two key bearers emerged out of the ship and looked about.

Wow, Sora said, awed by the thick wilderness around them, This is pretty nice.

Now s not the time to be site seeing. Riku told him. We have an infamous Death Lord to seek out. He pressed a button to the side of the ship and transformed the gummi back into its portable capsule form and put it in his pocket. Thank goodness for Capsule Corp.

So where do we begin? -

Let s browse around and see if we can t find anything first. -

Good idea. -

The key bearers made their way into the forest. Surrounding them was a brilliant forest of chirping birds and active little rodents wandering about with hordes of food in their mouths. The sun pierced through the thick canopy of high pines, making the forest seem more of a pleasant experience than an intimidating one.

This is a pretty nice forest after all. Riku said.

I know. Sora replied. It just has that atmosphere. Its not like anything we ve ever encountered before. And the weather is just right. Not too cold and not too hot either.

C mon, we have to find Thundro s hideout. We could be gazing at nature all day and still not find a thing& -

Suddenly, Riku was jerked upward in the air feet first. Sora watched as his friend was found dangling from what looked like a concealed rope. Riku had stepped into a trap and was now hanging upside down. Following his ensnarement, a loud ear piercing sound was heard echoing through the forest, scaring off birds and animals. It was an alarm siren which was activated the moment the trap was activated.

Riku, Sora cried. Are you alright?! What was that?! -

It was a booby trap! Riku shouted. Get me down out of here, Sora!

Don t worry, buddy! I m coming! -

But no sooner had Sora said that then he too was sent skyward with a noose around his foot. He hung from the air kicking and screaming, not knowing what happened.

You idiot, you fell into a trap too. Riku grumbled.

Shut up, Riku! You re the one who stepped into a trap first, so don t you be calling me an idiot! -

Never mind, let s just get ourselves out of this. -

No sooner had he said that, the siren alarm stopped. Then the sound of foot steps came from behind, indicating a large bipedal individual.

Well, well, a voice uttered, What have we here, a trespassing duo. The key bearers couldn t see who was talking, but the voice s tone was all too familiar. Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and doesn t know where to find them. But unlike that old nursery rhyme, you two will not be going home wagging your tails behind you. You have dared to enter the realm of the Death Lords and your day of judgment is now imminent. They heard the individual come about to look them in the eye. Let me gaze upon the

faces of these trespassers, so that I'll familiarize their features before killing them.

Sure enough, Thundro walked before the two key bearers. Riku and Sora only smiled.

Hey, Thundro, Sora said with a sheepish grin. Long time no see. Thundro, realizing who it was that dangled from his traps, only gave that annoyed glare.

So it's you two, he grumbled, The two stooges. Thundro drew out his blade.

Hey, hey, Riku shouted. What are you doing?!

I know you two well, Riku, Sora. But you've dared to enter the domain of the Death Lords without my permission. Ergo, it doesn't matter if I know you or not. You approach this territory unannounced and without a good explanation, then you will meet your demise swiftly and without mercy. He drew the point of his blade at them. Let me ask you this. What is it that you're doing here, how did you get here, and who was responsible for telling you where I could be found? And you better give a straight forward answer, no beating about the bush. Depending on how you answer will determine on whether you live or die this day.

Oh my God, Sora shouted, He's gonna kill us just like Goten said!

Shut up, Sora! Riku bellowed. You're only making things worse.

So Goten was the one who told you, eh? Thundro asked.

Yes, -

I knew that boy couldn't keep his big mouth shut, choosing cause over master. Now I know who's responsible for telling you. But you still haven't explained to me on how you got here and why you're here. -

We got here by gummi ship. Sora said.

I see, and the final? -

We came here because we need your help, Thundro. Riku replied.

My help, you say? And what could you possibly need my help for? -

We need you to tell us what you know about General Saber. -

It was those words that struck Thundro deeply.

Sneer told us that Saber used to be a leading tactician for the former Imperial regime. Sora said. He said that Saber answered only to the lords of the Empire. And since you were a former lord, maybe you could tell us if you knew anything about Saber.

And that's why you came? -

Yes& -

Thundro gave a sudden smirk. He raised his blade and slashed at the ropes suspending the two key bearers. Riku and Sora fell to the ground. Riku managed to land on his feet while Sora landed on his head.

Consider yourselves lucky, boys. Thundro said as he sheathed his sword back into its scabbard. I'll tell you what you need to know, but not here. I hate to explain things in an atmosphere where I'm not comfortable. Follow me. He simply walked away without concern for the key bearers.

Sora stood up with a large red lump on his head.

Man, he grumbled, You think he could have taken it a little easier?

Be grateful that he was easy on us at all. Riku told him. We could have been killed by him instead.

I guess you're right. -

Are you two going to dawdle all day? Thundro hollered. I don't have time to waste with this menagerie!

Coming, we're coming! The two key bearers rushed behind the Death Lord trying to keep up.

The three came to a Cliffside, jagged and formidable. Thundro stepped up to the side of the cliff.

Here we are. Thundro implied. The key bearers looked about. To them, there was only a wall of rock,

nothing more.

There s nothing here. Sora said.

It just goes to show how little you know. -

What s that supposed to mean?! -

Silence, fool, I m trying to concentrate. -

Man& Sora growled.

Easy, Sora, Riku replied, Don t do anything rash.

Now, Thundro drew up his hand and uttered an Oceanarian phrase, *Vi Da Con corte Exmortin, Lucien Exmortus Thundro ot Radiin Noctin Imperin*. With that phrase, the outline of a door suddenly appeared, glowing with a bizarre blue light. The design was so elaborate and so intricate, its center bearing the crest of the Imperial Death Lord symbol, the Cross of Conquest and the lightning volt. The side of the mountain began to crack open. Bits of rubble fell from the cliff s face, at times pelting the trio.

Unbelievable, Sora uttered.

What a door. Riku added. The door opened fully and led into a dimly lit hall.

Well, hurry up, Thundro said. There s no time for you to be footling about like court jesters.

Man, Sora grumbled. Can t he just speak plain English once in a while?

I m afraid I wouldn t understand him even if he did. Riku replied.

The two followed him into the hall. The door closed behind them, making the hall seem darker than usual. On the walls were the portraits lords and leaders within the former Empire, those who deserved recognition by the Death Lords.

Riku, look, Sora said, pointing to one of the portraits.

Well, I ll be damned. Riku uttered. They beheld the portrait of none other than General Saber. I guess Saber must ve had a big impression with the Death Lords.

Boys, Thundro shouted.

Coming, the two rejoined Thundro.

After walking for about a hundred yards, they stopped before twin doors made of cast gold and silver.

Welcome to the realm of the Death Lords. Thundro said. He swung the doors opened and before the key bearers, the more magnificent hall mesmerized their eyes with an almost envious lust. The main hall was a large dome carved into the side of the mountain. It had intricately carved designs, complex, forming a vine-like interweaving. Gold and silver were painted about. To the very top, a painting of Imperial glory colored the domes head. Bright lights lit the hall.

Look at this. Riku said, unable to turn away.

I ve never seen anything so magnificent. Sora added.

Boys, Thundro interrupted, My chambers are down the west wing. Follow me. The young key bearers hastened themselves. They followed the Imperial down another corridor. But it was simple, not showing any intricate designs. They stopped by the first room and entered. This is my quarters, make sure not to touch anything if you value your fingers that is. The three sat upon overstuffed chairs. Now, what is it that you want to know about Saber?

First things first, Thundro, Riku demanded, If you would be so kind to tell us. What s with all the secrecy and hostility? You do know that the Imperial regime has been waning since the defeat of the Three Excellencies right? So why maintain this place. Why keep it a secret?

You just expect me to walk about in the open as if nothing has happened? I may have defected against the Empire, but I still consider the Imperial way my way. I may have raised arms against them, but that just gives me all the more reason to repent for my betrayal. Despite proving to the Alliance that I had turned over a new leaf, not only would they have not accepted me for who I was instead of what I was, but there was still that part of me who thirsted for Imperial rule. This is the only real haven left where the last of the Death Lords can reside the rest of his life in peace. -

You're just as proud and anti-social as usual. Sora implied.

Don't change the subject. You came to me for help, which is bold of anybody. Even Sneer never dared to enter this realm without my permission. Thundro folded his arms in front of him. You wanted to know about General Saber correct? So what is it that you want to know about him and why is it so important?

First of all, Riku began, We need to know about Saber's techniques and skills. We have to know how he thinks and where he gets his power. We need to know him in and out so that we'll be able to counter any attack or strategy he throws at us.

We've already encountered Saber several times before. Sora added. At times we had to battle him. But he's so hard to figure out and so hard to approach. Those techniques that he used were mind boggling.

And what techniques did you see him perform? Thundro asked.

Well& The two key bearers pondered for a while at what they witnessed in the past worlds when they confronted the last of the Blade Generals.

There was that time he used a clone technique on us back at Maleficent's castle. Sora began.

Then there was that time in Agrabah. Riku added. He used a sand storm trap on us.

And just recently in Neverland, he used that gravity spell on us. -

Not surprising, Thundro inquired, Saber is very cunning, very cunning indeed. Had the Empire survived, he would have been promoted to lord due to his exquisite profile. Saber's style is unflawed, unblemished. He has the charisma and the determination that would make even the greatest of Imperial lords envious. Thundro leaned back in his seat. If there is one important thing you should know, it's Saber's grasp on the eleven natural elements.

Eleven elements? the two key bearers were shocked.

There are eleven elements? Sora said. But I thought there were only seven.

You parallel that knowledge with the experience of battling the Cavendish Shinobies. But you merely battled against seven elements. You did not battle against all of them. -

What are the eleven elements? Riku asked.

First you have the five basics, the ones you battled, ice, water, fire, wind, and soil, or earth as some call it. Those are the basics, especially for Shinobies. Then come the three elite basics. First, there is sound in which a master of the sound element is able to inflict severe damage to the body with the use of sound waves. After that comes the seventh element, the element of darkness and shadow, much like what you faced when fighting against Kahn. Then you have the light element, categorized as the eighth in the scale.

Why only the eighth&? -

The power of light is the top of the basic elements, those that can be easily grasped by the majority. The light element is considered to be hard to grasp because of its effectiveness in battle. Lightning also adds as a sub category to this element. Others like Sora's Corona Flash Barrage rank a little higher.

So those are the eight basic elements then. Sora said.

Then there are the two rarities. Thundro continued. The first of these is the element of force, much like the gravity technique you saw Saber unleash. The element of force is wide ranged. By force you can manipulate atoms and molecules to become your weapons. The force can be a repelling style. It can be an immobile style. In which one can halt an enemy's attack, forcing them to float freely in mid air against their will, or hold them in place, a sort of paralysis. Then there is the gravity effect in which an epicenter is created and draws everything to it. A true master would be able to create such a powerful force, that it levels up to the gravitational pull of a black hole. The key bearers were shocked about what they heard.

I never knew you could bring it to that kind of extremity. Riku said.

Then there is the tenth element, the element of dimension. This is a rare elemental manipulation indeed. The effect is that one who grasps and masters this element has the capability of bending or

breaking the space time continuum. -

Is it like the attack I use when turning into Dark Riku? -

Not entirely. What you undergo as Dark Riku is more of a teleportation technique that revolves within a 360 degree circumference. No, the dimensional element is different. By opening up a dimensional portal, one would be able to direct their attack, not in the direction of their enemy, but by opening a dimensional portal, they can link the attack back to the present plain and attack the enemy from a completely different angle. -

Okay, Sora grumbled, You lost me completely.

Let me demonstrate then. Thundro drew up his fist and punched outward. But as soon as his arm was fully extended, this entire forearm disappeared, as if it had been cut off. At the same time, Sora felt a punch at the back of the head. Both key bearers looked to find Thundro's missing forearm behind them.

Now do you understand?

I see, Riku was impressed, never seeing anything like that. So that's what you meant by breaking the space time continuum.

You could have at least given me a warning! Sora shouted.

That's the reason for such a technique. Thundro continued. That tactic was meant for deceptive moves. The dimensional element can also be used in redirecting an attack against incoming energy waves or other sorts of projectiles. One who masters the dimensional element is able to open a temporary portal and redirect an enemy's attack right back at them.

Exactly how many people have mastered that technique? Riku asked.

So far, only four have ever even come close to touching that element, let alone mastering it. One who fully mastered the dimensional element was Lord Cavendish himself. Then there was Lord Arakis, followed by myself, and finally General Saber. Simply trying to acquire the basics is more difficult than what people think. Even the most talented of elementals cannot even dream of gaining such power. And one must master, or at least obtain basic knowledge of the first ten in order to obtain the final and most potent element of them all, the eleventh element. -

And what is the eleventh element. Sora asked.

The element of time, -

Time&? -

That's correct. -

But how is the time element so potent? Riku inquired.

With the time element, one is able to slow down time or even halt time entirely in order to obtain their wanted outcome in a battle. -

Is it like the Stopga spell? Sora wondered.

Not exactly, Thundro continued. The Stopga spell is merely a cheap imitation, a paralysis technique, shutting off all basic functions of the body and mind so that an opponent is immobile to attack. Ergo, they believe they were placed in a state where time seems to cease itself. No, the time element in its purity is more than that. When one increases their stamina from within, they can unleash a halting effect in the space time continuum. Thus, all time around them halts. A single second would seem a day to one who truly mastered it. This is a technique used against extremely swift enemies, or numerous enemies. With the time element, one would be able to abide their time and not have to worry about any form of retaliation. They simply initiate the time element; inflict the damage necessary to defeat their foe, and its over. The opponent would not have known what hit them. But by then it's already too late.

But if Saber has the ability to halt time completely, that means that& -

It means that if you battle him, you'd be dead before you could even draw out your keyblades. -

Is there a counter to that element? Riku asked.

There is only one way. Thundro stood up and locked his hands together behind his back. You must

gain enough knowledge and power of the eleventh element to develop immunity to its effects. Unfortunately, for you, you'd be old men before you could even hope of reaching for such a goal. And I do not believe Saber will wait that long. -

In other words we're screwed, right? -

In many possible phrases, yes, so you might as well forget it. Battling against Saber and actually winning is virtually impossible at your level. -

Then what do you propose we do? -

If there is one way to gain quick immunity to all eleven elements, it would have to be this. Thundro drew up his hand. Suddenly, there was an immense surge of energy that lifted up from his open palm. Appearing over his fingers in a flash of red light, a gleaming white orb appeared. It was a pure white light. Around it, sparks of blue electrical surges snapped and whirled around it. There was an immense aura coming from such a small orb. The key bearers were dumbfounded by its beauty.

Wow! Sora said.

What I bear here is the solution to all your problems. Thundro explained. This little sphere is what has been dubbed the Immunity Orb in which when absorbed into your bodies, you will be able to obtain all knowledge of the eleven elements and will have the capacity to nullify their effects if they're deployed by an enemy, even if your foe combines elemental and physical components. Not even Saber knows about it. Thundro dispersed the orb into his hand. It was a technique and quick solution passed only amongst the Death Lords. Not even a man as revered as Saber was allowed access to that knowledge.

But why share it with us? -

It's because there is no other solution. You either gain it through your own means, which may take years, or you can achieve it in one little package. And in all my experience, I never knew a single man who could achieve such knowledge in a single lifetime. Saber may look young, but he's old enough to be your grandfather. The key bearers cringed a bit. Riku, however, was not deterred.

Then, can we have it? Riku asked.

In your state, I think not. -

But why not? -

The Immunity Orb may not look like much, but don't let its size fool you. By absorbing the orb, you gain knowledge of all the elements and develop immunity to their effects. However, as is with everything in this world, there are negative aspects to coincide with positive aspects. -

And what's the con for the Immunity Orb? -

In order to fully absorb the orb, you'd have to be at least three to five times stronger than you are now. If you absorb the orb right now, it will undoubtedly kill you. -

Kill us? Sora uttered.

That's right. Thundro replied. It will kill you. The reason why is because your bodies and minds, as tough as you think they are, will not bear a quarter of the power and endurance needed to absorb the orb.

We'll undertake it then. Riku declared. Whatever the consequence, we have to have that power to defeat Saber.

No, Thundro walked away towards the door. Letting you intake the orb now is out of the question. And there's no discussion strong enough to persuade me otherwise.

Hey, Riku and Sora got up and followed Thundro as he exited out of his quarters. At least let us give it a try.

A try you say? You've be dead before you realized what happened. And you're not worth anything to anyone if you're dead. -

Listen, we don't have time to screw around right now! We need a way to defeat Saber. And if absorbing that orb is the only way, then so be it! -

You're not strong enough, believe me. It will kill you. -

And how bad could it possibly be?!

Do you really want to know? Thundro suddenly turned around. His hand gripped like a claw, he unleashed surge of energy through Riku. Riku was struck by an indescribable sensation of pain. It was as if something were able to blow him up from the inside. Every nerve and every capillary pounded with this sharp, gut wrenching pain. Riku cried out and screamed like mad because the sensation was so unbearable.

Riku, Sora cried. He glared at Thundro. What did you do to him?!

I'm merely giving him an example of what he'll be feeling if the Immunity Orb were absorbed in him. -

Riku, Sora tried to touch him, but Riku only shouted him away.

Get away, Sora! he cried. Don't touch me! Don't touch me! He curled into a ball again as the pangs struck in multiple waves. The pain was so great, tears started dripping from his eyes.

Riku, -

The pain, the pain, it's unbearable! -

Is it really? Thundro wondered. I'm sure one with a will as strong as yours can take a little pain.

Stop this, Thundro! Sora pleaded. You're killing him!

Riku wanted to experience the pain of absorbing the orb, so I gave it to him. -

He won't last long at this rate! -

I don't expect him to. Riku gluttons for pain, I thus bestow that pain on him as he wished. -

Riku, -

I will overcome, Riku cried. I will overcome! Using all his energy, he suppressed the pain. It felt as though his head was about to explode. Finally, Riku turned into Dark Riku, unleashing all the darkness he had to subdue the pain. But even so, the effects did not diminish. I will not be defeated by mere energy! At last, with one last push, Riku expelled the energy from his body. But doing so left him exhausted. He collapsed to the ground.

Riku, Sora caught Riku as he fell backwards. The key bearer was drenched in sweat. His body was aching so much that each muscle throbbed with pain. Even his bones seemed to throb with pain. Riku gasped for air as the sweat trickled down his brow. Sora held him tight. Are you alright, Riku?

My body, Riku whispered, unable to raise his voice above a whisper, It's so heavy. That pain was unbearable. I'm so tired&so tired&

It's alright, buddy. You'll be okay. -

What was that? -

What you experienced was a portion of the pain you would have felt had you decided to absorb the Immunity Orb. Thundro replied. The Death Lord knelt and laid his hand over Riku. There was a pulsating energy resonating from his palm. Within seconds, Riku was mended up and back on his feet. I apologize for that, but you seemed determined to endure the pain. I did warn you that it was enough to kill you. It nearly did. So tell me, how did it feel?

I've never felt such pain before, nothing like that ever. It affected all of my senses and shut down my body. It was like all the pain, mentally and physically, I ever had to endure in my entire life all rolled into one moment and concentrated a hundred fold. -

That's right. And even when you've gone beyond the point of feeling any pain, that pain still strikes hard. Thundro put his arms behind him again. What you experienced, however, was only a tenth of what the true orb feels like. The true pain would have been ten to twenty times greater. And with the overload in energy, if your body was not able to suppress and maintain it, you could have blown up like a hand grenade.

My God& -

So I guess absorbing the orb is out of the question. Sora said.

I'm afraid so& Thundro replied.

If that's the case, Riku implied, Then we have to become stronger so we can absorb the orb's true power.

Riku&? Sora was baffled, he and Thundro both.

Is that so, and how do you plan on becoming stronger? Thundro asked.

We'll train. Riku replied, his voice filled with new determination.

But Riku, Sora told him, We can't train like we always do. We wouldn't have enough time and we'd only be able to achieve so much. We couldn't hope to become three to five times stronger in such a short period.

We have to try, Sora. It's our only option right now. -

But how are we gonna train? Normal training wouldn't be enough. -

Oh yeah& Riku pondered. Once again, it seemed their hopes were dashed. But then Sora had a brilliant idea.

I have it! He turned to Thundro. Maybe you can train us, Thundro.

I beg your pardon? Thundro seemed rather stunned by Sora's words, but his shock didn't show behind his calm facade.

Yeah, I'm sure you have some training techniques that might be able to make us stronger. You're the last of the Death Lords, so that means you have to have at least a few styles that exceed normal training. -

That's right, Riku added, You trained Goten to excel in swordsmanship in about a month's time. I remember him mentioning that when we first met. And that's incredible. If you could somehow train us, we might actually be able to reach to the level of strength we need to take in that orb. And we might still have a little time to spare!

I see, Thundro replied. If I take you in, then you will undergo new and rigorous forms of training that will bring your strengths to incredible heights. And once you have achieved your goal, you will be able to confront Saber and put him in his place! The key bearers were perked by Thundro's level of enthusiasm. But the mood turned sour when his true thoughts emerged, his enthusiasm regressed to cruel sarcasm. Are you two imbeciles running a high fever or something, how in the world could you have conjured up a strategy so idiotic?! Of course the key bearers were offended by this remark.

Hey, what's with the sarcastic attitude all of a sudden?! -

My training is only meant for the elite, not the rabble. I don't think you two are even worth my time and effort to train! Thundro turned his back on them.

What are you saying? Sora growled. Are you saying that we're not good enough?!

You're an intelligent young man, Sora, what do you think?! -

Are you trying to be funny?! Cause we're not laughing!! -

I don't expect you to. And I don't expect you to understand my reasons for rejecting your proposal. Thundro turned again to face them. You might think you have the charisma. You might think you have the determination. You might think you have the strength, the cunning, the ability, and the power. And all these might be true. But your level of so-called strength pales in comparison to my definition of these categories. Engaging in my regimen will cause your bodies to shut down and your minds to go into a frenzy of insanity. You might actually go crazy and not be able to recover. I've seen men lose their sanity and logics due to the severe stress. And they were supposed elites. So what makes you think that you are any more qualified than they are?!

Listen to me, Riku said with a stern tone. You think you can just judge us without even knowing our capabilities? We're stronger than what you give us credit for. Sora and I are a team, that's what makes us strong!

Yeah, Sora agreed.

Really, Thundro replied. Then if you are so strong, how is it that every time you confronted Saber, you were somehow repelled by him? You could have used that teamwork of yours to defeat him and yet he still roams freely about with no one to oppose him. I understand that he's been sent to several worlds accomplishing in a matter of days what the S class elites couldn't achieve in a month. So how can you justify this excuse for him living?

Well, uh& We still don't know anything about him! We need to know him better! Those times before, he caught us off guard with his elemental techniques. But if you were to help us, then maybe we might be able to defeat him the next time we meet! -

Is that so? -

You say that we don't have the ability, right?! Riku declared most strongly. But I say you're wrong, we do have what it takes! We do have what it takes to defeat Saber! But training under normal circumstances will not be enough to reach the level we're hoping to achieve! If there is anyone who can help us, it's you, Thundro!

And exactly how desperate are you to seeking my council? -

Riku, determined to show his will to the Death Lord, did the unthinkable. He fell to his knees and bowed respectfully. Sora saw his friend humble himself and he too did the same. Both key bearers fell to their knees and bowed.

We're begging for your help, Thundro. Please teach us your way of preparation. -

Yes, Sora added, please train us.

So you're that desperate are you? Thundro approached them. You certainly show humility, but my answer remains the same. You are just not qualified for my level of preparation. Thundro walked the opposite way, but Riku grabbed the bottom of his frock. Thundro turned to find Riku looking at him, his eyes filled with eagerness and desperation.

We're on our knees letting go of our pride. He uttered. Please&

I see. The Death Lord smirked. Something is definitely pressuring you to do this, eh? How can I be certain if you're made of the right material? -

If there's anyway we can prove our worthiness, Sora implied, name it.

Very well then, Thundro helped the two young men up. You are young, but your eyes tell me differently. You are not doing this to boost your egos. Though you might still be hatchlings, your eyes hold wisdom beyond your years. Thundro turned towards the exit of the great hall. Then if you are so determined to prove your worth, we'll do it my way. -

How's that? Riku asked.

Follow me. Thundro marched to the exit. The key bearers quickly pursued him.

The three exited the Imperial facility and walked up a narrow path. The key bearers were curious, but said nothing, fearing that uttering one word might change Thundro's mind. The train led in an upward pace, leading through tranquil parts of the forest that would have otherwise remained unseen.

Eventually, the trail ended, coming to a flat basin of short grass and dusty terrain. Nearby, a water fall fell, pelting the eroded rocks at its basin, feeding the stream. It was here that the Thundro halted. The two key bearers stopped short of him.

So what did you bring us up here for, Thundro? Riku asked.

You said that you wanted to prove yourselves. Thundro replied. You want to convince me that you two are made of the right stuff, correct?

Yeah, Sora replied.

Very well, then if that be the case, we handle it in the manner that I've executed to prove the worth of a student. Thundro turned, in his hand he wielded a blade, which had been concealed about his person.

Riku, Sora, I challenge you both to a duel.

A duel&? -

That's right. It is how I am able to determine whether you are taken in or booted out. -

Is that so? Riku replied with a smirk. Then what are the terms, do we have to beat you?

I wouldn't ask you to go that far. You don't have to beat me. All you two have to do is inflict one strike anywhere on my person. -

You mean? Sora uttered.

That's right, if either one of you manage to strike me at least once, no matter how small the impact, then I will take on the responsibility of training you. -

Is that all? Riku asked.

Then this'll be easy. Sora added. They both drew out their keyblades. Get ready, Thundro, you're going down!

Now wait a minute, Thundro replied, I haven't finished yet. Thundro reached in his pocket and pulled out a gold plated watch. He opened its lid and checked the time. He then stuffed it back in his pocket. He then pulled out red lens scouter and mounted it upon his left ear. He pressed the little red button on its side, thus activating the machine with a soft beep. I've checked my watch and it read 10:00 a.m. That means you have one hour, one hour to strike me at least once. However, if you can't strike me by the time the hour strikes eleven, then you go home and forget about this proposal.

An hour time limit eh? Riku wondered. Well, I think that's more than enough time we need.

Don't get too confident boys. It won't be that easy to best me. -

And why do you say that? -

Do you really think I would propose such an outcome if I knew it would be easy for you? -

We'll just see. He looked at Sora. Are you ready for this, buddy?

Yeah, Sora replied.

Then let's get him! -

With incredible swiftness, both key bearers launched themselves at Thundro. However, as they swung down upon him, believing that victory was theirs, the elusive Death Lord vanished from sight. He then appeared behind the key bearers and pummeled them both on their backs with two powerful picks. The key bearers fell forwards, dropping to the ground and skidding across the dusty rubble. Riku and Sora slowly rose up, coughing and choking as the clouds of dirt suffocated them. They turned up to see Thundro standing above them like a storm.

So tell me, gentlemen, he implied, Do you really think it's going to be as easy as you had anticipated?

That attack, Sora uttered, I didn't even see him.

It's like he just disappeared into thin air. Riku added. Could that have been the time element?

That last attack had nothing to do with time, Riku. Thundro explained. What you just witnessed was pure speed.

Pure speed? -

That's correct. And to tell you the truth, that speed isn't even a fraction of what I'm capable of. -

Man, Sora said.

Now do you dare try again? -

Don't count us out so soon in the game, Riku declared, The party's just starting!

Let's hit him again, Riku! Sora shouted.

Yeah, -

The two charged again and swiped and struck with all their might. Their own speed was incredible, mind boggling to most people. But to Thundro, they were moving way too slowly. He dodged and evaded as if the grapple was well choreographed ahead of the bout.

You guys are fast, Thundro chuckled, but you lack severely against the likes of me. Thundro elbowed Sora in the chest, while kicking Riku in the gut. The two key bearers tumbled backwards and fell in the dust again. Thundro stood up, not even laboring in breath. Have you two had enough yet?

Not even close! Riku shouted.

We won't give up until we win! Sora cried. They attacked again, yet the result was the same. But still they were undeterred. Again and again, they were pummeled by Thundro, but even so after every tumble, they stood back up and assaulted once more. In all their assaults, Thundro was impressed.

I have to admit, he thought inwardly, These two young men are determined. Perhaps they do have what it takes. Their hearts are pure, but then again so are fools. However, maybe it is because of their pure hearts that they are so determined to succeed. Perhaps maintaining those pure hearts is the only way for them to maintain their humanity.

2 - Acceptance

Acceptance

The hour quickly passed as the duel between the key bearers and the last of the Death Lords continued on. The easy victory that had filled the minds of Riku and Sora with confidence quickly diminished as they came to realize the true strength of Lord Thundro. Back and forth, with great neck speed, they struck and swiped and slashed and jabbed, putting all heart and soul into each strike. But still success did occur. Thundro managed to elude his attackers and get himself out of the tightest of predicaments without the key bearers landing a single scratch.

Come now, boys. Thundro said as the three met at a sudden stand off. Is that all you've got? Riku and Sora gasped, catching their breaths for the moment before engaging again. Though their teamwork was flawless, but even that was not enough to subdue the mighty Thundro.

He's got to have a weak spot somewhere. Riku thought to himself.

This is impossible. Sora inquired silently. How can Thundro move so fast? No matter how many times we try, we can never seem to get at him.

Thundro smacked Riku away then turned his attention to Sora. He raised his sword to strike the young man. Sora drew up his keyblade, hoping to block the blow he believed was coming. But at the last minute, Thundro struck with an unexpected kick to the gut, knocking the wind out of him.

Don't let your opponent's movements deceive you, boy. Thundro advised. Just because a foe has a weapon drawn doesn't mean they'll use it.

Sora, Riku cried as he saw his friend pummeled. The silver-haired key bearer flipped and retaliated against the Imperial. He swiped from behind only to have Thundro suddenly appear above him and deliver a kneed blow to the back. Riku fell to the rubble face first, taking in a mouth full of dirt.

You'll have to do better if you ever hope to defeat me. -

He's just too strong for us. Sora thought to himself. The two key bearers hit the ground and lay there for a minute or two. Thundro didn't even break a sweat. It was as if he wasn't trying from the start. He simply dusted the dirt from off his black frock.

Tsk, tsk, he said, At this rate you won't hope of ever receiving any training from me. He pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the time. So far you two have spent thirty minutes trying to strike me, yet I haven't even received a blemish. You might as well give up. You can't hope of hindering me.

This isn't over. Riku said.

Not by a long shot. Sora added. Thundro watched as they staggered to their feet again. Though exhausted, they still had enough energy to continue battling.

You expect me to believe that you can still fight? Thundro asked. He checked the scouter reading. There were a few insignificant bleeps on the scouter monitor. Your power levels have remained at an estimate level of a hundred and fifty each. Now that's definitely powerful when it comes to battling even a factional S class elite, but it pales in comparison to my capabilities. Not to mention, your power levels haven't really changed for the past half hour. Ergo, I can only come to one of two conclusions. The first is you've displayed your full strength. The second reason, which I find more likely, is that you've been concealing your true power all this time.

Well, I guess you got us. -

Let's crank up the heat! Riku shouted. The key bearers suddenly began to increase their levels of

strength. Thundro's scouter began to detect the increase in power and the displayed ranking was slowly increasing.

Look at that, he quietly implied in his mind, Riku and Sora are fired up. They're holding nothing back this time.

Let's get him! Sora shouted. The two key bearers lunged forward at the Imperial with all their might. Thundro drew his blade at the ready.

Come to me, boys, come to me. -

The night was long in Traverse Town as the team and their allies went about their business, still waiting for the heroes to return. Goofy and Donald rested alongside Olette and the several children in the red and green rooms at the Traverse Town Hotel. Ophelia was giving instructions to the supply crews on restocking and repairing the gummies available. At the same time, Goten and Leon helped themselves to beverages at the inn in the first district.

I wonder how Riku and Sora are doing. Leon said. It's been about three hours since they left.

I hope that they're alright. Goten replied. This is Thundro they're consulting. He's a completely different guy compared to me. He'd be more likely to spear them than give them a warm salutation.

I don't think so. This is Sora and Riku we're talking about. I'm sure they could smooth-talk their way out of any hostile predicament. -

So says you. -

It was then that Ophelia appeared and joined them at the table. She slumped down and huffed.

I tell you, she grumbled, If you want to get things done around here, you have to do it yourself. And even so, you have to scream your head off at times until you're blue in the face. -

I take it that the situation with the gummi ships was not exactly a joy ride. Leon said.

Those supply crews are inconceivably incompetent. It was like I was talking to a group of monkeys. -

Well, they are new recruits after all. Goten chuckled.

Then someone should give those boys a damn good hiding. I hate those types of recruits, a bunch of immature high school kids whose only thoughts revolve around booze, sex, and playtime. -

I bet you put them in their place, eh Miss Billiard? -

I had to bust a few skulls, break a few noses, and crunch a few nut sacks to get my point straight, but I think they've learned a little. -

No sooner had she sat down, a messenger came rushing from the transmission station in the third district. She saluted her superiors.

Colonel Billiard, she declared. I have a message from President Sneer. She handed a slip of paper containing the message.

What is it? Ophelia took the paper from her hand and opened up the letter, revealing its contents. She read what was written. As she did, her eyes opened with a feeling of apprehension and concern. There was strange eerie silence that lingered about the little congregation. Is this right? -

I'm afraid so, ma'am. -

My God! -

What is it? Leon asked. Ophelia handed him the slip and both he and Goten read the contents.

No way, Goten uttered in disbelief.

Is this true? -

As far as we know, yes, Ophelia replied.

All the while, back on Oceanaria, near the Gilgazion Springs, Thundro sat upon a rock, meditating a while. The battle had ended with a temporary lull and he now took the opportunity to organize his thoughts.

Once again the order of this vast universe and all worlds connected to it will be turned upside down. He thought to himself. Though the Imperial regime had collapsed, it still lingers in its final waning stage. However, they begin to wax again, much like the moon. There are still those who wish to restore Imperial might, but forge it in their own image. But no resurrection would fit the former structure of the Dark Empire. Though the Three Excellencies have been restored, they consist of men who have no real intention of cooperating with one another in the end. If power does shift in their favor, and they manage to somehow bring a downfall to the Universal Alliance, the only powers they must fear and fight are one another. They will eventually turn on one another and battle one another until only one stands. And by that time, further regimes within that regime would have emerged and the chaos would erupt once more. Thus, whatever copied Empire does emerge, it will only fall in flames. Thundro tapped his fingers upon his knee. I had hoped for peace when the Empire was still fresh, but they continuously thirsted for more war and more battle. That is the reason why I defected against the regime. A regime that only knows chaos can never find true peace. And the factions are no different, thirsting for endless battle and conquest. Thus, I must stand with a former enemy to bring down a once favored ally that knows only chaos.

Hey, Thundro suddenly shouted, Exactly how long do you two idiots intend on sleeping? He looked to Riku and Sora who lay prostrate and tired on the ground. They gasped and labored for air, their bodies were weary with pain and exhaustion, and the sweat trickled down their youthful faces in rivers. Get up already! You only have twenty minutes left. You can't spend it lying around like a couple of bumps on a log.

Man, Sora uttered, doesn't that guy know when to quit?

We used up too much energy in that last bout. Riku added. It took out so much energy, we barely have enough to stand up again, let alone battle one last time.

I'm with you there, Riku. I'm so tired. -

Do you want my help, Thundro declared, seeming to mock the key bearers, Or are you going to call it quits now? I guess what you were saying about you being made of the right stuff was just a great manifestation of falsehoods.

Don't you be mocking us, Thundro! We're just trying to regain our composure. -

Well, it's taking a long time for you! Hurry up! -

Damn it! The two key bearers tried to stand, but their bodies felt as if they gained a ton or two, keeping them down on the ground.

Perhaps you two nimrods need a little motivation. Thundro took out what looked like a little black book. I could always perk you up by filling you full of guile, especially when it comes to the most embarrassing moments of your young lives.

Ha, Sora scoffed, Don't make us laugh! You don't know anything about us, so you wouldn't know any of our embarrassing moments!

Don't be so sure, Sora. I am an Imperial after all. I have my sources. -

Then why don't you flatter us?! -

Alright then, Thundro flipped through the pages and stopped at one particular entry. Aw, here's one. This is for Sora. This was the final time that you actually wet your bed. You woke up with your pajamas and your sheets wet and that recognizable odor of urine about the mattress. The funny thing is that you were thirteen years old when that happened.

Oh that's a bunch of lies! Riku shouted. Sora would never! But the moment he looked at his comrade, Sora had this rather awkward look on his face. The sweat of worry was on his brow and his face had turned almost a complete red. Riku gawked at him. Sora, you actually?

I thought no body knew about that. Sora uttered. Riku suddenly bawled out laughing.

Oh my God, Sora, you wet the bed when you were thirteen?! That's a laugh! -

It s no funny, Riku! -

Still, that s a laugh! -

You are in no position to be mouthing off, Riku. Thundro replied as he flipped through the pages of his little black book. It says in here that you didn t stop sleeping with a stuffed animal until you were fourteen! Immediately, Riku s guffaw ended with a dead silence. Oh yes, it was a brown teddy bear with a missing eye. You called in Mr. Lumpkins.

The boot was on the other foot now. This time it was Sora who was laughing his head off and Riku sat quietly.

No one supposed to know about Mr. Lumpkins. -

Well, now we all know! Sora chuckled.

You should be talking Mr. Bed Wetter! Sora immediately took offense.

Hey, you take that back, Mr. Lumpkins! -

Why you&! -

You two can start fighting when I m finished. Thundro shouted as he flipped through his book again.

Aw, here s another one for you, Sora. There was the time when you were eight years old, you mistook Madera wine for grape juice and you were found laying in you backyard naked as the day you were born! He flipped again. Riku, you were ten years old and you were famished because you didn t want to eat breakfast. So you ended up eating a batch of wild laughing mushrooms. But the effect was anything by a laugh! Thundro browsed his book again. Sora, you were six years old when you got yourself trapped in a birdcage. And Riku, you were seven years old when you slid into the hole of your family toilet and got stuck. Or how about the time when you ripped the back of your pants back in Kindergarten, Sora. You weren t wearing any under underwear. And you Riku, you didn t stop wearing underwear with little animals on them until you were twelve. If you would like me to go on, I will.

By this time both Riku and Sora had enough having their deepest secrets revealed.

I don t know how he got those, Riku growled, But enough s enough.

I m with you, Riku. Sora replied. Both of their faces were red with both embarrassment and anger. Thy shook hands calling a truce, and approached Thundro as the Imperial continued to casually blather out their dark secrets without care.

Let s see if we have another one here. Thundro said. Aw yes, here s one, the secret crush with Kairi. That s the one where you two actually fought one another. You were still in elementary school and both of you sent a Valentine card to her with both cards signed a friend. When you found out about each other sending her a card, you both got jealous and had yourselves rolling about on the school black top.

That s enough, Riku shouted. Thundro looked to find both key bearers ready to strike. But the Imperial dodged without much trouble.

Damn it, Sora grumbled, we missed him again.

I see you two have found the motivation to stand up and try again, eh? Thundro chuckled. But I m still reminiscing, so rest a little longer. I want to get down to the nitty gritty.

You think its funny expressing our most humiliating life moments like they were nothing? -

You take delight in tormenting us like this don t you?! Riku shouted. Well, how do you like it when someone talks trash about you?! -

Yeah, like your personality! -

There s something about your personality we hate! -

Yeah it has flaws! -

You re crude! -

Is that so? Thundro said in his own defense. Riku and Sora continued to give their opinions consecutively as Thundro replied with the same response over and over again.

You re vindictive. -

Is that so? -

You re arrogant. -

Is that so? -

You re anti-social. -

Is that so? -

You especially enjoy making other people miserable when mentioning the darker secrets of their lives! -

Is that so? -

Not so funny when it happens to you is it?! Sora said.

Then again, Thundro implied, such mockery cannot bend my will, let alone break it. And do you want to know why I am unmoved by your harsh words?

And why s that? -

It s because I have accepted your proposal on giving you aid. I m actually offering a chance for you to train under me. The only reason is because you two are the ones who are desperate. Ergo, I m giving you the opportunity to become stronger. To think that I, a former lord of the Dark Empire would train allies of the one organization that opposed the authority of Imperial might. So, there isn t a more understanding lord around. Thundro pulled out his watch. To add, with all the complaining you made, you wasted a good fifteen minutes. Thus, you only have five minutes left to strike me at least once. -

What&? The key bearers were shocked.

But to tell you the truth, I m starting to get a little bored with this insufficiency on you part. Thundro lifted up his sword. Therefore, I will not wait until the hour is up. If neither of you is able to strike me with your next attack, you can forget learning anything from me. Again the key bearers were shocked.

Petty tricks won t work on him. Riku said to Sora. He s dead serious. This last attack may be our last hope.

I agree. Sora added.

The only way to assure success is to go all out, hold nothing back. -

Yeah, -

Final Form, Hyper Mode Fusion& -

Give me strength! Sora shouted. The two combined to activate the final form. I unleash the power of darkness, the power of the rage, and the power of Saiyan devotion! Let my power smite my enemy! The increase of strength bleeped on Thundro s scouter.

Well, well, he said to himself, It looks like they re holding nothing back now. They really intend to strike me down.

Here I come! The warrior suddenly leaped up into the air. Thundro watched as he hovered in the atmosphere.

Smart move, taking the higher position so you can see my movements, The Imperial then leaped into the air as well. But it ll take more than that to defeat me!

The two clashed with double keyblade against Imperial katana. Sparks flew, a flash of a light, and thunderous waves erupted as the weapons made contact with one another. Then, everything fell silent with all surroundings going dark.

The sound of the waterfall could be heard in the distance, the sound of birds chirping sounded, and the warm sun beamed down upon Riku and Sora as they slowly opened their eyes. They both groggily lifted their heads up and looked about. There was no sign of Thundro in front of them.

Did we do it? Sora asked.

What time is it now? Riku wondered. Just then, they felt two hands grab the sides of their faces and clonked their heads together. The two for a moment ached and moaned as they comforted their craniums.

I was starting to think that you two were going to spend the rest of the day sleeping like a couple of lazy bums. Thundro said from behind.

What the heck did you do that for, Thundro?! But both key bearers came to realize their blunder. Oh no, what's the hour?!

That's why I was worried. You two have been laying prostrated on the ground for over thirty-five minutes. -

But that means the hours up, Riku. Sora uttered.

No! Riku uttered. The two key bearers lowered their heads. We failed!

We didn't make it. There was a silence that lingered as they dwelled on a chance to improve themselves only to lose it.

Well, Thundro said, Even if you did manage to regain your consciousness shortly after, it wouldn't have made any difference since I declared that last attack to be your last attempt.

But why were we both unconscious? Sora asked. Did you knock us out?

No necessarily, boys. You inflicted that black out on your own. The reason is because you were so concentrated on that last attack, putting all your heart and soul into your strike, you forgot about how you were going to land on the ground, which is the reason why you two have a concussion. -

Oh! But Thundro threw his right arm in front of them. On his gauntlet, the key bearers beheld a streak across the white leather guard indicating that they had managed to strike Thundro once in those final moments.

But then again, if you hadn't gone all out with that last attack, you wouldn't have been able to inflict this on me no matter how many times you tried. -

We did that? Riku asked.

So as I promised, I will take you in and train you under my wing. -

So we did it? Sora said.

You begin your first day tomorrow. -

Great, the two key bearers cheered, but their jubilation was cut short.

Now, don't get too joyful. I still need to calculate on how long I will be training you. You do remember that the Imperial Axis may mobilize at any day when we least expect it. Thus, I cannot keep you absent from the front for very long. -

So what do we do first? -

We must first get in touch with your other comrades and tell them of the predicament we face. -

But our friends are back in Traverse Town. Riku said. It took us almost two hours to get here, one full hour to reach Oceanaria.

Do you forget, Riku? Thundro chuckled. I am a Death Lord. I know no distance too long. Grab onto my shoulders.

Okay! Sora uttered. Both key bearers placed their hands upon Thundro's shoulders.

Let us be off. Instantly, the trio vanished from sight.

Back at Traverse Town, Goofy and Donald were busy playing games with Olette and some of the children.

Now, now, Goofy would instruct them. Ya gotta settle down, boys and girls.

Yeah, Donald added. Otherwise the owner would have a good reason to throw us out of here.

Settle down, you guys. Olette said. Some of the others are still asleep.

Riku and Sora would be scolding you if they ever found out that you're misbehaving. -

But amidst the rowdy crowd of boys and girls, the trio suddenly appeared. Goofy, Donald, and the others were shocked and they repelled.

Well, here we are. Thundro implied. That took less than ten seconds considering the distance.

You gotta teach us how to do that. Sora said.

Sora&? Goofy uttered. Riku&? -

Oh, hey you guys. -

But I thought you guys were at Oceanaria. Donald inquired.

We came back only for a while. Riku explained. We need to talk to all of you. Riku looked around.

Where are Ophelia and the others?

Well, Miss Billiard went out to oversee the re-supply and repairs of our gummies. Leon and Goten, however, I don't know. -

They were at the first district inn if I'm not mistaken. Goofy told them.

But no sooner had they been mentioned, Colonel Billiard, Goten, and Leon appeared in the doorway of the green room. They were just as shocked to find the key bearers and Lord Thundro of all people standing before them.

Riku&? Ophelia said.

Sora&? Leon added.

Master Thundro&? Goten inquired.

What are you guys doing here? -

I'm glad that you three came in when you did. Thundro declared. Gather around, ladies and gents, gather around. Riku and Sora have something to say to you. The team came before the trio.

Guys, Riku began, We have spoken with Thundro. Our prospects of actually defeating Saber as we are now are nil. But due to his gracious acceptance, Thundro has agreed to train Sora and I for the upcoming battle.

What&? the team gasped.

Is that true, Master? Goten asked.

That it is, Goten. Thundro replied. I have decided to take Riku and Sora to my tutelage.

Well, that's good. Goten looked at the key bearers. You guys are lucky. You'll be training with the best.

Oh yeah&? Sora asked.

But there isn't a lot of time to be training. Leon implied. The Imperial Axis is already starting to initiate campaigns again on their outer territories.

I agree. Ophelia replied. That's why we came to the hotel in the first place, to explain the predicament. We bear some bad news. There was a transmitted message that arrived from Oceansburg not too long ago.

How bad&? Riku asked. There was dead silence for a while before Ophelia spoke again.

We received word that Central has fallen into the hands of the Midnight Faction. -

Central, Sora wondered, Are you talking about the world that Edward Elric and his brother Alphonse were defending?

Yes, -

How long ago? -

No more than two days ago. Leon said.

And Edward is he alright? Again there was an eerie silence. Ophelia lowered her head.

He was killed. She uttered. The team were dumbfounded, unable to speak a word.

What&? Riku gasped. Edward Elric is dead?

But when&how? Sora too was shocked.

From what the details explained, he was killed in the last stand-off at Central. He was killed by General Saber. -

It can't be& Donald said.

Saber killed him? Goofy added.

Damn him& Riku growled.

From what eye witness accounts said, Ophelia continued, Edward was on the verge of initiating an alchemic reaction against Saber when both of his hands were suddenly sliced off from the wrists down. Then what looked like slash marks appeared on his chest then finally across his throat. Edward was dead before the battle could even begin.

The reports said that Saber didn't even move to try and cut him. Leon added. It was said that Edward's wounds just appeared out of nowhere. -

Then it must've been the time element he executed. Sora said. Ed never stood a chance.

Saber's been up and down the lines. Ophelia told them. He's so far the only truly active force the Imperial Axis has working.

How many other worlds have fallen due to him? Riku asked.

Well, he wasn't involved in any real downfalls. Leon explained. But he has killed a lot of top elite warriors. I think the majority of them you know.

Like who&? Ophelia took out of the message they received earlier.

Edward, she began, along with his brother Alphonse, was killed. They were the first victims. Van Flyheight was the next victim, killed in a convoy raid led by Saber, when he was returning to his own world only yesterday. Heero Yuy of the Preventers was killed, assassinated by Saber. Dearka Elman of the Orb Union was killed by Saber along with Mu La Flaga and Shin Asuka. Thank God Kira Yamato wasn't amongst them. All of their deaths occurred within a close proximity, perhaps within a day. That means the majority of the major ally leaders who were involved in the Oceansburg Campaign were killed.

Now there's deep concern, Leon said, about whether or not Saber will go after the president himself. - I think not. Thundro implied. Saber is a powerful general, but he's nowhere near strong enough to confront the Alliance forces all on his own, especially now that the Z fighters are there protecting him, or so I've heard.

Still& -

I know Saber better than anyone here. He is incapable of initiating a one man attack on the whole of the Alliance, believe me. -

How would you know? Sora asked, curiously. Thundro stalled, as if not wanting to explain.

That's not important right now. The main focus is stopping the last of the Blade Generals. Saber is the only truly effective officer Sirius Viicous has serving under him. You do away with Saber and the chain of success within the Imperial Axis will be broken forever. -

But you're a strong feller. Goofy said. Why don't you fight him?

Yeah, Donald added, You're a Death Lord. You could easily take out Saber on your own, right?

I could, Thundro implied, But I refuse to take such an action.

But why not? Ophelia asked.

I have my reasons for refusing. Besides, I'm not the one who has a score to settle with Saber. Rather, it's the key bearers who have a score to settle with him. I find it more justified for them to break the link entirely, and to help wipe away an old grudge from one's mind. -

An old grudge, Sora asked, What kind of grudge?

The grudge that Saber holds against you two. He has mentioned it at least once, am I correct? -

I wouldn't be able to recall. Riku said. What grudge does he hold against us?

Is there anything else you need to tell us about Saber, Colonel? -

Well, Ophelia said, There is one thing. It's regarding the death reports of each of those close friends and allies Riku and Sora knew. Apparently, Saber left a mark on each of them, carving a message on their chests with his sword. The message always read the same.

What was the message? Leon asked.

Vengeance& -

Vengeance&? -

It seems Saber is holding a strong vendetta against Riku and Sora. Thundro said.

Could someone please tell us what it is that we did to Saber? Riku demanded.

Now is not the time. Thundro faced the key bearers. We spent enough time blathering about this predicament. Let's focus on the matter at hand. You need to become stronger and I'm the man to do that. Now, if you please. Riku and Sora put their hands on Thundro's shoulders. Thundro turned to Ophelia, Goten, and Leon. Pass the word along to Sneer and the rest of the Alliance. I will train the key bearers and make them stronger. Give me three weeks to bulk them up. Three weeks is all I'm asking.

Three weeks? Leon said.

But that's an awfully long time. Goten added. A lot can happen in three weeks.

Then you idiots better not dawdle and make sure to prevent anything of a negative nature from occurring for that extension. And I'll do what I can to make the key bearers stronger. Hopefully, our labors will bear fruit. With that, Thundro concentrated his energy and he and the two key bearers vanished from sight.

Oh man, Goten uttered, When the axe will fall.

Well, Ophelia said, Riku and Sora will be absent for three weeks. So it's up to us to keep anything drastic from happening.

Like what? Donald asked.

If Saber has enough nerve to take over worlds and kill our closest comrades, then we'll do the same thing. We do all in our power to make the Imperial Axis quiver. Ophelia turned to her comrades. Are you guys with me?

Yeah, they replied.

Thundro, Riku, and Sora reappeared in the entrance hall of the Death Lords' secret realm.

The day grows late, gentlemen. Thundro said. You two may spend this final day of freedom as you like. Get a good night's rest tonight, because tomorrow, you two are all mine. You will undergo training that can only be described as pure hell. And because we only have three weeks, I will make sure to push you ten times harder than what's usually expected. -

I see& Riku replied.

Now if you would be so kind as to follow me, I will take you to your quarters. Thundro led the way with the key bearers behind him. They headed down the East Wing to the apprentice chamber. He opened the door to their room.

The room itself was rather small and bare, having only walls, a ceiling, and floor made entirely out of cement. There was a tiny cubical where the bathroom was, with toilet, shower, and sink. There was also an old wooden wardrobe where they could hang their clothing. There were two small beds lying side by side, making an almost hallway effect in the already narrow room. There were blankets and sheets neatly folded. And above each bed was a light. The only light used to illuminate the room.

You boys will be sleeping here in the Apprentice room. Thundro said. The key bearers were anything, but impressed with their accommodations.

It's a little cramped don't you think? Sora asked.

Sorry boys, but you won't be given any type of luxury here, only the basics. -

Well, couldn't we at least have our own rooms? Riku requested.

You two are a team correct? You always brag about your bond with one another. Well, as a team, you have to know how to fight together, work together, and at times suffer and die together. So in order to enforce that, you two will be living together in the same room. Now it gets very cold in these rooms and

very lonely. And there are only three of us here. The only ones you can really rely on for comfort is one another, because I'm not the compassionate type. So don't come bawling to me for sympathy. Thundro walked in and opened up the wardrobe. Also, since you two will be training under me, I expect uniformity. You will wear these Imperial uniforms for the duration of the three weeks that you are here. There will be no more individuality for the next twenty-one days. You will follow every order, every rule, every commandment, and my strict curfew to the letter. If you botch yourselves up, I will force both of you to train harder to the brink of death. In many cases that is what you will expect. By the end of the third week, you'll be wishing for death, but at the same time would have gained something greater in return. For this day only, your door will remain unlocked. But when you're training, you'll be locked in this room for the duration of the night. It's not only a team effort, but also individual endurance. Thundro turned about. You have until ten o'clock, so enjoy your freedom while it still lingers. Thus, I take my leave. The Imperial retired to his own quarters.

Wait, Sora said, halting Thundro in his place. I have one more question to ask you.

What is it? -

It's about Saber. You said that he bears a grudge against us, but what could we have possibly done to him that would force him to hold a vendetta against us? -

You know Saber more than what you claimed back in Traverse Town. Riku added. By the way you talked about him; you must've been very close. Perhaps that's the reason why you said you refused to fight him yourself am I right?

Thundro sighed and turned to the key bearers.

I never told anyone about this, not even Goten. Thundro explained. I was very close to Saber years ago. Thundro seemed to gain a sense of sentimental feelings towards the mightiest of the Blade Generals. This puzzled the key bearers. The reason why is because Saber was one of my best students. It was I who taught him the elemental ways.

He was your student? the key bearers were shocked.

I always promised myself that if there was one type of enemy I would never dare battle, it would be my own pupils. I keep that promise to myself even to this day. -

So that's why you don't wanna fight Saber. Sora said. He's one of your old students. Well, I guess I can understand that.

But what is it about him and this grudge he bears? Riku asked. Why does he hate us?

It's because of what you did. Thundro replied.

But we never met Saber until we started fighting against Sirius Viicous. -

It wasn't what you did to Saber himself, but rather what you did to one of his closest loved ones, a younger cousin to be precise. -

A cousin&? -

I really shouldn't be saying any of this to you, but if you plan on beating Saber, you should at least know everything about him, including his hidden past. Though I do not take pleasure in giving away the past of an old apprentice, I find it best for the sake of maintaining the peace. Thundro paused to organize his thoughts. The key bearers were anxious to know what he had to say. Perhaps you already know that Saber is not his true name.

That's what Sneer told us. Riku replied. He said that using that name was simply an alias he goes by so that no one could identify him. -

That's correct. -

Well if that's true, what's his real name? Sora asked. Thundro again hesitated, but continued with his statement.

His real name&is Guentory Finnele. -

Guentory Finnele&? -

That's correct, Sora. He also happens to be the former leader of the Cavendish Shinobies. Immediately, the key bearers gasped, their eyes grew wide with apprehension. Confusion and endless streams of questions entered their minds, flashing instantly in their psyche.

He was the former leader of the Cavendish Shinobies? -

My God, Riku said. No wonder he's so hard to defeat.

Yes, Thundro replied, He was the most effective out of all the Shinobies, mastering all eleven elements. There was no other ninja who could compare to his skills. He contemplated ways of mixing techniques, studying the basis of chi manipulation, combining shinobi arts and Jutsu techniques with sciences like alchemy and transmutation. He excelled in his planning, making him the greatest general on the field since Marcus Durovano and Arinario Triiken. However, it was because he excelled in military strategy that his talents were later realized by the Imperial council. I recommended Guentory as a protégé and that he'd be given a special position as Chief Field Marshall, the officer who is in charge of all front line engagements and answers only to lords of the Empire. Thus, he was transferred out of the shinobi unit and took tutelage under the late Lord Exavier Crassus and His Excellency, Lord Dexter Viro. Thundro put his arms behind him and cleared his throat with a deep ahem before continuing. However, because of his transfer, the Cavendish Shinobies were left without a commander to lead them. But Guentory knew exactly who to put in charge. So, his cousin thus took his place as the unit leader. And he remained so until the fall of the Dark Empire. Thundro realized that the key bearers were again stiff with apprehension and anxiety. You know of who I speak, don't you? You should know him very well, especially you, Sora, being the one to battle and finish him off in Gombria six years before.

You mean his cousin was? Sora said with a waver.

Yes, his cousin was none other than the late General Kai, master of the light element and the final leader of the Cavendish Shinobies -

No wonder, Sora gave that blank stare, turning away. I see now why Saber holds a grudge against us. Sora tried to walk away, but fell to his knees. It's because of me. It's because of what I did. I killed his cousin. I killed Kai. And now all these people are dying because of that grudge. The key bearer fell upon his hands. What, what have I done?

Sora, Riku said, kneeling by his friend's side. You did nothing wrong.

I killed Kai. And because of that, so many others have to suffer because of what I've done, because of one man's vengeance. -

You did what you had to do, Sora. There was no other way. -

But, Sora's eyes were moist with tears as his head filled with the faces of close comrades who Saber had slain.

He intends to have you suffer more by eliminating those around you. Thundro implied. He wants to break your will, he wants you to curse yourselves for what you did before going for the kill. Only when you have torn yourselves apart will he finally eliminate you. -

So he won't stop until his vengeance is fulfilled. Is that what you're trying to say more or less? -

That sizes it up perfectly. But do not let the deaths of your comrades weigh on your minds. It should motivate you more to know that you have to succeed, no matter what the ordeal, in order to save the other friends you have left. Thundro gave a sigh and withdrew. Well, I've said enough. You two keep your time to yourselves. Resolve this issue if you can. As of this time tomorrow, you will be training hard. And I don't relent even on the dead. Let your minds think only of the here and now. Thundro thus walked away without saying another word, leaving Riku and Sora together.

Riku lifted his friend up and put him on one of the beds. He sat next to the downed Sora whose eyes felled tears of sorrow.

It may sound cruel of me to say this. Riku remarked, But I believe Thundro's right. We can't let the deaths of our comrades dwell on our minds. We have to use that motivation to excel and press on until

we reach our goal.

Riku, Sora said, his voice slightly above a whisper, Why is it that when we try to do something good, it always ends up bad? Someone else is always affected by our actions.

Sora, -

I thought I was doing good, finishing off Kai back then. I thought I was doing something to help my friends. Instead, I find myself responsible for their deaths due to someone else's vendetta against me. Is trying to help others so wrong? -

Helping others isn't wrong, Sora. At times people try to justify their own means in order to maintain their own happiness. But in the end, the outcome is entirely the opposite. To gain our goals, we inflict some kind of suffering upon others, whether it's taking someone's possessions or taking someone's life. I can't help that by fulfilling our goals, we deprive someone of their own. But it cannot be helped. Riku put his arm around Sora and tried to comfort the young man. What determines our success is whether or not we have the will to continue. We're able to maintain that will because of our strong hearts. And even if we lose, if we have the will to accept defeat, then we haven't lost.

Kai told me before he died that he had no regret fighting and dying. He said that it was an honor for him to die in battle. I always regretted taking his life, but for that moment, I thought he seemed so happy to die. -

If that's the case, then he died honorably. Therefore, neither of you lost and both of you won. Riku smiled, trying to cheer his friend up. Now wipe those tears from your eyes, Sora. There's nothing to be ashamed of.

Sora, unable to speak, lowered his head, giving a sad smile. Riku embraced his friend and the two sat silently together.

3 - The Chambers

The Chambers

The night was cold and unforgiving as the two key bearers slept in their individual beds. Sora and Riku were curled up like little balls in their blankets. The night was restless and neither key bearer was able to slumber soundly. Their minds were cluttered with continuous thoughts of past events, which made them uneasy. Because their cell had no windows to peer into the outside, they couldn't tell on whether it was still evening, or if the sun had already risen.

Just then, the door bursts open and Thundro storms in like the apocalypse.

Riku, Sora, he shouted, Get up now, it's your first day of training. The two key bearers groggily opened their eyes and gave out a fatigued moan.

It's morning already? Riku grumbled. I barely even slept.

That's too bad! You've got five minutes to get up and get dressed! Move it!

Alright, alright, -

Just give me five minutes& Sora mumbled. I'm not ready to get up yet.

You get your sorry rear end up! You're under my jurisdiction now, boy! Thundro declared.

Just five more minutes, that's all I'm asking. Thundro sneered as he watched Sora flop his head back onto his pillow. He then gave a sudden sigh to calm his nerves. He walked up to the head of Sora's bed.

You want five minutes do you? He knelt by Sora. His voice seemed subtle and not at all aggressive.

Then perhaps you would like a good burking to go with it too.

A what&? Sora asked.

A burking& -

If it'll make me sleep better, sure I'll have one. -

Oh it'll do more than make you sleep better& Thundro suddenly snatched the pillow from under Sora's head and then tightly pressed it against his face. Sora was taken by surprise. It'll definitely make you sleep permanently!

Hey, Riku said as he watched Thundro smother his friend, What are you doing?!

To burke, Thundro explained the definition, To murder someone by suffocating them, so as to leave no marks on the body. This was named after the infamous William Burke who smothered to death several healthy men and sent their bodies for medical dissection.

I can't breathe, Sora cried, muffled beneath the cushion. His screams were stifled as he violently kicked about.

You encountered a similar situation with the Asphyxia twins didn't you, Sora? -

That's enough, Thundro! Riku shouted, ready to intervene. You'll kill him!

Very well, Thundro eased his grip and Sora fell out of bed gasping and coughing. Thundro stood up and straightened out his frock.

Damn it, he growled as he took in deep breaths. You could have killed me!

All the better for you to obey my orders, as I said, you obey me to the letter or you will be punished.

Thundro turned to the doorway. Now, no more levity, get dressed and meet me in the main hall in five minutes. The Imperial walked away without remorse or regret.

Riku knelt by Sora and helped him up.

Are you alright, Sora? he asked.

I could've died because of that. Sora grumbled.

Thundro isn't going to go easy on us from here on out, that's for sure. We're his for the next three weeks. -

What are we gonna do, Riku? -

The only thing we can do, Sora. We'll just have to tough it out. -

Yeah, you're right. -

Now let's get dressed. -

The key bearers opened up the old wardrobe and took the uniforms folded for them.

Five minutes had elapsed and Thundro still waited patiently for the key bearers. Sure enough, Riku and Sora emerged from the East Wing, dressed in their Imperial Uniforms. Both wore black shell jackets and trousers with gold and red trim. The jackets were similar to Ophelia Billiard's shell jacket except for the number of gold chevrons on the cuffs and gold braids on their right shoulder and chest area. They both wore white belts with gold buckle, bearing the symbol of the former Imperial regime. On their left shoulder, both wore an upper shoulder guard, much like what Cunla wore with his entourage. Upon their hands were white gloves and upon their feet were white boots with the Z realms golden tips.

So, you two decided to take my words seriously. The Imperial chuckled.

Alright, Thundro, Sora said, We're here, now what do you want us to do?

Follow me. Thundro headed towards the North Wing. The key bearers quickly followed behind him. The North Wing doors were no different from the west, east, or south, but as they entered, what stood before them was not another hall, but a white washed chamber bearing four grandiose doors on two separate levels. On the bottom level, to the far left, there was a door made of ivory and mother of pearl. Straight ahead, there was a door made of silver. And to the far left of the chamber, there was another magnificent door of glimmering gold. And on the second level, a lone door made of Jade and precious stone.

What are these? Riku asked.

Standing before you are the Doors of Might, Thundro explained. Behind each one, there is a different training facility, each bearing its own challenges and own obstacles. It is here that you will do the majority of your training.

So what's behind them? Sora wondered.

I'm about to go over it. Thundro walked to the ivory door. This door leads to what I would like to call the Scenario Chamber, popularly known as the Pendulum Room. This facility will test your mental abilities, both in cunning as well as philosophy.

What happens in there? -

I'll get to that later, on to the next door. Thundro walked up to the silver door. This room is known as the Gravity Chamber. It will help you increase your physical stamina, heighten your abilities, in speed, reflex, and agility, and raise your bodily strength. Thundro then moved on to the final door, the door of gold. Then there is the final door, which is popularly called the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. Goten and the rest of the Z fighters can tell you all about it. This chamber will test your spiritual strength, or your endurance and determination.

I see, Riku implied.

Now, the first of these three you will undergo is the Scenario Chamber. -

Wait a minute! Sora said.

What is it? -

I was wondering, Sora peered to the second level, glaring at the lone jade door at the top, What's that door?

That door, Thundro looked to the door, but did not dare to explain a thing. That door I will not tell you about until the end of the final week that you re here.

Is it that secretive? -

It s not that. It s simply because you re not ready to advance to such a level of training just yet. You will start with the basics. Thundro came before the ivory door and opened.

Before the key bearers, a dark domed chamber came before them. There was no lighting system within the room say for the bizarre, glowing light accumulating from the series of transmutation circles drawn about the place. And above them, swaying back and forth like a clock piece, the great gold pendulum swung back and forth, giving a loud ping every time it hit its climax before descending again. Riku and Sora were awe inspired by the sight of the massive pendulum. Thundro shut the doors behind him.

So what happens in this room? Sora asked.

As I said before, Thundro continued, This room will test your mental abilities, both in cunning and in philosophy.

Now exactly what do you mean by that? Riku implied.

What this chamber does is it transports you to a different time and place. Therefore, you will find yourself engaging in famous battles and wars fought in all different worlds in different eras. Participation in these battles will heighten your mental stamina, making you ready for any type of psychological warfare that you enemies might use against you. However, this chamber will also cause you to question your own philosophies and beliefs. You might say that this chamber is a good example where one is able to achieve ultimate enlightenment. Thundro stepped to the center of the room where four circular platforms were raised. To the center of them, a long pillar, about waste high, emerged from the floor. On its top was a control panel.

For your first exercise, you will undergo a series of battles. Thundro continued. All of them different. He calculated a series of scenarios. Now, some of them may seem familiar, while others seem more distant. Thundro finished with his coordinated insert. The scenario chamber is ready now. Please step onto one of the four circled platforms.

The key bearers did as they were told.

So what will we be feeling in this? Riku asked.

While the scenario is commencing, your body will enter a nullified, hypnotic state in which your senses will be affected as if the battle were really taking place. You will feel pain, you will feel fear, you will feel fatigue, etc. You will feel as if the battle was really happening.

So we don t really have to worry right? I mean, it s all a fake and we can come back right whenever we have to, right? -

Not exactly, you see, your body will simulate every physical and mental situation you get in. If you are wounded and you start to bleed, you will feel the blood oozing from your wound, though the wound is not really there. You will feel its sting and you will feel the fatigue of blood loss. And if you die, your body will simulate death as well. And so you will remain in a demised state until the next scenario. However, the only way to actually reach the next scenario is to fulfill the missions given to you. If you fail and you die, your body will enter a death phase, shutting down your mental capacity altogether. Only an outside force can bring you back. And even so, it may take days for you to recover. And as you know, we don t have that kind of leeway. -

The way that sounds, it s more than virtual reality. Sora uttered. It s the real thing. So if we die, we really die.

That s why I m saying to be careful. Also, when entering each scenario, a few things will change. Though your keyblades will still be wielded through each battle, there may be a few techniques that you won t be able to use. The reason why is because the scenarios and logistics are based off the natural laws in those individual worlds. So don t expect to charge into battle as if you were invincible.

Furthermore, your wardrobe will change every time, provided what kind of battle you engage in.

Exactly how many battles to we have to fight? Riku asked.

Since this is your first time, I have contemplated three major conflicts for you to engage in. I won't tell you what order they come in, or where they will take place. Your job is to fulfill the missions given to you. Thundro stepped away. Now all you have to do is close your eyes and concentrate. Hear nothing, but the ticking of the pendulum. And when you awaken, you shall find yourself in another world. Good luck, boys, you'll need it.

Are you ready for this, Sora? -

Let's do it. Sora replied. They closed their eyes and took in no other sound, but the ticking of the pendulum. Within seconds, the pendulum's clunking seemed to muffle itself into the distance, further and further with every tock. Eventually, a different sensation was felt. The atmosphere was no longer the inside of a room, but rather the fresh air of the wilderness.

It's time, Sora thought himself. He opened his eyes and&

4 - The Colossus

The Colossus

Riku and Sora found themselves in what looked like a vast pasture field, green and lush, filled with life. In the distance were lush forests and tall mountains and rolling hills. Upon the ground, stray birds and silver-tailed lizards scurried about in search of food.

Where are we? Sora wondered.

Hey, Sora, Riku said, Look at us.

The key bearers looked at one another. They were no longer in their black Imperial uniforms. Rather, now they had changed in a more Celtic or mythical style of wardrobe. Both of them wore light woolen, short sleeved shirts with a early style of stitch, made of horse hair or some other type of fiber. That shirt was then covered by a sleeveless leather vest. Both vest and shirt were fastened by a dark brown waste belt, wielding a series of metal strips covered in fur, perhaps to muffle any clanking sound. They wore knee lengthen shorts which caressed their youthful legs. They too were stitched together with a strong fiber substance. The entire entourage was covered by an elaborate tapestry or serape that draped down to their knees concealing both front and back, but their shoulders and flanks were completely visible. Upon their arms wore leather armguards tainted a mix of brown and green with woolen cloth at the near the elbow joint to act as an enforcer. On their legs were woolen warmers fastened by leather straps which weaved their way down the shins of the key bearers and fastened to sandal footwear.

We have new clothes. Sora pulled at some of the fabric, rubbing it through his fingers. This is real alright.

Well, Thundro said that there would be some changes. Riku said.

So I wonder what our first mission is. Sora looked around to see where they were. But as he looked to the rear, he was awe struck by an incredible sight. His eyes grew wide with admiration and fear. Riku, look&

What is it? Riku turned only to react the same way. Before them was towering castle ruin like nothing they d ever seen. The top tier of the ruin had to be at least a thousand feet up. Scattered amidst the ruins were what looked like the pillars of fallen bridges, perhaps centuries, or millenniums old. My God, what is this place?

I don t know. It was than that something else Caught Sora s eye. Riku, look at those! He pointed to the skyline. In the distance, beams of light seemed to spurt out into the atmosphere. Sora counted them. There are thirteen of those lights altogether.

I wonder what they are. -

I don t know. Let s go into that old castle and see if there s anyone who could help us. -

Good idea. -

The key bearers went into the castle. They came before what looked like a great hall. On each side of the chamber, there were a series of what looked like large storage spaces towering at least three stories tall, which might have been used to bear some kind of massive object. On the floor of these gigantic compartments, what looked like mountains of stone rubble were piled up, indicating that something of a large scale had been demolished within the compartment. It soon became apparent to the key bearers what once stood in each space. At the very far end of the chamber, three great statues still occupied their own cubbies. At the top of the structure, a bright beam of light entered the chamber, dispersing the

shadows. The mere sight of the masonry structure, the statues, and the castle's interior, though old and ancient, spurred intrigue within the hearts of the key bearers.

I bet this used to be a really nice place way back when. Sora remarked.

Hello, Riku cried, Is anyone here? There was no answer.

Riku, Sora grabbed his friend's shoulder.

What is it now? The two then happened to look upon what looked like a stone alter constructed to overlook the landscape. And upon that stone alter rested a fair young maiden in a pure white dress. The key bearers rushed to see if she was okay. Miss, are you alright?

But the moment Riku touched the girl, his hand was repulsed. She was as cold as ice, indicating only one thing, that she was dead. Sora put his hand on her forehead. The minute he touched her icy skin, he drew his hand away.

The girl is dead. Sora said.

That's for sure. Riku added.

I wonder who she was. -

What boggles me more is how she got here. Riku took hold of her hand then let it fall. Her body hasn't stiffened. That means she must have died not too long ago.

It was at that moment that a strange chill touched the hairs on the necks of the key bearers. They stiffened up, uneasy of the wind that brushed up against them.

Did you feel that? -

I did. They turned to the vast chamber before them. It seemed to grow darker.

No sooner had the chill caught their attention, a deep, growling voice was heard from above.

Who is it that dares to trespass upon this forbidden soil? the voice implied.

Who's there? Sora demanded. Come out and show yourself!

Well, well, so two others have come upon this cursed land searching for the answer to the universal question. -

Who are you? Riku asked.

I am known as Lord Dormin. The voice replied. I am the master of all you see, from the great gate to the north, to the lake of mists in the east, the mountain passes of the west, and the high sea cliffs in the south.

Dormin, eh, where are you? Sora wanted to know.

I am here, all around thee. -

Really, and what are you here for anyway? -

I have been summoned because a young man had come to seek my help to revive his deceased love. -

Deceased love, are you talking about that girl on the Alter? -

That is correct. He had come seeking my help after hearing of the mystic powers of this land. He thus engages in a quest to fulfill his wish. -

And what does he have to do? Riku asked.

The young man, Wander his name is, must finish a task in order to resurrect the young woman. He must first defeat the sixteen Colossi who roam this land. -

Colossi&? -

Yes& -

But what are Colossi? Sora asked.

Behold to the very end of the chamber. The key bearers looked to the compartments again. In each of those chambers a statue or at least a former statue of a colossus would stand. In order to fulfill his goal, Wander must destroy each of the statues. But destroying the statues cannot be done by mortal hands. He must first destroy the beast that is linked to each statue. As thee can see, already a majority of the statues have crumbled, indicating that he is already half way through with his task. He needs only to

defeat three more. -

So that's what those pillars of light are in the distance. Those must belong to the colossi he's defeated already. -

That is correct. And once he has defeated all sixteen colossi, then the deed is done and his wishes can be fulfilled. -

Just then, one of three colossi statues remaining began to glow a strange white light. Then, there was a loud crack and the statue crumbled to its foundations.

What the heck was that? Sora asked.

The statue just crumbled. Riku said. But that must mean that&

Ah, yes, Wander has defeated another colossus, the infamous Cerrebus colossi of the western city ruins. -

It was at that moment, a bright light flashed within the interior of the chamber. And there, lying on the ground was the figure of a young man.

Is that him? Sora thought.

That must be the guy. Riku implied.

And so the mighty hero returns. Dormin said.

Riku and Sora ran up to the young man and helped him up.

Hey, are you alright? Sora asked as the young man was lifted to his feet. But the moment that they laid eyes on him, the key bearers were shocked. Wander, though a young man did not bear the complexion of a young man. His face was almost a ghostly white, strips of dead skin hung from his cheeks. The veins in his neck could be seen, pumping what looked like black blood. His eyes had turned pale. He was not a handsome youth, but rather one who might have already been dead.

Who&who are you? Wander asked.

I'm Sora and that's my pal Riku. -

Sora, Riku, what brings you here? -

I don't know. But we understand that you're trying to defeat these colossi. -

Who told you that? -

Dormin did. -

Man, what happened to him? Riku thought. Is this kid alive or dead?

I&I have to keep going. Wander said. He staggered and approached the great beam of light in the chamber. I have defeated the beast of the western ruins as you have instructed, Dormin.

Very good, Wander, Dormin replied with that deep mysterious voice, Thou have not too far to go. Thy next foe is& Dormin began to speak in archaic poetry, A giant has fallen into the valley. It acts as a sentry to a destroyed city.

I understand, the ruined city in the Northeast. Wander staggered towards the Alter and stood before his lifeless love. I shall bring you back to life, my love, even at the cost of my own soul.

Man, Sora said to Riku. He must really be desperate.

No kidding, Riku replied.

Is there any way we can help, Wander? -

Do you wish to accompany me on my quest? Wander asked.

Yeah, that's what we're here for&I think. -

Very well then, I could use the extra help. However, I have one condition that you must follow. -

And what's that? Riku asked.

If you help me fight, you must allow me to give the finishing blow. I must slay all sixteen colossi with my own hands in order for my task to be done properly. -

We understand. -

We'll let you do the killing then. Sora said.

Wander walked over the edge of the alter platform and whistled loudly. In the distance, the sound of a horse galloping and whinnying emerged over the vast grasslands. Sure enough, a large, black horse, with a white spot dashed upon his forehead, came running through the fields, ran up the stairs leading to the alter and presented himself before Wander. Wander came up and patted his faithful steed.

There we are, Agro. Wander cooed to the horse. Easy, boy, He turned to the key bearers. This is my beloved companion, Agro. He s been with me since the beginning of my quest.

I see. -

Come on, you two, jump up. -

I don t think there s enough room on that horse for all three of us though. Riku said.

There s plenty of room. Wander held out his hand.

Are you sure it s alright? Sora asked. Agro might get spooked.

No, he s good around other people, aren t you boy. The Horse gave his rider a whinny. Now come on, we don t have all day.

Go on, Sora. Riku said.

Okay, here I go. Sora grabbed onto Wander s hand and was pulled upon the back of the black stallion. Riku was assisted soon after.

Now, Agro, Wander declared, Let s go to the city in the desert.

Agro neighed and galloped out of the castle. The trio turned northeast to the very edge of the forbidden lands. Along the way, the trio gazed upon beautiful landscapes, waterfalls from out of the mountains, beautiful lakes that poured into the sea miles to the west. Rolling hills and strange rock formations featured about the region, especially narrow, natural rock bridges that the key bearers had never seen before. Then, they passed through a sandy desert where again those silver tailed lizards imprinted their tracks.

No more than thirty minutes had passed before the trio reached the ruined city to which Dormin said they would find the next of the colossi. It was a vast ruin with many of its stone structures still standing. The three dismounted Agro and walked in though a grand gate, where old rune pillars were standing tall, on both sides of the entry chamber, within the structure. Some had collapsed over the years, obstructing their way in. But that did not halt the young men as they climbed over the rubble.

So this is it, eh? Riku asked.

Look at this place. Sora awed. These ruins must be centuries old.

This once was a thriving metropolis in the time of my ancestors. Wander said. Or so the elders say.

Hey, Wander, this may be too personal of a question, but what happened to you? -

What do you mean? -

I mean your face and complexion. You look pale, and I hope you don t take this offensively, but you look more like the living dead. -

Did you have to be so direct, Sora? Riku grumbled.

It s alright, Wander replied, I was rather shocked the first time too. I didn t always look like a walking corpse with my pale skin and my black blooded veins and peeling flesh. When I started this journey, my complexion was no different from yours. I was a very handsome young man. However, as I battled against the colossi, defeating one after the other, I noticed that my complexion started to change. Around defeating the tenth colossi, I came to realize how much my body had deteriorated. I happened to look and saw my reflection in the lake waters while getting something to drink and when I first laid eyes on my haggard appearance, I was terrified. I was a past figure of my former self, no longer the handsome youth I once was. I had become decrepit and hideous with my white complexity and pale eyes.

But how did this happen? -

It happens every time I defeat another colossus. A strange surge of energy strikes me, as if it were the

vengeful spirit of the beast. It's a dark essence that always enters me. And as a result, you see the consequence. The more energy I absorb from the colossi, the more unfathomable I look. But I can't stop now when I am so close to the end. Though I did not want to bear this distorted form, I don't want to think that all my efforts are in vain. I do this for my love. As I said before, I would sacrifice even my soul in order to bring her back to life.

Have you ever regretted taking this task? Sora asked.

I at times regretted going on this mission. For one thing, when my love does return back to life, I wonder what she will think of me with my body wasted from absorbing the dark life force of the colossi. Even now that same question plagues me. I don't know whether or not she could ever love me again. I wonder if it really was for love, or if it was just my youth and my body that she cherished. -

If she truly loves you, then she'll accept you no matter what you look like on the outside. It's what's inside that matters. -

Hey, you two, Riku said, Look!

Before the three young men, a row of great columns lay before them. Beyond that was a vast courtyard surrounded by older building structures.

This is incredible. Sora remarked. I've never seen anything like this before.

So it's here that we'll find the next colossus right? -

As far as I know, Wander replied, This is the place, the ruins to the extreme northeast of the realm.

One thing still boggles me though. Sora was curious to know. What does this colossus look like?

I have no idea. I've encountered a massive array of different colossi forms, from four-legged monsters, to serpents that glide in water, or sand, or even soar high into the air. I've encountered beasts no bigger than a tiger, lizard-like colossi and especially the Minotaur colossi. They're the ones you really have to watch out for. -

So how big do you think this next one will be? -

But no sooner had Sora said that, a distant rumbling bellowed in the distance, causing the ruins to rattle and shake.

Look, over there! Riku cried. The trio turned to find at the very end of the vast courtyard, leading to a steep ravine of jagged rocks, a large form emerged. First there were two dark grey hands that slammed onto the edge of the cliff's edge. Big and furry they were, extending twenty feet long from wrist to middle finger. Then uplifted a great grey and black beast covered in fur. Wielded in its right hand, the beast gripped a massive stone club shaped like a jagged scimitar, which was meant to pummel and smash its foes. Its left arm was completely armored with old bronze or iron plating at the shoulder. And upon the face of the colossus, a frightening mask. It towered over the key bearers and Wander with a height of at least five to six stories, a leviathan of a monster as anyone would have seen.

My God, that's the colossus?! -

I guess that answers your question, Sora. You wanted big and now you got it! -

How the heck are we supposed to battle that thing? -

We have to use our wits! Wander said. But we have a slight advantage now.

How's that? -

The colossus can only go after us one at a time. To add, he might be big, but he's slow. Let's split up and confuse him a bit. -

I understand. Riku replied. The three split up.

But you still haven't told us about how we're gonna defeat that thing. Sora said. But Wander was already out of earshot and the colossus was still advancing. Its glowing blue eyes stared at Sora, giving the key bearer the hint that he would be the first victim. Great, out of the three of us, why does it have to be me he goes after first?!

Sora ran with key blade in hand as the colossus stormed after him like a bull elephant. Sora tried to fly,

but to his dismay, he could not lift himself into the air.

Oh no, don't tell me that I can't fly in this world. Of all the things to be restricted, it had to be that. The key bearer happened to look back at the colossus. The beast at that moment drew up its club and thrust it down, hoping to strike Sora where he stood. The young warrior predicted the monster's attack and quickly eluded. However, the reach of the colossus was more than what Sora had expected and the club struck no more than ten yards away from him. The vibration of the impact caused him to stumble, but he quickly regained his foothold and dodged rolled further out of the way to avoid any possible injury.

Sora, Riku cried.

Riku, Riku, Riku, get this walking throw rug off my back! -

Can't you just fly to safety? -

You think I'd be down here if that were an option?! This world's natural law forbids the flight ability! -

Are you serious? -

Yes! -

Damn it& -

Again, the colossus struck, stomping his foot to the ground. Sora was knocked off his feet as the impact of the monster's lower limb caused the soil to upheave. The key bearer crawled as fast as he could before jumping back on his feet and running as fast as he could. Don't you dare stomp on me, rat face!

Hang on Sora, Riku cried. He began to accumulate the flame element to unleash Cinder Canister.

Well, it's good to see that magic works in this realm. The seven spheres of intense flames lit up the ruins. Here you go, big guy, choke on this!

All at once, the seven orbs of fire rushed in and pummeled the monster at point blank range. Riku smirked as he felt the heat singe the colossus, but his smile soon evaporated. As the smoke and flames diminished, he saw that no damage whatsoever had been inflicted on the monster. The colossus had received no damage.

I don't believe this, not even a scratch. -

Riku's attack was completely ineffective against that thing. Sora said to himself. Sora rushed in. Now, it's my turn! He drew forth the ice element. Let's see you eat this, Tundra Canister! The ice froze the monster's right leg, immobilizing it momentarily. Now let's see you take this on! Sora then unleashed an energy beam from his keyblade, striking the monster in the face. I got him! But like Riku before him, there was no effect. Awe come on, that was point blank in the face and yet that thing still isn't hurt, not a scratch on him.

Riku, Sora, Wander cried. The key bearers spotted him from atop a bridge overlooking the entire courtyard.

How the heck did you get up there? Riku asked.

Listen to me, you guys. You can't defeat the colossus just by striking it. You have to hit its vital points. -

Vital points, where are they? -

Look, Wander drew up his sword and reflected the sunlight from off its shining surface. A thin beam reflected from the sword, touched the colossus. It was then that a strange insignia appeared when the light touched a certain part of the monster's body.

What is that? Sora wondered.

Those points that retain the light, in those strange insignias, are the weak points of the colossus! We strike them all and the colossus goes down! -

How many impact points does he have? -

I've so far counted only two weak spots! One is on the left side of his chest and the other is on the top of its head!

Is that so? Riku said. If that's the case, he looked down at Sora, Sora, can you immobilize this guy for a while?! We need him to stand still for a moment!

I sure can! Sora replied.

Wander, you aim for the head! I'll go for the chest! -

I gotcha, Wander replied.

The three situated themselves around the colossus with Sora standing before it, Riku to its right and Wander on the bridge above it. Sora accumulated more ice.

Okay, big guy, he declared, It's your turn! I'll summon wind and ice to my command, Tundra Twister! Using a combo attack with Tundra Canister and Twister Strike, Sora created a freezing funnel cloud that engulfed the colossus. Its feet and arms were encased in a sheet of thick ice, thus immobilizing it for the time being.

My turn, Riku declared, Power of wind, power of fire, I'll summon you forth to send this demon back to hell, Flaming Hurricane! Using a combination of Cinder Canister and Hurricane strike, flaming projectiles struck the colossus left and right. The majority of them struck the light insignia, where its weak spot resided. Sora, it's your turn, aim for the chest!

I got it! Sora fired another energy beam straight at the light insignia. The impact was so great that within seconds, the insignia diminished, indicating that the job was successfully executed.

At the same time, Riku's Flaming Hurricane had struck a vital spot on the beast's right arm, forcing it to drop its club. The thing, still encased in ice, remained immobile, but with flames and ice swirling about, the icy prison began to melt and the colossus was about to break free.

Hurry, Wander, Sora cried, The colossus is gonna break my ice shield soon!

I'm on it! Wander leaped from the bridge and landed atop the monster's head, just as it broke free.

Under-handing his blade, he thrust the sword deep into the head of the leviathan. The colossus, overcome by loss of needed energy, collapsed to the ground. Sora quickly ran to avoid being crushed by the falling monster.

Get out of there, Sora! Riku cried. Within a few feet, the monster collapsed just as Sora evaded, missing him by a narrow margin. Wander too fell from atop the colossus, rolling and tumbling along the ground. They both looked at the fallen monster.

That was close. -

We did it, you guys. Riku cheered as he descended from the ruins. We took down the colossus.

That was one intense fight. Sora dusted himself off. We did a pretty good job, don't you think, Wander?

But Wander's mind somehow seemed occupied.

Are you alright, Wander? -

Something's not right. Wander said. Something's wrong.

What do you mean something's wrong? Riku asked.

Usually, the colossus' body would have been engulfed in shadow by now. -

Without warning, the Colossus suddenly lifted its right arm up and landed upon the trio.

Look out! The key bearers quickly evaded, but they watched as Wander was struck by the full force of the monster's palm.

Wander, Sora cried.

Wander, The key bearers were concerned and ran to the beast's fallen hand. Wander, speak to us! Are you alright?

Just then, Wander appeared from beneath the stone-like fingers and brushed himself off.

Hey, Wander, you're alright. Riku sighed.

What happened? Sora asked.

It turns out we missed a spot. Wander replied.

Yeah&?

Where was it? Riku wanted to know.

The last weak spot was in the palm of his right hand. Wander continued. The three looked to the colossus which now lay motionless on the ground.

Is it over now? Sora asked. No sooner had he said those words than strange dark shadows engulfed the monster.

It's over. The body of the colossus is diminishing. -

That means you only have one left. -

Just then, dark waves struck Wander, knocking him unconscious. The key bearers were shocked.

Wander! Riku cried. The two caught him as he fell. They put him on his back.

Wander, are you alright? -

I think he's out cold, Sora -

Out cold, but how? -

It might have been due to that surge of darkness. -

Well, now what do we do? -

As if things couldn't get any more bizarre, the trio suddenly found themselves levitating up into the atmosphere.

What is going on? Sora demanded to know as this sudden levitation caught him completely by surprise. I thought we couldn't fly in this world. -

It must be some other kind of power. -

Then just like that, the three vanished into thin air, leaving the now stone and rubble remnants of the colossus left to lie within the ruined city, a reminder of yet another great battle.

The key bearers suddenly found themselves back in the temple from which they started.

The temple? Sora uttered.

That was fast. Riku said.

What a way to travel. -

It was at that moment a bright light illuminated the very end of the chamber. The key bearers turned to see yet another statue glow brightly before crumbling to its foundations. They watched in awe as the form of the recent colossus tumbled into bits of rubble and debris. They then looked upon Wander who was still lying motionless upon the ground. He stirred and eased himself up, staggering to his feet.

Are you alright? Sora asked.

Are we back? Wander asked as he looked about.

We're back in the temple. Riku replied.

That was one heck of a fight. Sora said. That thing was tougher to battle than I thought.

I've had to do this fifteen times now. Wander was weary. I had to battle against enemies, all different from the other. It's been tedious and at times unbearable, but soon my task will be fulfilled and my wish will be granted. Soon my beloved Mono will be revived.

Mono? -

That's the name of my love. -

Oh? -

I see thou hast returned again in one piece. Dormin suddenly announced above the trio.

Dormin? Riku said.

I have defeated the fifteenth colossus with the help of my friends. Wander proclaimed.

And so the climax of this task has come. Dormin declared. Thy body is weak and thy mind is weary, but all thy efforts will soon gain it's just rewards. Dormin paused before speaking again. And now, the final colossi, thou will find it beyond the great gates to the south. The ritual is nearly over and thy wish is nearly granted.

I am glad? -

But someone now stands to get in thy way. -

Someone&? -

Make haste for time is short. Dormin s voice thus diminished for the time being.

Someone s gonna stand in your way? Sora asked.

Whose gonna stand in your way? Riku added.

It may be the elders coming to stop me. Wander replied.

Stop you, but why? -

When they told me about the legend behind these lands and the power that resided here, I said that I wanted to use that power in order to restore the life of Mono. But they forbade me to do so, saying that these lands were also cursed and that trying to use the forbidden spell to bring back my love would only result in ultimate suffering. But I didn t care. I just wanted my love to live again. To me, her death was the ultimate suffering. Compared to the loss of her, the pain I feel now is a trifle. -

How did she die anyway? Sora asked.

She was sacrificed because the people of our nation thought she wielded a cursed taboo and that her execution was needed to maintain the stability of this land. I didn t find any purpose in her dying. It was unjust. So I took it within my own hands to undo the sin that the elders have caused. Wander walked towards the exit. There, his faithful steed, Argo awaited their return.

Even the horse is here. -

After fifteen times of the same procedure, I wouldn t be the least bit surprised that he d come back to the temple automatically. -

Either that, or he was transported here like we were. -

Come on you two, Wander advised, We still have quite a way to go. It s a far journey to the south, at least ten miles.

Alright, -

The three mounted upon Argo s back and began their trek southward to the great gates. As observed, the lands to the south were just as breathtakingly spectacular as those to the north. High peaks and rocky cliffs covered in grass and moss gave a comforting, yet foreboding look to the region. There were a few shrubs and trees they passed and some passes had a strange eerie mist lingering about, like morning fog that never fully diminished. There were vast green meadows and pastures where more of the black and silver-tailed lizards scurried about. White sky birds and hawks flew high in the sky. And on the ground, slow tortoises crawled about without a care.

This is just as nice a place as in the north. Sora said.

From deserts to the sea, Riku added, What a contrast.

Riku, Sora, Wander suddenly implied.

Yeah, what is it? -

I ve been meaning to say this to you guys for a while, but I m glad that you two decided to help me. -

Oh yeah? Sora said.

To tell you the truth, since I began this task a few days ago, I ve felt really lonely. No one, but Argo here has been with me. My horse was my only companion. It s nice to at least have someone to talk to now. -

It s the least we could do. -

It s a feeling that both Sora and I can relate to. Riku told him. We ve encountered our fair share of solitude as well.

Thank you for understanding. Wander said, his eyes tearing.

Hey, you guys, Sora shouted. Look, what s that over there?

Riku and Wander looked to a cluster of high mountains in the distance. Their resemblance looked like two large pillars with a narrow crevice between them. As they drew closer across the grasslands, it became apparent that what resided between these two natural formations was a great stone gate. At its

center was a round crystal window to which light from the sun beamed down, hitting a circular platform at the base of the gates. Argo stopped upon the platform.

Well, Riku said. I guess this is the place.

What do you say we open this thing? Sora added. The three dismounted and walked up to the gates. But they came to realize that manually opening the gate by hand would be impossible. The gate itself was over a hundred feet high and made of thick, solid stone.

This is impossible. Riku folded his arms in front of him. There s no way that we could possibly move something that massive.

You never know til you try, Riku. -

True& -

Let s give it one try, you guys. -

The three placed their hands upon the gate.

Okay, Wander said. At the count of three, we all push with everything we have.

Right, the key bearers responded.

Ready&? They leaned forward. One, two, three&!

The key bearers and Wander pushed with all their might, grunting and moaning as they used all their strength to move the gate. But despite their efforts, the gate itself did not budge one bit.

Let s try it again! Sora said.

One, two, three&! Again they pushed, hoping to jar the gate doors open at least a couple of feet, but still there was no avail.

One more time, let s give it all we ve got! -

One, two, three&! -

They pushed again, their muscles flexing and tightening as they shoved at the stone doors, but still nothing happened. They wearily looked up at the gates.

This is impossible. Riku said. The gates are just too big. -

Maybe if we tried it again& Sora suggested.

It wouldn t make any difference, Sora. This is no good. We can t possibly hope to open these gates with our own strength. This gate is twice as big as the doors to Kingdom Hearts. And to make things worse, these doors are made out of stone. -

Maybe I could blast them open with an energy beam. -

Save your strength. Wander advised. There s no use wasting energy. Besides, we need every ounce of energy to fight the last colossus.

Well, how do we open the gate? -

I have an idea. Wander pulled out his sword and stood upon the circular platform.

What are you going to do? -

If this sword can reflect light to reveal the weaknesses of the colossi, then perhaps if might be able to open this gate. Wander drew up his sword and reflected the light from off the glimmering blade. He aimed for the crystal glass in the gate s design. Sure enough, the moment the beam touched the window; there was another flash of light and a low rumble.

Just then, they came to realize that gate was opening, very slowly. The ground shook as the stone doors swung open. Once opening fully on their giant hinges, they struck the sides of the rock pillars causing a mellow roar to erupt.

You did it. Sora said.

Alright, you two, Wander continued, Let s keep moving.

The three mounted Argo and proceeded to enter through the gates. They came before a series of stair flights and continued on their way. They eventually came to a bridge, leading to a higher series of stone structures. They dismounted at the mouth of the stone walkway.

The colossus must be on the other side of that bridge. Riku said.

It looks like we have some climbing to do. Sora added. Let's go!

Sora was the first to step onto the bridge, but the moment he did, the first stone block gave way beneath his feet. Sora screamed as he fell, but Riku and Wander caught him at the nick of time. Below Sora was a deep ravine with a flowing river at its bottom. There were also a series of jagged rocks just under him.

Hold on, Sora! Riku cried

Don't let me go, you two! Sora shouted.

We're not gonna let you go! -

Heave him up! Wander said.

They pulled on Sora's arms and brought him up to safety. Riku embraced his friend tightly.

Thanks you guys, Sora uttered, gasping from the shock, You saved my life.

Nothing to it, Riku replied. The three stood up and looked at the bridge. Closely examining it, they realized that the bridge was fragile and able to crack beneath them if they tried to walk across. That bridge is on its last legs. It seems that any added weight will cause it to collapse like dominos.

Then, we'll just have to find some other way to get to the other side. Wander said. But as they looked to the left and the right, they noticed that no other connection arched between their side and the opposite. The other bridges around had collapsed over the years. Well, scratch that plan.

There's no other way to the other side. -

Now what'll we do? Sora asked.

I hate to do this, Wander said, But we have no other choice. Wander mounted back onto Argo. Get on you guys.

What are you gonna do? -

The only other option we have right now is to jump across that bridge and cross it as fast as we can and Argo's the one for the job.

Are you crazy? -

There's nothing else we can do. Trying to find another way would only work to our disadvantage. It may take days or even weeks to find an alternative way. We have to risk this jump. It's all or nothing. -

He does have a point, Sora. Riku said.

Alright, Sora replied, But do you think Argo will be able to support us all?

He can and he will. Wander told him. The only thing you have to worry about is holding on to dear life.

Alright, then let's do it. -

The three mounted up. Wander then backed Argo far enough to give him a galloping start. Argo neighed and whinnied.

I'm asking a lot from you, old friend. Wander whispered to his horse, padding him on the neck. Can you do this? Argo nodded his head, agreeing. Then, let's go!

Kicking his sides, Wander caused Argo to gallop almost instantly. Riku and Sora held on tightly so as not to fall off and into the ravine. Argo's jumped upon the bridge and galloped away. Almost instantly, the bridge began to collapse. Argo made it, jumping across a gap on the other side. But as he reached the bridge mouth of the other side, the stone began to crack. Kicking up, he bucked the trio off his back, having them safely land on the stone walkways. Wander looked to find his beloved horse fall as the stone gave way beneath his hooves.

Agro, he cried.

Oh no, Sora shouted, Agro!

The three watched as the faithful stallion fell to its possible demise in the ravine. They watched as the horse fell into the river and didn't resurface. Then again, at such a deep depth, they couldn't really tell anyway. Wander reached with futility, as if he could save his horse from his plummet.

Agro's voice wavered. He began to cry.

Wander & Sora said. He patted his back, trying to comfort him. Wander threw his head into Sora's arms and cried. It's alright, Wander, it's alright.

Argo, my friend, my companion, he's dead. -

That may be, Riku implied, But there is a chance that he might have survived. Hopefully that river down there was deep enough.

Do you think? -

I'm positive. -

Yeah, Sora added, I'm sure Argo survived.

I hope so. -

Now, let's keep going! Riku said. We have substantial climbing to do so let's not waste all that energy sulking.

Before the three, an intricate wall of steps and platforms lay before them. They began their ascension, first overcoming a large wall. They then proceeded walking up a series of natural footing in the Cliffside.

Whatever you do, Sora said, Don't look down!

That's the thing, Sora. Riku replied. You tell people not to look down and what do they do, they look down.

They eventually came to a flight of stairs constructed into the face of the cliff. They climbed at least two flights before reaching step pillars. One at a time they ascended. By this time, rain and thunderous lightning bellowed. The winds picked up, but such terrible conditions did not deter the trio. They finally reached the summit to a series of ruins. And before them was a large black structure.

That was some climb. -

You're telling me. -

So Wander, this is where we'll find the final colossus, right?

That's right. Wander replied.

So where is it? -

It's over there. -

Over where? -

Over there, right in front of you. -

But to the shock of the key bearers, they realized that he was pointing at the large black structure before them.

Are you talking about that big temple? Sora asked.

That's the one. -

So is he at the top of that old ruin? Riku wondered.

No, the ruin is the colossus. -

WHAT?!! The key bearers looked again and realized that this large structure, supposedly a half a mile high, began to move on its own. The arms spread out and the glowing blue eyes could be seen protruding and staring right at them.

Are you kidding?! Sora gaped. That big thing is the colossus?

That's the one. -

That's not a colossus, that's a building with legs! -

It looks too big to move quickly. There's nothing to fear from it! -

That's what scares me. Riku implied.

What do you mean? -

I mean that. Riku pointed to a series of deep crevices and craters that were embedded in the dirt and stone, as if a barrage of some sort had commenced there. Something tells me that this guy doesn't have to move about on the field. By the looks of those pock marks all over the ground, the colossus might use a long range type of weapon.

So what do you think we should do to avoid it? Sora asked.

Well, let s see, Riku pondered. He then noticed a series of stone barracks, pits and winding trenches. Perhaps we could use those trenches to conceal our movements.

Good idea. -

But how accurate do you think that thing can shoot? Wander asked.

We ll just have to find out. Riku pointed to a fallen pillar on the ground. Let s rush behind that stone column and see what happens from there.

Right, -

On the count of three, we charge. One, two, three&! -

The trio rushed up the ramp and quickly threw themselves behind the fallen pillar. The colossus suddenly fired a continuous barrage of energy beams, pummeling the fallen pillar. The trio ducked and covered as the ballistics kept striking at their only means of protection.

That thing isn t letting up is it? Sora said.

You were right about one thing, Riku, Wander added, That thing is dead accurate when it comes to shooting.

That means that trying to move over that open ground is suicidal. No matter how fast we are, that colossus will be able to mark us. Riku peeked over the pillar. He noticed that the high walls and pits were vastly spread apart by open ground. There s no way that we d be able to advance across that without getting shot at. The colossus has the upper hand against us since it has the higher position. It would be able to spot us from anywhere on the field.

Hey, Riku, Sora shouted, Look at this! He pointed to an opening in the ground near the pillar. Do you think we could hide in there?

I m sure we can. Good thinking, Sora. One at a time, we ll go in. Sora, you go first. -

Why do I have to go first? -

You discovered that hole. -

Yeah, but& -

No time to argue, Sora. Wander advised. We can t stay here forever. -

Alright, alright, since you both are pressuring me to do this. A big sweat drop formed on his brow. Why me&? He gave a huff before summoning the courage to make the charge. Alright, here I go! Sora jumped out from behind the collapsed pillar and made for the hole. The colossus in the meantime fired a barrage to strike and kill the key bearer. But at the last moment, Sora dodge rolled and made it into the hole just as the energy projectiles struck. The ground shook and thunderous booms bellowed, forcing him to cover his ears. He looked around and found out that what he was in was not just a hole, but an entry way through the trenches.

Well, Sora, Riku said, What did you find?

Get in here, you guys! This is no ordinary hole. This is the entry through the trench! -

Really, that s great! -

Hurry, -

Alright, Wander, you re next. -

I gotcha, Wander replied. He huffed and puffed before charging recklessly towards the trench entry. He managed to make it just as the colossus projectiles made a second impact. That was close.

Alright, Riku, Sora shouted, Your turn now!

I m coming! Riku quickly rushed into the pit just as the bombs blew around him too. That was close.

You see, this is the entry to the trenches. Before the trio was a stone hall with a roof to cover it.

Let s go then. Maybe this will lead us to the colossus. -

The three went down the corridor. They made a turn and headed down another corridor. Again and again they turned, seeming to always advance forward instead of receding. Then finally, the team

reached the end of the trench. But as they emerged, they came to realize that the trench only reached half way to the colossus. If not, only a quarter. The colossus still towered above them, firing away its energy, hoping to strike the key bearers and Wander from afar. The three hid behind a pit just as the colossus fury rained down on them.

Damn, Riku growled, We re not even close to being safe. -

That thing s still in front of us. Sora said. Maybe there might be another trench entry. Sora looked hither and thither before spotting another entry way. Look Riku, there s another one over there! But to their dismay, only a few guarding walls stood to protect them. Between each pit, there was at least ten feet of exposed ground.

Look on the bight side. The gaps aren t that big. -

I know, but it s still too long a stretch for us to go without that monster seeing us. -

If that s the case, then I ll stay here and distract the colossus with my Cinder Canister. -

You ll what? Wander asked.

You heard me. Riku replied. You said yourself, Wander, we have superior numbers here. Therefore, while I keep that thing s attention on me, you two hurry up to the colossus and get within striking distance. -

I see what you mean. -

Now go, I ll hold keep him occupied! -

Right, Sora said. Let s do this!

Sora was the first to jump out from behind the wall. The colossus fired at him, but missed. At the same time, Riku formed Cinder Canister behind the safety of the barrack and hurled the flaming orbs at the head of the colossus one at a time. The colossus was struck, but remained undamaged. It looked to where Riku was hidden and launched energy beams at the area where he hid. By this time, Wander and Sora managed to jump from pit to pit without the colossus shooting down at them even once.

Riku s strategies work every time. Sora chuckled.

Come on, we re almost there! After running though a series of protective corridors and trenches, hanging from a cliff, and clutching for dear life on a narrow ledge, the two made it to another opening leading to more pits. At the distance, there was another underground entrance to more trenches, which led to the base of the colossus itself. Just one more flight, Sora, then that thing won t be able to shoot at us anymore.

Wander look! The two turned to find that the colossus was continuously pummeling Riku. Riku was now giving off so many shots with his elemental spells and the infamous Cinder Canister. Riku s in trouble.

What ll we do? -

Wander, you go on without me. I ll stay here and back up Riku. -

But& -

Don t worry, I ll be fine. Besides, it s you that has to deliver the final blow. -

You re right. -

Go& -

Stay safe, Wander padded Sora on the shoulder and continued on. Sora in the meantime, stood up from behind the protective barrier. Aiming his keyblade, he unleashed a powerful energy way that struck the mid section of the colossus. The colossus eased its aim attacks on Riku and saw Sora just below. It then started to barrage him instead.

Riku poked his head from behind the barrier.

Sora, Sora, Sora, he sighed, Always playing the hero. But at least he got that thing off my back! Riku formed Cinder Canister and began to toss the orbs at the giant from his position all the while Sora was unleashing long ranged elemental attacks from his position. The colossus tussled with both key bearers, but was unable to dislodge them.

Little did the giant realize that with all its attention concentrated on the key bearers, it forgot about Wander who had managed to emerge at its base and started ascending up its armor a little at a time.

Thirty minutes had elapsed and the duel between the key bearers and the colossus did not ease up.

What the heck is Wander doing? Riku grumbled, Is he taking a nap? I don't have enough energy on reserve to keep up a support fire.

Wander, Sora cried, Wherever you are on that thing, take it down now!

The prayers of the key bearers were answered as they watched the colossus suddenly halt its barrage and throw its left arm behind its back as if to ease a painful kink in its spine. Its arm made its way back to the front. Then from there, its right arm raised to comfort the bicep of the left arm.

The key bearers squinted to see what was happening. To their surprise, what caused pain on the colossus was none other than Wander who had scaled upon the beast. He had jumped from the back of the monster to its left hand, scurried up its left arm then jumped upon its right hand after inflicting a stinging thrust with his sword.

Hey, there he is! -

What do you know?! Riku chuckled. He scaled that beast!

Wander stood upon the top side of the colossus' fury hand and fired his bow and arrow at the monster's exposed right left. The colossus moved its hand to ease the sting from the arrow, permitting Wander to jump onto its shoulder. He then scurried up the thing's neck and nestled at the top of its head. There, the one great Achilles' spot glowed profusely before him as his sword neared it. He drew up his blade.

This is for Mono! he cried. But no sooner had he prepared to thrust, the colossus began to jostle its body around, trying to shake him off. Wander held on for dear life. Help, Riku, Sora,

He needs help, Riku! Sora cried.

Lay on a volley! Riku shouted. Aim for the chest!

Right, -

The key bearers unleashed another barrage. The colossus was struck and forced upright. This pause gave Wander his chance. He drew up his sword and thrust it deeply into the head of the colossus. The colossus gave a dying roar and died upright as the black blood of shadow spurted from its head.

I did it. Wander uttered.

Yeah, Sora cheered.

He did it! Riku added, whooping away. Way to go!

Wander jumped from atop the head of the colossus and used his cloak as a parachute. But no sooner had he jumped than dark essence from the slain colossus came shooting at him and struck him from behind. Wander was rendered unconscious as he had been many times before when defeating a colossus.

Wander, the key bearers cried as they rushed to aid him. They caught the unconscious warrior as he descended.

Unconscious again, Sora said. You sleep then, kid. You deserve it. Almost like a miracle of divine intervention, the storm that erupted during the battle seemed to dissipate, breaking up to the beams of the afternoon sun. Eventually, the storm receded and a clear sky came upon the trio, warming them with warm light. In this atmosphere, the once feared colossus did not seem as threatening. Is over&

Sora, Riku uttered.

What is it, Riku? He pointed to what looked like a couple of stubs now protruding out of his head. Sora was shocked when he took notice. It almost made the slumbering Wander frightening to look upon.

Those are&horns& -

My God, what has this dark energy turned him into? -

Perhaps Dormin might be able to explain. -

No sooner had Sora said that than all three of them began to levitate into the air.

Uh ho, here we go again. I guess we ll find out sooner than expected.
There was a bright flash of light and the three once again vanished from sight, returning to the temple from which they came.

5 - Dormin

Dormin

Riku, Sora, and Wander once again appeared within the grand chamber of the temple.

What a rush. Sora said.

You said it. Riku added.

You, a voice suddenly shouted, who are you?!

The key bearers looked to the direction of the altar where the voice originated. Upon the altar steps and at the altar itself, six men stood. Five of them looked like soldiers, dressed similar to the trio say for the masks that they wore. They were armed with sword or crossbow. The sixth individual, who happened to be slightly smaller in stature, must have been the leader. He was dressed in a grey hooded coat with a shaman mask in the shape of a dog or owl s head.

Who the heck are you guys? Sora asked.

How did you get here? Riku added.

I could be asking you the same thing! the cloaked man said. You dared to trespass upon this ground and use the forbidden spell to release the evil?

What are you talking about? Who are you? -

I am Lord Emon, chief shaman and protector of this realm. What gives you the gall the break the seal of this world?! Are you trying to send this world into a second darkness? -

A second darkness&? Sora wondered.

Listen, sir, we don t know what you re talking about. Riku explained. We were just helping Wander fulfill his task to revive his love.

Wander&? Lord Emon uttered. So he s responsible?

It was at that moment, Wander started to stir and stagger to his feet. His body, weak and decrepit in form, was an unbearable sight to behold.

Wander, Sora said, You re alright.

Mono& Wander uttered as he began to walk towards the altar.

I don t believe this, Emon growled, So it was you after all, Wander! Have you any idea what you ve done?! Not only did you steal the sword and trespass upon this cursed land, but you used the forbidden spell as well! To be reduced to such a sight, you were only being used!

He was only being used? -

What do you mean he was only being used? Riku asked.

Wander came to beseech Dormin, Emon said, believing that he d be able to grant any wish his heart desired. But Dormin is not a being of wisdom. It is the evil that has been concealed in this land.

But what about those colossi, aren t they evil too? -

Those colossi weren t evil! They were merely immortal guardians meant to conceal the darkness. Dormin s power was divided into sixteen separate entities. Those colossi were responsible for guarding each segment of dark energy. But now because you idiots have killed all sixteen guardians, Dormin s power has been revived and united into a single entity. He will once again become a pestilence to all the land, destroying all civilizations in his path as he did to the once thriving society centuries before. And Wander is his host body.

His body is being used by Dormin s evil? -

So that's why his body looks like that now. Sora uttered.

Emon drew out his hand and the soldiers drew their weapons, drawing back their crossbows or drawing out their swords.

Eradicate the source of the evil! Emon commanded. One of the soldiers drew up his crossbow.

No, what do you have to shoot him for?! Sora threw himself in between Wander and the arrow.

Get out of the way, fool! You dare to protect the evil one?! -

But he didn't know this would happen! -

It's too late for regret! He must die or he will spread misery throughout this land, would you prefer that?! -

No&but& -

Get out of the way young man and let us do what we have to do! -

Mono& Wander said. He passed by Sora continuing to advance.

Look, he's possessed by the dead. Emon pointed to the rear. The key bearers looked to find shadows suddenly appearing around them.

Riku&? Sora uttered.

Heartless&? Riku thought. The key bearers backed down. Their minds were filled with questions. They wanted to help Wander, but was his life more important than the fate of the land?

Riku, what are we going to do? -

We have no other choice. Riku lowered his head. We can't interfere.

But Wander, he&

Look at him, Sora. He's completely possessed by darkness. I hate to say it, but we can't be responsible for bringing a downfall to this land by allowing our friend to live. We have to let Emon do as he will. -

Wander& Sora could only watch as Wander marched on to his doom with the dark, tormented souls following him.

Hurry up and do it! Emon ordered.

The soldier shot him in the left leg, forcing Wander to collapse. He moaned and cried as he grasped for the arrow sticking out of his flesh.

Mono& he continued to cry. Mono, my love&

It is better to put him out of his misery than to exist, cursed as he is. -

Another soldier came forward and drew his sword over Wander. Wander rolled upon his back and looked up at his inevitable death. The sword hung over him, glimmering in the pale light.

Please& -

The soldier did not relent. With a single downward thrust, he stabbed Wander in the chest. The young man, overcome with exhaustion did not have the energy to cry out.

Wander&! Sora cried, as he and Riku watched their friend ruthlessly impaled.

But for some reason, he did not die. Wander grasped at the blade. The soldiers were shocked and withdrew from the possessed warrior. Wander was in no way affected by the sword which now stuck out of his chest. Black shadowy ooze spurted out of the open wound as he stood up again.

He's possessed alright. Riku said.

Wander continued his stride towards the altar, determined to reach his love. He pulled out the sword and threw it aside. But his energy was drained and he could not advance any further. At the same time, when he extracted the sword, shadow from the wound began to manifest all over his body, covering every inch of him in shadow. Overwhelmed by this darkness, Wander gave in completely, falling to the ground. There he lay as the shadow covered him from head to toe. He lay there, motionless, the life purged from his body. The members of the party believed that it was over.

So, Emon said, Wander is dead.

Wander& Sora uttered, a tear falling from his eye.

Damn it, Riku grumbled, To think that it would end like this.

His efforts were in vain, Emon thought to himself, looking back at the still lifeless body of Mono.

Wander had sacrificed everything, including his body, mind, and his soul, and yet the life of his love has not returned.

But no sooner had things quieted, the body of Wander began to manifest even further as the shadow began to spread around his being taking another shape. The being stood up, growing larger and larger until its head could reach the very ceiling of the chamber. It was a dark and sinister form with clawed hands and feet, a furry complexion, spider like limbs on its back and especially its large horns upon the top of its head. Upon its face, there was no feature, but two glowing, pale blue eyes. The thing towered over them like a mountain. The soldiers backed away.

That s not Wander. Riku said, Not anymore.

Riku, Sora implied, It looks like&like&

I know, that thing looks like a heartless. -

At last, the being chuckled in a deep and sinister voice, We have been revived to our original form. Thou severed our body into sixteen segments for an eternity in order to seal away our power. We, Dormin, have arisen anew.

We were too late. Emon said. He s been resurrected. Dormin suddenly slammed his hand upon the group, trying to crust them. The soldiers quickly evaded as the monster s mighty fist made impact with the floor. The stone slabs shattered and the rumble of the ground forced the group to fall.

We have borrowed the body of this warrior! The dead souls thus converged into Dormin, making him stronger.

Quickly, we must place a seal over the entire shrine before it s too late! The soldiers began to run, protecting Lord Emon. But Dormin threw his mighty arm in their path.

Sorry, shaman, we won t let thee get away from this shrine! The monster then unleashed an acidic breath which blinded and choked the group. He then raised his hand above his head and made ready to unleash the final blow. Now die!

But before he could strike, Riku and Sora came before him and began to strike at Dormin with their keyblades and elemental attacks.

You re right, Sora. Riku said. This guy is just like a heartless.

You guys get out of here now! Sora shouted. We ll hold him off!

Let s go, my lord. One of the soldiers beseeched.

Yes& -

The party of six withdrew as Riku and Sora stayed behind to hold off the shadowy being.

Thou dare betray us? Dormin declared.

We never betrayed you! Sora shouted.

We never befriended you from the start! Riku added. Let this be our repentance for helping to release you!

But we are Wander, thy friend. Dormin said. He is part of our being.

You re not Wander, you re just a soulless monster, a heartless! -

Then so be it. Thou dare stand in our way? Then thou shall die for thy deception! -

The great monster threw down his arm upon the key bearers, but his massive size prevented him from striking quickly and his lack of space prevented him from effectively striking. Riku and Sora dodged and evaded.

Face it, Dormin, Sora shouted, You can t catch us the way you re moving!

Thou dare to mock us? The giant heartless unleashed its burning breath, hoping to cripple the key bearers, but his foes evaded again.

The duo then rushed in inflicted severe strikes against the monster. Dormin growled as he felt the

keyblades strike into his shadowy flesh. Angered, he pounded again, but again the two eluded the strike only to counterstrike successfully themselves.

What is this power? Dormin cried as he felt the stinging of the keyblades. It burns us!

You're no different from a heartless. Sora said. Therefore, there's nothing you can do to defend against the keyblade!

Give it up, Dormin! Riku added. You can't beat us!

Is that so? Dormin chuckled. Then cut away if thee wish! But be warned that if thou kill us, then thy beloved companion shall die as well.

Wander? Sora said.

Yes, Wander is part of our being. He will thus lose his life as we. The key bearers held their assault. Dormin chuckled. Thou fools, thy feelings get in the way. Our power is indomitable! The giant fumed his breath. The key bearers, evaded. But because of their emotional ties with Wander, they reacted too late and were struck by the cloud. They coughed and choked, while their eyes burned with pain.

I can't see. Sora cried. It burns!

I can't breathe! Riku coughed.

Now die! Dormin raised his fists above his head and prepared to deliver a final blow.

However, he little realized that by fighting the key bearers, he allowed Lord Emon and his soldiers to withdraw safely from the temple.

Ready my horse! he instructed.

Yes sir. One of the soldiers replied.

Lord Emon, another soldier added. He handed Emon the sacred sword, which was retrieved during the scuffle.

Good, Emon replied, wait outside. I must do something first.

Sir! The soldiers quickly scurried back to their horses. In the meantime, Emon looked down the tower shaft to a sacred pool at the very bottom.

If there is one way to seal away the monster for good, then it will be through means of diminishing through generation. Let the last defy his fate! The shaman thus threw the sword down the tower and into the pool. Be gone foul beast!

The minute the sword struck the pool, a strange energy erupted. Powerful winds and a strong vortex like current bellowed. Dormin was on the verge of crushing the key bearers when he felt the surge of energy take hold of him and pull him away into the sacred pool. The wind was like that of a blustery day to anyone else, but to the beast, the pull of the wind was as strong as a black hole. He could not escape it.

No, he roared as his power slowly diminished, Curse thee, shaman, thou hast sealed our fate!

What's happening? Sora asked.

I don't know. Riku replied. It looks like Dormin's being pulled into something.

Look, Riku, They watched as the shadow diminished. Dormin's form thus vanished and only the shadowy form of Wander remained.

Mono, he cried as he reached for his beloved with futility. He was thrown back and tumbled towards the glowing cesspool.

Is that Wander? Sora said. He's still alive!

We gotta help him! Riku added.

The two key bearers rushed forward, trying to catch up with Wander who was still tumbling about like an autumn leaf. He reached the cesspool which glowed profusely. He grabbed to the sides, hanging on with all his might, but the strength in his arms gave way. Lacking further strength, he let go. But Riku and Sora managed to grab a hold of both of his arms.

Hang on, Wander! -

We gotcha! -

The pull of the energy was even greater and it started to pull the key bearers in as well.

It s no use. Wander said.

No, Sora cried. Don t give up! Don t you dare give up on us!

C mon, Sora, Riku cried, Pull as hard as you can! The key bearers heaved as hard as they could, but such effort was futile. The wind was too great even for them.

It s no use, you guys. Wander said. Just let go.

Let go...? Sora asked. But why&? -

It s what I want. -

But all your effort, all of your suffering&

I know, but it was all in vain. All sixteen colossi have been slain, but life has not returned to my beloved Mono. It was all a ploy by Dormin to free himself from his prison. His being resides within me now. I can t afford to have him roam about and regain his strength. -

But Wander& -

All this time I was wrong. My ambition and desires blinded me. Let me at least repent by destroying Dormin s power once and for all. Please, Riku, Sora, let go, or you ll be dragged in too. -

We re not gonna give up on you, Wander! -

If you keep holding on, you yourselves might be pulled in. And who knows what ll happen after that. Please, let go and live. It s better for one to die than three. -

No& Sora uttered.

It s alright, I ve accepted my fate. It s better to die than to be possessed by a demon. Now, let go. -

Very well... Riku said.

But just one more thing before you do, I just wanted to tell you thanks. Thanks for accompanying me. I ll never forget you& -

With a final sad smile, the key bearers released Wander. His body vanished into the light of the cesspool. There was a strong reaction and the energy seemed to pull and push at the same time. Riku and Sora were blinded and threw themselves to the stone floor as the energy flowed above them. Within seconds of releasing Wander to his fate, the power diminished and all was calm as they were before.

In the meantime, Lord Emon and his soldiers managed to cross the bridge back to safely. The bridge behind them began to collapse, thus sealing the way to the forbidden lands forever. Emon could only look back.

Poor ungodly soul, he said, Now no man shall ever trespass upon this place again. He looked at the collapsed debris of where the great bridge to the temple once stood. He watched as the dust settled for the last time in the cursed lands. Emon lowered his head solemnly. Should you be alive, if it s even possible to continue to exist in these sealed lands, one day, perhaps you ll make atonement for what you ve done.

My lord, one soldier said.

Yes, -

Giving no final word or a final glance back, Emon and his troops withdrew, never to return.

Riku and Sora slowly lifted up their heads. There was a dead silence now.

Is it over? Sora asked.

I think so. Riku replied.

Poor Wander& -

To think that all his efforts were for nothing& -

But just then as the key bearers lifted themselves up, they were met with the sound of cooing. They turned towards where the cesspool resided. In place of the water, there was smooth rock. And there, lying on the ground was a little baby boy. Upon his head were little stumps on his head, miniature horns to be precise. It cooed and smiled.

It's a baby, Sora uttered.

I know, Riku added, But where did it come from? -

You don't suppose that maybe that baby is? The key bearers examined the baby. Riku then lifted it up. The baby laughed and smiled.

Yes, without a doubt, this is Wander.

Well, what do we do with him? -

I don't know. The two key bearers set him down again.

I guess we take care of it? -

Are you kidding, Sora, we know nothing about taking care of babies. -

Well, I was just suggesting. Besides, we're the only ones here. -

Well yeah, but -

Just then, the key bearers suddenly found their bodies vanishing from sight.

What's happening to us? -

We're disappearing! -

Is this mission over? -

With no further words, the key bearers vanished from sight, leaving the little baby alone. Scared and cold, the baby began to cry. At that same time, the sound of hooves entered the chamber. Through the entrance, Argo appeared, limping with a sprained left hind leg. He trotted over to the altar, neighing and whinnying. He heard the baby crying. He then gazed at the still lifeless body of Mono.

Suddenly, there was a stir. The young woman suddenly opened her eyes as the lifeblood refilled her veins. She slowly arose and sat up upon the altar. She jumped from the stone platform and stood for the first time since her death.

Where am I? Mono said to herself. That's when she heard the cry of the baby. Curious, she walked down the chamber, passing the crumbled statues of the colossi, with Argo hobbling next to her. They came to the cesspool to find the baby boy crying. Oh you poor thing, what are you doing here? Taking the baby boy in her arms, Mono rocked him to sleep.

6 - The Battle of Hu Lao Gate

The Battle of Hu Lao Gate

Riku and Sora again opened up their eyes and found themselves in a different place. No longer were they within the old temple, but rather a narrow mountain pass. There was a slight mist and an icy residue upon the ground indicating that the next world they came to was one where winter had set in and a new morning was breaking.

This must be the next battle assessment. Riku said. The air was cold and it caused him to shiver. It's a little chilly too. But the change in atmosphere did not deter their thoughts on Wander and his world.

Poor Wander, Sora thought to himself, To think that he had to meet such a sorry end, regressed to an infant alone in that world.

I know, but there's nothing we can do about it. Riku then happened to look down to realize that his wardrobe had changed again. Sora, look at this.

Sora looked up to see that both he and Riku were no longer in the Gaelic style of clothing as they were in the world of the Colossi, but rather they were dressed in Chinese armor dating to the end of the Han Dynasty. The armor consisted of individual armored plates, with a shiny grey hue, woven together with red twine. There was blue trimming along each featured piece of armor, specifically on the arm, leg, and waist guards. The arm guards also displayed reinforced thickness for the upper shoulder in the form of beast, or dragon heads. The chest piece was slightly different, consisting of circular armored plating and a thick, reinforced base around the abdomen and lower torso, colored in gold and black. And around the color, more reinforced armor, reaching down to the middle of their back and chest and topped with scarf and connecting insignia. Around their waists were standing sashes of thick cloth to withstand enemy attack. They were fastened with bolted belts, with the buckle as another frightening demon. Thick arm guards and shin guards, of an identical color to the rest of the entourage, protected their much needed limbs. Finally, upon their heads, they wore domed helmets topped with blue tassels and golden spires at the side of the helmet's front, resembling the fierce appearance of a dragon or lion.

No wonder I was feeling a little heavy. Sora declared.

We must be going into one fierce battle. Riku added.

I know, but where? -

Hey, you two, a voice shouted from behind. What are you standing about for?!

The key bearers turned to find a man, dressed in intricate battle robes, standing behind them. He was a dashing individual, battle-hardened in appearance with his long flowing hair and his thick beard and moustache. A patch concealed his left eye and in his hand, he wielded a large sword called a Kirin Blade. His appearance was almost similar to General Saber, which was the reason the key bearers reacted harshly.

Riku and Sora jumped back and drew out their keyblades.

Saber, Sora growled, What are you doing here?

Show more respect to me, you novices! the man thundered. And who is this Saber you speak of? You've mistaken me for someone else possibly. My name is Xiahou Dun and don't you forget it! The key bearers lowered their weapons.

I don't think that's Saber. Riku said. He's too brash and direct.

Are you trying to be funny or something?! Xiahou Dun walked up to them, What are your names?!

I m Riku& -

And I m Sora. Sora added.

Well, Riku, Sora, Xiahou Dun said, I should have you two executed for your insolence! But we can t afford to waste lives in the middle of our upcoming campaign!

Campaign&what campaign&? -

Are you idiots that dense? I m talking about the battle that we re waging at Hu Lao Gate! There s a military meeting and I m supposed to attend it with my cousin! You two will accompany me! -

Very well, Riku said. Xiahou Dun turned without uttering another word.

Man, Sora grumbled, What is his problem?

I don t know. -

And why did you say we d go with him? From what I can tell, he doesn t like us. -

That may be so, but he s our first link to figuring out what s going on in this world. -

Yeah, I guess& -

We ll just follow him for the time being. Just make sure to keep on his good side. He s not the type of guy you wanna screw around with. -

You got that right. -

Are you two coming or not? Xiahou Dun shouted.

We re coming, we re coming, -

The two key bearers quickly pursued. They eventually came to a vast encampment of possibly twenty thousand tents. A few soldiers wandered about in their early morning duties. Some brushing down their horses, while others were fetching water for their comrades. Others sharpened their weapons while some men changed guard. The sun had not peeked and the stars were still twinkling, though slightly faded by the upcoming morning. The torches in the camp were still lit and the majority of the men were still fast asleep.

The trio eventually came to a large tent near the center of the camp. There, just outside the flap of the tent, a man in blue stood idly about. Though his main battle array was blue, his battle sash and upper body guard were intricate pieces of red with gold trim. His stern face was an intimidating sight stationed within the folds of a standing collar. His hair was a raven black, matching the moustache and lengthy beard that hung from his chin. Upon his head was a royal cap, tightly fastened in place. At his side was a long sword, neatly sheathed away.

Cousin, Xiahou Dun shouted.

Ah, the man said, Glad to see that you could make it. He then noticed the key bearers behind him.

What means this armed guard?

They re two soldiers I saw standing about just outside of camp. He presented the two young men to his cousin. This is Riku and Sora. Boys, this is my cousin and founder of the allied coalition, Cao Cao.

Well, well, Cao Cao looked at the two youths, You seem like agile young soldiers. How good are you in battle?

As good as any man here, Sora chuckled, sarcastically.

Is that so? I see you have a lot of spunk. We could use more frontline soldiers like you. Perhaps you would like to join us in our council. -

It would be an honor, sir. Riku replied.

Very well then, -

Cousin, Xiahou Dun implied, our allies come.

Mounted on horses, a group of men approached. One, leading upon a white stallion was dressed in a magnificent gold colored entourage. Following him, two other men in red ensembles, one wearing a helmet with an excessively large plume at its top, the other was a large muscular man wielding a giant iron club. Soon after, three more men, robed in green uniform, came behind them. One was a large,

slightly robust man, wielding what looked like a serpent headed spear. His beard was thick and bristly like a cactus. The other large man next to him wielded as spear with an excessively large head, as if a sword had been welded on to the staff of a pike. His beard was long and flowing, not at all like his stouter companion. It was such a sight draping down to his waste. Between them was a smaller man, much more distinguished and gentle-looking than his two comrades. His beard and moustache were not as exquisite, but it was a sign that he was reaching that age of maturity. But one thing was obvious, every man present wielded some kind of facial hair, unlike Riku and Sora whose faces were as clean and smooth as an infant's backside.

Ah, Lord Cao Cao, the man in gold said as he dismounted his horse, I see that you've beat us to the punch once again.

Lord Yuan Shao, Cao Cao replied, Glad to see that you and the other officers managed to make it here without running into any trouble.

Ha, there is nothing that Dong Zhou can do to stain the prestige of the Yuan family. The two men shook hands hardily. Shall we begin this war council then?

Let's, -

Yuan Shao first entered with Cao Cao right behind him.

Who are those men? Sora asked.

Those are the commanders of the ally coalition. Xiahou Dun explained. The man in gold is the commander of the coalition, Lord Yuan Shao, hand chosen to lead our forces by my cousin. He began to identify each man as he dismounted and entered the tent. Then those two men in red. The smaller man with the large plume on his helmet, that's Lord Sun Jian. He resides in the Wu province. He's known as the Tiger of Jiang Dong. Then the man with the large club accompanying him, that's Huang Gai, one of the more effective officers under Sun Jian; he's an excellent strategist and a very brave and dedicated commander. Then those last three men are the sworn brothers. The stout bristly man with the serpent spear is Zhang Fei. Then there's the fellow with the long beard. His name is Guan Yu, the supposed strongest of the three brothers. However, I think Cao Cao is starting to favor him. But despite that, both are extremely fierce and formidable fighters.

And the little guy? -

The smaller man is Liu Bei. You might consider him to be the heart of the trio. It's because of him that Zhang Fei and Guan Yu stick together. You might say that Liu Bei is their little brother and they have to watch out for him.

Lord Xiahou Dun, Liu Bei suddenly said as the three approached. He examined the key bearers. Who are these young men accompanying you?

Lord Liu Bei. These are a couple recruits who will be joining in our council by my request. -

A little young to be frontline soldiers don't you think? Zhang Fei said. Neither of them is growing a hint of a beard or moustache. They're clean-faced!

What's that supposed to mean?! Sora grumbled.

Brother, Guan Yu said with his deep, robust voice, That's awfully rude. I'm sure that these young men have the capability to battle as well as we do.

And how would you know that, brother? Zhang Fei asked. They look like a couple of hams to me.

It takes a true warrior to know. These boys may not be as much of novices as you claim them to be. -

Yeah, yeah sure, of course I'd have to see it to believe it. -

Don't mind my sworn brothers. Liu Bei chuckled. So what are your names?

I'm Riku and this is my best friend, Sora. Riku replied.

Riku and Sora, eh, I'll be sure to remember your names. -

With that, the three entered the tent without another word.

Well, boys, Xiahou Dun said, Let's join them.

C'mon Sora, Riku implied, You heard the commander.

Getting a little too involved in this role aren't you, Riku? Sora sighed. The two key bearers entered the tent. They gathered around a long table, with Yuan Shao at the head.

Gentlemen, he said, Let us begin this war council. Upon the table was a large map of the geographical features of the land. So far we have managed to defeat Dong Zhou's forces at Si Shui Gate at the same time capturing a great deal of necessary supplies from that depot. Now, Dong Zhou's forces are falling back to Luoyang. The only thing that stands between us and the end of Dong Zhou's reign is the impregnable pass at Hu Lao Gate. We take that and Dong Zhou will be trapped like a rat in the Imperial capital with no one to protect him.

So who shall take the lead in the assault on Hu Lao? Liu Bei asked.

I believe Sun Jian will take the lead, followed by Cao Cao and of course you at the end, Lord Liu Bei. - Does anyone disagree with this arrangement? Cao Cao acknowledged.

Wouldn't it be best to send the Vanguard in last though? Sun Jian asked.

We can't afford to waste time in the pass, Lord Sun Jian. If we wish to break the back of the defenses at Hu Lao Gate in a short time, we'll need the vanguard to go in first. If there's anyone who can get the job done quickly, it'll be you. -

I understand. -

Then we leave at daybreak. Yuan Shao boasted to success, Generals, good fortune in battle! The officers stood and bowed respectfully. And one at a time, they departed from the tent.

Well that was a short war council. Riku said.

If you can even call it a war council, Sora grumbled.

It just goes to show how confident we are right now. Xiahou Dun implied. Only Hu Lao Gate stands in our way and we'll be able to break through whatever resistance that tries to stop us.

By the way, Riku asked, Yuan Shao mentioned a guy named Dong Zhou. Who is Dong Zhou?

Dong Zhou is a tyrannical despot who seized the throne after the late Emperor Ling passed away. Now he rules the land with an iron fist. We can't have a man like that in power that only looks after his own personal gains. He cares nothing for the people and their suffering. He cares not for anyone, but himself. That's why we have to put him down for good.

I see. -

But because of Dong Zhou's seizing of the majority of China's military forces, it's been a lot harder for us to go against him. It's not anything like the Yellow Turban Rebellion we fought against a few years earlier. Unlike them, a band of novice peasants, we're fighting against our country's own Imperial forces. And it's all due to that damned Dong Zhou and his followers.

There's always one guy that has to be the goat. Sora grumbled. I hope this Dong Zhou gets his just deserts.

In due time. Xiahou Dun pounded his fists together with determination.

Lord Xiahou Dun, Liu Bei inquired as he and his brothers prepared to depart, If it's not too much of a bother, would it be alright if we take Riku and Sora under our wing?

I don't see why not. Besides, you could give these boys a few good lessons in combat. -

That sounds good. -

Then they're all yours. Xiahou Dun took a bow to both the brothers and the key bearers. I must leave you now, Riku, Sora. You'll be in the hands of those three. He thus departed without a second glance, as if he were glad to be rid of his burden.

There was a dead awkward silence between the duo and the trio. But Liu Bei only smiled at them.

So how well are you experienced in battle? Liu Bei asked.

We have a sufficient amount of skill to be of some use to you, Lord Liu Bei. Riku replied.

Yeah, Riku and I have been in a lot of battles. Sora added.

And when was the first time you battled? Liu Bei asked.

I was about fourteen and Riku was about fifteen. -

I see. -

How close are you two? Guan Yu asked.

Well, we've been friends since we were boys. -

He's been hanging around me all these years and I still don't know how to get rid of him. Riku grabbed Sora and gave him a noogie upon the top of his skull.

Hey, cut it out, Riku! -

Then you're more like brothers than friends. Zhang Fei asked.

Yeah, -

Then your bond to fight together should be stronger than anything. Liu Bei said. Since we have some time, I want you two to spar. I want to see how good you two are in battle. -

Alright, you ready for this, Riku? -

Get ready to lose, Sora. Riku chuckled.

Hey, hey, not so fast, Liu Bei inquired, You didn't let me finish yet. You see, you're gonna spar, but not against each other. The key bearers were puzzled by the declaration.

Well, then who are we supposed to spar against? -

The two of us, Zhang Fei chuckled as he and Guan Yu stepped forward.

Us against them&? Sora's Adam's apple suddenly slithered from his throat to his stomach.

You got a problem with that, little guy? -

Don't call me little! -

If you're gonna fight alongside us, we gotta see just how powerful you two really are. Liu Bei said. Just claiming that you're tough doesn't necessarily mean you're really effective. We have to see for ourselves.

I see, Riku replied, Then we'll do it to prove our grit. Sora, you take Zhang Fei. I'll battle Guan Yu. -

Right, Sora said.

Getting a little feisty aren't we. Zhang Fei chuckled.

Well, I must ready our men for the march. Liu Bei declared. I leave you four to battle.

Understood, Guan Yu replied.

Then I take my leave. He bowed respectfully before withdrawing. In the meantime, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei drew out their weapons and prepared to face the key bearers.

Alright, you two, let's get started. -

Right, Sora replied.

But remember, Zhang Fei advised, We're gonna fight like this is a real battle. Don't expect us to hold back. -

We would expect nothing else. Riku said. Are you ready for this, Sora?

Yeah, Sora was fired up.

Then let's show these two what key bearers can do. They drew out their keyblades with a swing of their wrists. The blades were a magnificent sight to Guan Yu and Zhang Fei as well as the way the key bearers drew them out.

Look at those blades. Zhang Fei said. I've never seen such weapons.

They look like giant keys. Guan Yu added. I see, so that's why they call you key bearers.

This ought to be fun. -

The key bearers suddenly charged their opponents. Zhang Fei and Guan Yu took up defense and fended off Riku and Sora. They clashed steel with steel, forcing sparks to fly. The lightning fast movement of both parties was a sight that could not be described in words. Their agility was unrivaled as the warriors were able to dodge and evade each other's attacks by inches.

Some of the soldiers passing by or on duty watched in awe as these four did battle. To them, the fighting skills they witnessed were equal to that of the gods.

These guys are stronger than what we took them for. Riku thought to himself as he evaded the massive blade of Guan Yu's Guan Dao. For guys so big, their agility is equal to our own.

C'mon, Sora shouted, You don't scare me!

This kid is something else. Zhang Fei said quietly. I guess he's more than just a novice.

I have to commend your strength, Riku. Guan Yu said as he attacked and blocked. You are indeed one of the toughest warriors I've fought so far.

I can say the same about you, Guan Yu. Riku replied. You're like a war god.

Well, I wouldn't go that far. I am just a man, but a man who excels in the art of battle.

Back and forth the four did clash, not one of them showing any signs of slowing down. In fact, they were still fighting as intensely as they had when they started, when Liu Bei returned from his rallying duties. He was awe-struck by the confrontation.

Incredible, he said, unable to express his true emotion, Those boys are good. They're going head-to-head with Guan Yu and Zhang Fei at an even stride.

Just then, both combating duos got into a deadlock, pushing at each other, hoping that the other would give up, but neither side seemed to be gaining any upper ground. As the only solution to break up the deadlock, both sides pushed each other away with all their might. They skid their heels upon the winter soil and held their weapons at the ready. By this time, both duos were exhausted, heaving and breathing to regain their strength.

That was one hell of a rush. Riku said. Guan Yu is not a pushover, that's for sure.

I can definitely say the same about Zhang Fei. Sora added, trying to catch his breath. He just won't go down.

That little squirt's getting the best of me. Zhang Fei said. I can't believe it. I thought no one besides you, brother, could do such a thing.

I'm just as surprised as you, brother. Guan Yu added. Riku is a veteran fighter alright. He uses that weapon with such precision and skill.

What's wrong, you two, Sora declared in an urging, sarcastic manner, Have you had enough? Are we just too much for you?

In your dreams, kid! Zhang Fei said with a smile. I'm just getting started!

So are we! Riku shouted.

Then are you ready for another round? Guan Yu hollered.

I'm afraid we don't have time, brother. Liu Bei said. We're ready to move out.

Already, Sora asked, But it seemed so short.

You four have been battling against each other for over an hour now and you showed no signs of slowing down. Liu Bei approached the four. He first complimented his oath brothers. Zhang Fei, Guan Yu, you two were superb. I see that you perfected your abilities again. He then turned to the key bearers. And you, Riku, Sora, you two were incredible. I never would have thought there would be anyone who could go head-to-head with Zhang Fei and Guan Yu of all people. I have to say that I'm impressed.

It was nothing really. -

But none of you even let up with your fighting to take a breather, even after a full hour of doing battle. Perhaps I could recommend you two to be assigned as members of our vanguard. -

Na, I don't think we're ready for a promotion yet. -

Well, at least you're honest. He gathered the four around. It's time for us to move out. Get your gear and prepare to march. We'll be following Cao Cao's column here in a bit.

Right, Riku said.

Let's go then. The five departed together.
You guys were awesome. Zhang Fei complimented. It'll be great to see you two engage the enemy.
I'll say. Guan Yu added. You'll cause the enemy to flee in no time.
Thanks for the compliment, Guan Yu. Riku replied. I can't wait to see you and Zhang Fei in battle either.
Me too, Sora added.
In due time, my friends. Guan Yu said, In due time.
It looks like we've making really good friends here, Riku. -
I'd say so too. Riku replied.
Just then, a messenger, mounted on a horse, came from the front. It was one of Yuan Shao's couriers.
He presented himself before Liu Bei.
Lord Liu Bei, he said, Lord Yuan Shao's compliments.
What is it? Liu Bei asked.
My lord wishes to inform you that Sun Jian's vanguard troops have engaged against Dong Zhou's forces commanded by Li Jue, Gao Shun, and Zhang Liao. It's a three pronged attack. -
Damn it, they set a trap for us. -
Lord Sun Jian is at the moment confronting the forces under Li Jue and Lord Cao Cao has engaged Gao Shun. Lord Yuan Shao instructs that you move to fight against Zhang Liao. -
Understood, With that, the courier galloped away. Liu Bei turned to his brothers and allies. Alright, get the men ready and have them move at a double-quick pace.
Very well, Guan Yu replied. Let's go we're heading out!
It looks like we'll be entering battle earlier than we thought. Riku said.
You two stick with us. Zhang Fei instructed.
We gotcha, Sora replied. The five hurried to their ranks and moved their columns forward to battle against Dong Zhou's forces at Hu Lao Gate.

The march to the front did not take long. Almost instantly, hundreds of wounded stragglers appeared, making their way to the rear. Already signs of devastation could be seen. There were wounded men lying side by side with their slain comrades. Supply wagons were dilapidated or burning. Arrows and bits of debris littered the pass. But such sights did not deter the advancing columns. As they reached the front, the sounds of hundreds, if not thousands of men echoed through the pass. Sure enough, there came the sight of arrow volleys and catapult projectiles being launched into the air. By the looks of it, the three pronged attack had severely crippled the allied advance.

Man, Sora said, Look at all this chaos.
I know. Riku replied. They watched as Liu Bei met up with Cao Cao and Sun Jian. They overheard some of the information passed between the three men.
I'm glad that you came just in time, my lords. Sun Jian remarked.
What happened? Liu Bei asked.
They just came out of nowhere, striking my ranks with a volley and forcing them to withdraw. -
The predicament is not looking well for us. Cao Cao said. The morale of Lord Sun Jian's vanguard had decreased dramatically.
We just need to break up that three pronged attack. Liu Bei suggested. We attack their wings and force them to cave in.
I see. Very well, then deploy your troops as soon as you can. Let's compress the enemy at their flanks and thin the front line out a little bit. Liu Bei, you attack Zhang Liao on the right wing. I shall confront Gao Shun's troops on the left flank. And Lord Sun Jian, you remain at the center and hold off the enemy for as long as you can. -

Right, Liu Bei came before the key bearers and his oath brothers. Alright, you guys, take your positions at the right flank.

Liu Bei's troops assembled their formations and advanced to uphold the right flank. Zhang Liao's forces stood before them, grit and stubborn veterans they were. Zhang Liao himself was in the lead. A rather intimidating sight, he was dressed in light blue armor to allow better speed on the field. He was a seasoned warrior by the look on his bearded face. In his hand, he wielded a weapon almost identical to Guan Yu's weapon, called the Gold Wyvern.

There stands a formidable foe. Guan Yu said as their soldiers prepared to attack.

Is that that Zhang Liao guy you were talking about? Sora asked.

He looks impressive. Riku said.

If only that man were on our side. Guan Yu told them. Zhang Liao is not only a seasoned fighter, but a respected gentleman and loyal officer as well.

Is that so? -

His loyalties should be with us though, not with that tyrant, Dong Zhou. -

Maybe he might be persuaded. Sora implied.

That is beside the point. Liu Bei interrupted. Zhang Liao opposes us as an enemy and he must be defeated. He drew out his sword. My brothers, we go to battle! Prepare and archer volley to support us!

Archers, an officer shouted, Draw your arrows! -

Forward, Liu Bei and his brothers, along with the key bearers charged the enemy ranks.

Zhang Liao watched from afar as his opponents began their attack. He smirked and held his weapon high.

We must preserve this nation at all costs, Zhang Liao declared. Fight to the last man if necessary. Let none of the enemy through! There was a great cheer from his ranks before they charged against Liu Bei's advancing columns. Volleys of arrows were unleashed from both sides, raining havoc on the other. Hundreds of soldiers were struck down. Many of them were either killed instantly, or were severely maimed. But despite the devastation, neither side relented and continued to advance.

Riku and Sora couldn't believe what was happening as death fell from the heavens and struck down the men running next to them. Almost in slow motion, they watched as both sides drew nearer and nearer until finally, both sides clashed with great impact, toppling men as they collided. Swords and spears drove deep into the walls of humanity. The key bearers were stunned at the ferocity of the fighting. Not even their fights with the Imperial Axis could compare to the blood shedding they saw at Hu Lao.

Man, Riku said, This isn't a battle, this is utter chaos.

Stay close, Riku. Sora cried.

They did combat without hesitation, maiming as much as they could and killing as little as possible, a technique that had not changed since their first encounters with the former Dark Empire. However, those they did kill, they could only look into the stunned eyes of their enemies as their final breath gave way. The same haunting spectacle of a diminished life did not fade from their minds. Inwardly, both Riku and Sora were crying profusely as they took the life of another soldier. They tried to wipe from their minds that they were in a simulation, that they weren't really taking lives. But despite such logics, they couldn't help, but feel sorry for the men on both sides who were killed or maimed beyond healing. But still, it was a task they had to fulfill. Either they slew, or were slain themselves.

Keep at them, you men. Liu Bei shouted as he struck men from atop his grey Hex Mark steed. We must maintain the glory of the Han!

Zhang Fei and Guan Yu sliced their way through the enemy ranks, tossing many of the soldiers asunder with such brute force, it was as if the winds obeyed their every command and pummeled men to their death.

Riku and Sora were just as formidable, unleashing devastating attacks on their enemies. But their supremacy on the field came to an abrupt end as they soon confronted the mighty Zhang Liao himself. Zhang Liao emerged from the tide of ranks like a leviathan lurking in the depths. He stood before the key bearers. For a minute, the world seemed to halt around them, isolating the three from reality.

It's him, Sora uttered, It's that guy, Zhang Liao.

So we confront the head commander of these soldiers himself. Riku said with a smirk.

I see that you two have incredible strength. Zhang Liao declared. And I see that my illustrious name has gained fame even amongst the ranks of the individual soldier. May I ask who you are, who excel so greatly in the art of war.

My name is Riku. -

And I'm Sora. Sora made ready his keyblade.

I see, Zhang Liao gave his weapon a swerve as to intimidate the youths. Then I challenge you, Riku, Sora, to a contest of strength.

Is that so? Then we gladly accept. -

But do you have what it takes to battle against the invincible Zhang Liao? -

There's only one way to find out! Riku implied.

The two key bearers advanced and struck from the flanks, but Zhang Liao was able to evade and block at the same time. He leaped into the air and slapped the key bearers at the side of the head with the flat of his blade. The youths attacked again and both sides engaged in another intense fight. Slash, jab, they pummeled one another, with no wounds being inflicted. The soldiers around them seemed awe inspired, halting their own battles to act as spectators to this unbelievable bout.

Your combined strength is flawless. Zhang Liao said. I've never felt so exhilarated in battle for quite a while. It is an honor to battle you. For a moment, their fighting stopped between them as Zhang Liao pushed the key bearers away. However, despite that honor, I cannot allow you to just have your way. This is the future of China I battle for. And the future of the country is far more important to me than a single duel with two outstanding warriors.

Funny, Riku said, That's just how we feel.

We can't let you have your way either. Sora added.

The one to outlast the other in stamina and strength will decide the tide of this fight. -

Then I will hold nothing back this time around. Zhang Liao declared. If you are struck, then you will die. Zhang Liao's power suddenly increased and the key bearers could feel it.

He's serious now. -

Prepare, -

This time, it was Zhang Liao who was on the offensive. His blows had increased greatly, swirling and thrusting his blade with superior precision. The key bearers found countering him more of a challenge now.

He's not giving us a chance to breathe, Riku. Sora said.

Then if he's so determined to fight on that equal playing field, Riku replied, We're obliged to do the same. The silver haired youth unleashed his full potential as well and started attacking with more ferocity. Sora did the same, unleashing his full potential and assaulted alongside Riku against Zhang Liao. Zhang Liao slowly gave ground.

You two are good, but not good enough! He started to glow a bright gold and damage inflicted on him, become nonexistent. At the same time, the blows he unleashed on the key bearers had increased ten fold.

This power, Sora said, It's the Musou Rage.

Is that so? Riku smirked. Well, if he wants to play that way, then so be it! Riku unleashed the Musou Rage as well. Sora mimicked his comrade and used the Musou Rage as well. Now all three were equal,

not able to inflict damage or receive damage from the other.

You have the power of the Musou Rage? Zhang Liao uttered. But how can that be? Only a selected few have ever mastered that technique.

It just goes to show you the extent of our talents. -

How did you achieve that strength? -

It was handed down to us. -

Handed down by whom? -

If you defeat us, we might tell you. Sora mocked.

Is that right? Then I'll be sure to make this fight a quick one! -

But the battle was exactly the opposite. Zhang Liao was unable to break through the defense of the key bearers. So long as all three of them used the Musou Rage, no real goal was achieved.

This is impossible. Riku said. At this rate, none of us have done any damage. -

I agree. Sora added.

But as soon as it had occurred, all three diminished in the Musou Rage's power and had regressed to their original strengths.

Such power, Zhang Liao thought to himself, No man has ever caused me to fight this intensely. He could only stand in admiration of the two young men. Though they are at such a young age, they were able to level with me.

Just then, Zhang Liao came to realize that his soldiers were falling back. While he was fighting against Riku and Sora, Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei were able to coordinate their forces and push back his troops, inflicting terrible casualties in the process. As if that wasn't enough, a messenger came to him in the midst of this battle.

Message from our superiors, He said. We've been ordered to withdraw back to Hu Lao Gate.

Damn it. Zhang Liao growled. But he shrugged it off and smiled. Well, Riku and Sora, you and your friends have surpassed my might, impressive. Zhang Liao turned to his men. We're falling back to Hu Lao Gate!

With that, the soldiers quickly withdrew to the gate, seen in the distance. There was a large cheer from Liu Bei's men as they watched the enemy pull back.

We did it? Sora uttered.

I guess we won. Riku added.

Zhang Fei and Guan Yu came up to the key bearers and patted them on the back.

That was incredible. Zhang Fei boasted. We saw the whole thing. You really put that Zhang Liao in his place.

Your skills are impressive. Guan Yu added. I guess that spar with us unleashed a few new techniques, eh?

I guess so. Sora sheepishly said.

Brothers, friends, Liu Bei implied as he approached them on horse back. We don't have time to stand around. The enemy is on the run. We march to Hu Lao and break them once and for all.

Yeah, Zhang Fei was ecstatic, Let's break through that gate and give old Dong Zhou what's coming to him.

Assemble the men and have them launch a pursuit. -

Very well, Guan Yu acknowledged. The forces reassembled and continued their way to Hu Lao Gate. Eventually, Gao Shun and Li Jue's forces withdrew as well. Cao Cao and Sun Jian continued their way towards Hu Lao Gate. With this stunning victory, morale was higher than ever. It seemed that nothing could stand in the way of the coalition. And eventually, Hu Lao Gate would fall as well. But little did they realize that toppling Hu Lao Gate would be a greater challenge than any of them expected.

7 - The Greatest Warrior of the Three Kingdoms

The Greatest Warrior of the Three Kingdoms

There was a boost on confidence in the ranks of the alliance coalition. Ever since they managed to fend off the enemy, despite being at a disadvantage, thoughts of glory, easy victory, and invincibility entered the minds of each soldier. Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Liu Bei rode side by side. Riku and Sora were close behind them. They looked on as the soldiers sang and praised themselves for a job well done.

These guys are really jubilant aren't they? Sora said.

After routing Zhang Liao's forces, I'm not the least bit surprised. Riku replied.

You should be jubilant too. Guan Yu said, looking back to the key bearers. You managed to battle against Zhang Liao himself. And that in itself is a great achievement.

Well, we could and we should, but I've always kept it to mind to always count your eggs before they hatch. -

Well spoken, young Riku. Liu Bei said. It's always best to save celebrating until after the task is done in full.

It was funny that Liu Bei mentioned that. Almost like a dark cloud, the joyful murmuring suddenly diminished, transforming into an eerie silence. Now, there was tension in the air.

It got really quiet. Sora said.

Look, Riku said, pointing to the outside of the column.

Just off the road, thousands of men were stretched out. Some of them had lost limbs, an arm or a leg. Others had hideous gashes upon their bodies, inflicted by some sharp edge. Blood was everywhere, and the moans and screams of wounded men could be heard bellowing in chorus.

Wandering amongst the wounded was Cao Cao and Sun Jian. Liu Bei and his brothers approached them. Riku and Sora quickly joined up with them.

Lord Cao Cao, he said, What's the matter? Why have you and the others withdrawn from the front. Our forces have met stiff resistance at Hu Lao Gate. Cao Cao replied.

Trying to penetrate the wall's defense is more difficult than earlier anticipated. Sun Jian added.

What happened? Sora asked.

Well, Sun Jian began, we moved in as directed. We watched as the last of Dong Zhou's retreating troops made their way into the gate. We immediately made attempts to charge, but the vanguard was halted by stiff resistance.

Who was holding you off? Guan Yu asked.

It was only one man. Cao Cao implied. The brothers and the key bearers looked on with a stunning gape of their mouths.

One man managed to fend you off? Zhang Fei asked.

That's impossible. Liu Bei said. No one man would be able to fend off an entire military force.

Was it Zhang Liao? Riku wondered. He seems the kind of guy that could do that.

No, Cao Cao replied. It was Dong Zhou's adopted son.

Adopted son? Who is he? -

You mean you don't know? -

Well, not exactly. Sora said.

Well, that's a first. Sun Jian implied. I always thought that everyone in the military knew his reputation

for battlefield ferocity.

What s his name? -

His name it Lu Bu. -

Immediately, the key bearers reacted at the mentioning of Lu Bu s name. They looked at each other.

Impossible, what s Lu Bu doing here? -

How he got here is what I want to know. The key bearers quickly turned and withdrew from the group, heading towards the front.

Hey, Riku, Sora, Zhang Fei shouted. Where are you going?!

We ve got a score to settle! -

Settle the score? -

You think they have an old grudge against Lu Bu? Sun Jian asked.

If they have an old score to settle with Lu Bu, they must ve been really lucky warriors. Cao Cao remarked. To survive a fight with Lu Bu is a miracle.

We better go give them a hand. Liu Bei instructed. We can t have those two boys dying on us now can we. They quickly pursued the key bearers to the front.

Riku and Sora pushed their way through the masses of soldiers, desperate to see for themselves if what Sun Jian and Cao Cao said was true.

You really think Lu Bu is here? Sora asked.

I don t know. Riku replied. We ll just have to see when we get there! But his mind was full of questions. How is it that Lu Bu is here? And how do these people know him. Could it be that this is the China to which Lu Bu descended?

As the neared the front, they came to realize the true horror of reality. Two hundred wards away lay the gate. And it was at that distance, that no man dared to tread. It was not stationed archers at the top of the walls or falling boulders from angered defenders. Rather, what scared them the most was the man who stood in front of the closed gates, not budging for anyone. From the barracks to the walls of Hu Lao, at least two thousand men lay dead or wounded, their comrades unable to come to their aid.

The key bearers came to the front to see the carnage of the field. They were shocked at the amount of casualties inflicted.

So many men, Sora said.

Who did this? Riku asked as soldier behind the breast works.

It s Lu Bu, the soldier trembled, Lu Bu is guarding the gates.

Are you sure? -

Every man on the field saw him. It s without a doubt Lu Bu. -

So, Riku and Sora ran out to the field alone, the only two to rush forward as those wounded still able to walk limped to the rear.

Hey you two, a soldier cried, stop!

You re going the wrong way! another would holler. But nothing was about to deter the key bearers from their mission. A strange mist lingered about the ground. Mountain mist intermingling with smoke from small fires gave a strange atmosphere, the mangled bodies of slain men adding to the uneasy horror. As the key bearers came before the gate, there mounted upon a red horse was Lu Bu with his heavy armor, his headdress with the massive antennae, and his diabolical weapon, the Sky Scorcher.

Pathetic, Lu Bu growled, Can the alliance do no better than this?! These worthless cowards are all bark and no bite! He raised his voice to the apprehensive forces of the coalition. You guys can fight, well can t you?!

Lu Bu, Riku shouted as he and Sora approached. They drew out their keyblades. So it is you, Lu Bu.

Well, well, two little bugs ready to throw their lives away. You dare stand against the mighty Lu Bu?! -

You don't scare us, Lu Bu! Sora declared. We've fought you before and we won't lose to you again! Really, and who might you be?! I don't recall letting anyone live who dared to face me! - Don't give us that, the key bearers pulled off their helmets. You should know us. Lu Bu somehow looked confused.

That's absurd. I've never seen you before. The key bearers were just as bewildered. What are you talking about? You fought against us and then alongside us when we battled against Kang. -

I don't know who this Kang is you speak of. I think you have the wrong guy. -

Oh, don't play dumb. You have a score to settle with Riku, remember?! -

Who the hell is Riku and who the hell are you two?! Are you just trying to aggravate me or something? Because it's working! -

Lu Bu, -

I don't think he knows us, Sora. Riku said. The young key bearer looked at his friend curiously. This might be a different version of Lu Bu, perhaps before he met us.

Oh& -

Alright, Riku stood tall, drawing out his keyblade. You want to know who Riku is, eh? Well, I'm Riku! And we have a duel to battle!

Yeah, Sora pulled forth his weapon as well. And I'm Sora! We're here to fight you, Lu Bu! -

Is that so? Lu Bu chuckled. Well, Riku, Sora, if you're so willing to die at the hands of Lu Bu, then so be it! I'll stomp you both into a bloody mess! He gazed at Riku. I don't know, but for some reason&I just hate your eyes! You say that we have a score to settle, well let it be now and be done with it!

Lu Bu suddenly charged swiping away with his halberd. The key bearers evaded, leaping away as Red Hare charged into them.

You'll have to do better than that! Riku shouted. Let's see how you like a taste of this! He unleashed the Cinder Canister, deploying the fiery spheres all at once. But Lu Bu evaded, swaying his horse at tight turns, avoiding the impact of the flames.

Now it's my turn! Sora declared, unleashing Tundra Canister. But again, Lu Bu maneuvered the horse, preventing the frozen shards from encasing him in ice and immobilizing him. Damn it, I missed.

Not bad, Lu Bu praised the key bearers. I see you are able to use the elements in battle. But what good are they against brute force such as mine! Lu Bu leaped from his horse. He hovered in the air before descending two hundred feet. His halberd held above his head, he slammed the blade into the ground. The impact caused an immense explosion, cracking the earth and toppling soil over. Great gusts of debris and dirt flew into the air, blown violently by the wind. Riku and Sora were almost knocked off their feet as they braced their legs against the ground, shielding their eyes from the incoming bits of rubble.

I see Lu Bu hasn't lost any of his potency. Sora said. But no sooner had the gusts died down, the mighty warriors appeared before the young keyblade master, his halberd slung behind his back preparing to swipe and cut the youth in half.

You're finished! Lu Bu chuckled.

Sora, Riku cried. Get out of there!

But it was too late. Lu Bu was already on the verge of smiting Sora. His only other option was to block the attack. Sora threw his keyblade out in the path of the halberd. Metal struck metal and sparks flew. But the impact was too great for Sora and he was knocked off his feet. He could feel as the halberd's staff struck him at the side, moments after the impact was made against the keyblade. He was thrown to the side. Then there was a loud clang, the sound of metal breaking and splintering, and he felt a sudden sting across his lower shoulder blade. The lower side of the halberd's crescent blade managed to slice through his armor and slash his fair skin. Sora flew into the air and skidded along the ground for fifty

feet, before lying motionless amongst the dead and dying soldiers.

That s one down. Lu Bu boasted with warrior pride, One more to go.

Sora, Riku cried. But the key bearer did not respond, lying motionless upon the battlefield.

There s no use trying to call for your comrade. He s dead. -

No, Sora, Riku looked on at his friend s still body. He clutched his fists tightly as his sadness gave way to rage. He glared at Lu Bu. Damn you, you bastard.

There s no use getting angry over anything. Being mad is not going to help you in any way against me. -

You ll pay for what you did to Sora, Lu Bu. -

Oh, I quiver with fear! The titan lunged forward with incredible speed, but Riku did not waver, he drew out his keyblade again and stood defensively. Lu Bu struck, but missed as the agile warrior leaped over his head and prepared to attack from behind.

Let s see how you like it! He charged Lu Bu s blind spot. But the mighty defender seemed unconcerned.

You think it s that easy? He crouched down and stomped his foot upon the bare soil. A sonic boom erupted and knocked Riku of his course.

Damn, I forgot about the foot stomp. -

I told you, Lu Bu jumped up, You re no match for me! He swiped at the key bearer, but Riku was able to throw his keyblade in front of him at the nick of time. He hit the ground and skidded about in the same manner as Sora, before he lay motionless on the ground. Lu Bu in the meantime, landed no more than fifty feet away from him. I guess that s all you and your friend were, Riku, just a lot of talk and no action! You never stood a chance against me the moment you dared to raise your blades against me. Already over two thousand men have tried and yet they all failed. And all of them were just as talented as you. If none of them could defeat me, even with such numbers favoring them, what made you think that only two of you would make a difference?

But no sooner had Lu Bu finished his self-praising, he realized that life still clutched onto Riku. Riku slowly staggered to his feet. He gasped and coughed, exhaling the dust from his lungs. Sweat and dirt, intermingling with blood from scrapes, did not phase the youth. He defiantly rose up and smirked.

You still have that same power behind your punch, Lu Bu. He uttered. But a simple display of might like that will not deter me that easily.

Don t get cocky. You re still outmatched. -

I wouldn t expect it to be any different. -

And why is that? -

Because a man outclassed by someone like you is the reality of the world. I know I don t stand a chance and I know there s a high possibility that I may die. But still I go forward. And that in itself takes guts. That only proves to me that I am stronger than you are. But Lu Bu only mocked Riku s words.

Just keep barking, insect. You re no match for me, ever. You may have will power, but what good is that when you don t have the physical strength. You can persist, but it will be you to die this day, just like your friend. -

I don t care if I do die. -

Well, you should, because you ll end up just like these men. They were strong in will power, yet they fell so easily to my blade. -

But physical strength can only go so far. If your heart, mind, and soul aren t focused on the matter at hand, there s no use engaging in the first place. That is what will power is, the strength to confront a threat, no matter how much bigger it is than you. -

Enough of your philosophical blathering, Riku, Lu Bu charged at him, though Riku was still weary.

Let s see if your will power can block the next blow!

Lu Bu came nearer and nearer. Riku was still trying to recover from his pummel. The keyblade seemed

so heavy in his hand now. No matter how much he tried to pull it up, his body would rebel, too exhausted to continue. It seemed over for Riku. Or so he thought.

From out of nowhere, a strong energy beam struck Lu Bu in the back, knocking him forward. Lu Bu staggered to regain his balance, avoiding falling face down on the ground. His armor had been singed. He turned to see where the blast came from. And there, standing upon weakened knees was Sora. He had managed to deploy an energy beam from his keyblade.

Well, he said, at least I know I can still use energy waves in this world.

You little punk, Lu Bu growled, How dare you pummel me in the back!

You should heed Riku's words, Lu Bu. You may think he's rambling, but it's true. The strength of a person's heart is determined by their will to continue on. -

A heart is weak, a simple organ that can be easily pierced with the tip of a sword or spear. -

Yeah, you're right there. -

And yet you dare to stand up, knowing that you'll face the same kind of pain, especially after that uncalled-for strike against me from behind! Lu Bu turned to face the youth. Are you not afraid of me?

I'm terrified. Sora said. And who wouldn't be. The heart may be weak and sometimes may even give in, but I've learned, in all my experiences, that there is a light that never goes out. So long as that person has the will to continue, that light will shine bright even in the deepest of darkness.

Then let your heart try and outwit this! Lu Bu drew his halberd up. Rolling Thunder! He slammed his keyblade upon the ground. A sonic boom traveled along the soil, up heaving dirt as it roared towards Sora.

Sora, Riku cried, Get out of there! You'll get pummeled again!

But Sora had lost a great deal of blood from his wound and the thrashing he received from the previous fight had taken a lot out of him mentally and physically. Again, another casualty would be added to list of so many nameless victims upon the field.

But from out of the blue, a large warrior appeared before Sora, blocking the way between Lu Bu's attack and the key bearer. It was none other than the legendary Guan Yu. He threw his Guan Dao blade into the soil and cut the sound wave in two, forcing them to split up into separate paths. Sora gazed up at the long-bearded warrior.

You've done well, Sora. Guan Yu said. We'll take it from here.

Guan Yu, Sora uttered, You saved me.

Well, who's this? Lu Bu said, Another insect coming to die?

You're the one who's going to die this time! a voice shouted from behind. Lu Bu turned to find Zhang Fei standing stalwart next to Riku. Sorry we're late, Riku. Did we miss anything?

You guys made it. Riku sighed.

So two more insects have come to meet their maker, eh? Lu Bu scoffed.

Three actually, a third voice intervened. Lu Bu turned his head to find Liu Bei standing near. The three oath brothers stood no more than fifty yards away from Lu Bu, creating a triangular shape around him.

You're brave, I'll give you that. -

Riku, Sora, are you two alright? -

We've been better. Riku replied.

You two take it easy for now. Zhang Fei stated.

We'll handle this from here on out. Guan Yu added. The key bearers watched as the three brothers drew nearer to Lu Bu.

It's villains like you who are responsible for the current chaos. Liu Bei declared. But Lu Bu only made light of his declaration.

Is talking all you are good for? he chuckled. If you seek power, then show your might!

Perhaps you haven't realized, Zhang Fei implied, but we have you surrounded and we have you

outnumbered.

Plus we three brothers excel in battle. Guan Yu added. You can't fight all three of us at once. There was a slight lull as the three drew up their weapons, ready for battle. Lu Bu only stood there. But he broke the silence with a sinister cackle.

It doesn't matter. He said, throwing out his halberd. Your numbers mean nothing! By opposing me, you are only marching to your own slaughter!

Enough blabbing, Zhang Fei rushed in, If you're gonna fight, then fight, don't talk!

Lu Bu easily guarded against Zhang Fei's attack. He pummeled the muscled man to the ground. Guan Yu was the next to charge. He swung and thrust his Guan Dao back and forth, hoping to pierce his opponent. But Lu Bu easily pummeled him as well, knocking him back. Liu Bei charged forward, slashing at Lu Bu with very little result. The three men attacked from all three sides, but it seemed that Lu Bu easily thwarted them without breaking a sweat.

Face it boys, Lu Bu chuckled, You can never hope to defeat me!

Man, Riku said, running to Sora's side, I've never seen such a battle.

Lu Bu is fighting all three brothers off with very little effort, even after undergoing that earlier fight against all those troops and the two of us prior to this. He's not a man, he's a monster. -

What about you, Sora? Riku checked the gash upon his friend's back. How are you doing with your injury?

Honestly, I really thought I was a goner if Guan Yu hadn't stepped in. -

Well, this is Lu Bu we're talking about. -

I can't believe that this is an earlier version of him and yet we didn't even scratch him. -

Incredible if you ask me. -

The fight between Lu Bu and the three brothers continued. Flashes of light, elemental drives, Musou charges, clash of steel, sweat and blood, all these elements made the battle intense. It was a grapple between four warriors who would soon become legends and whose names would reverberate throughout all of China for centuries to come.

You can't keep this up forever! Guan Yu declared. You'll have to give in sooner or later!

Like your idle threats worry me. Lu Bu chuckled. You'll only meet the same fate as these men.

But you're reaching your limit, Lu Bu. Zhang Fei said. I can already tell that your strength is giving way to exhaustion.

Is that so? Well, come and prove that I have lost my potency! -

Again and again, like raved dogs, the four warriors had at each other's throats, but still no real damage was inflicted. For fifty bouts, one attack after another, they continued to fight.

It's hard to believe, Liu Bei thought to himself, Despite engaging in battle, without rest, prior to this right, and despite my brothers and I going all out with full strength, Lu Bu still manages to fend us off without any problems.

What power, Guan Yu complimented. Your skills are impressive, Lu Bu. Perhaps you are the mightiest man alive.

You flatter me, spinach chin. Lu Bu chuckled. And what you say is true!

But it takes more than just brute strength and the will to dominate to win a battle! -

Pretty bold words. What is it that you fight for that allows you to carry on like this? -

We fight for the preservation of this land and to restore the Han Dynasty to its former glory! Liu Bei declared. That is what we have vowed. We three brothers shall put an end to tyranny!

Such a lost cause, the Han is finished, there's no way it can recover from this point on! -

So long as villains like you thrive, the Han will never be restored. -

I am no villain. I am merely living my ideals. -

Is that so? -

And exactly what is it that you are fighting for? Zhang Fei asked.

You think Dong Zhou is the way of the future? Guan Yu added. He s a blood-thirsty tyrant! He doesn t deserve your loyalty!

What exactly are you fighting for? Liu Bei asked.

My motives are simple. Lu Bu explained as he continued to strike and slash. I battle for the sake of battle. The urge runs through my veins. I fight for myself and only for myself! I do not care about Dong Zhou! Power and Justice can only be obtained through victory in battle! -

And it is that kind of selfish idealism that is bringing forth this era of chaos! -

You re wrong. This era is caused by the egos of ambitious men. I fight for the sake of being the strongest. Therefore I side with the strongest! You fight to obtain justice and maintain the power of the Han. One way or the other, we both have ambitions. Whether they are a positive or negative objective, the nature of it is still the same.

But you must be reaching your limits by now, Guan Yu asked. I m sure that your strength is giving way with every strike you make.

Don t get too overconfident. You haven t beaten me yet! -

But as what Guan Yu had stated, Lu Bu could not keep up a strong defense indefinitely. His power began to fade, dropping dramatically. After defeating so many opponents prior to the fight with the three oath brothers, Lu Bu began to exhaust himself. His reflexes, his defense, his speed, his attack, they all began to suffer with every blow blocked and every blow given. Every second passing caused him to lose energy.

Soon, after one last shove, no longer at the top of his condition, his constant battle giving way to fatigue, Lu Bu had no other choice, but to withdraw.

Have you had enough yet? Liu Bei said.

Ha, Lu Bu scoffed, I have no time for you worthless maggots! I have other matters to attend to besides dealing with the likes of you mongrels! Lu Bu drew his thumb and index to his lips and whistled loudly for his steed.

Red Hare emerged, flying over the heads of the three brothers. So gracefully, with accurate precision, the mighty warrior leaped into the air and landed upon the back of his stallion.

You might have bested me this time, but your efforts were all in vain! I ve served my purpose, but you would have been better off killing me instead! With that, Lu Bu galloped off towards Hu Lao Gate. The great doors opened and he rode straight through. But for a short while, he stopped his flee and turned about to confront the three brothers. Perhaps, Liu Bei, the ones you should you really fear are not Dong Zhou and I, but rather your allies.

My allies&? Liu Bei inwardly questioned.

The question is who will dominate when this is over? With that, the gates closed again.

He s getting away! Riku shouted.

Let s go after him, brother! Guan Yu shouted suggested.

All forces, charge Hu Lao Gate! Liu Bei ordered. There is no need to fear their defenses anymore! The coalition charged towards the gates, battling against the remnants of the defenses that were left. Now, with Lu Bu no longer defending the pass, breaking through the defenses would be easy. The coalition advanced before a hail of arrows and other incoming projectiles. However, their push was not as affected this time. Now, with Lu Bu out of the way, there was no real threat besides the archers who fired down from the wall. The allies unleashed their own volley killing hundreds of defenders in the process.

Cao Cao, Yuan Shao, and Sun Jian looked from afar as their troops began to gain ground, storming the walls and attempting to break the gates at Hu Lao. Lord Liu Bei has done well. Cao Cao said. He certainly has indomitable strength.

He's only strong because he has his brothers to aid him. Sun Jian added. It's their unity that makes them a formidable force. Alone, they'd be vulnerable, but together, they're an unstoppable team.

Yes! Cao Cao, however, was a little concerned with this so-called unity between the three oath brothers. He inwardly commented, I just hope that those three don't become my enemies.

There is no need for strategy here! Yuan Shao shouted. All units attack, topple Hu Lao Gate! The fighting continued between the defenders of Hu Lao and the allied troops. Riku and Sora, desperate to help, did the only thing they could think of. The end of the battle, they would have to break down the gates.

Stand back! Riku shouted. We'll take it from here! The soldiers cleared the way as he performed Cinder Canister to use against the gate. This'll take very last ounce of energy I've got! He formed the flaming orbs above his head. Throwing both hands before him, Riku fired all the spheres at the gate all at once. There was a massive explosion of intense heat and an overwhelming inferno that singed the brick, incinerated the wood, and melted the iron hinges into formless blobs.

The entire top half of the gate was splintered while the rest of it tumbled to the ground. There was cheering from the soldiers as they watched the impregnable Hu Lao Gate fall before them.

Most impressive, Guan Yu said.

That was incredible. Zhang Fei added.

Come now, men, Liu Bei shouted, Forward to Luoyang and victory! He and his brothers led the charge.

The soldiers advanced in mass, despite the remaining enemy archers bombarding them from the walls defenses. They stormed through the entry way and easily fended and quelled the remaining forces.

Riku in the meantime, fell to his knees and sighed. Sora put his hands upon his shoulders and smiled.

You did it again, Riku. Sora chuckled. We got them on the run.

Yeah! Riku didn't have enough energy to boast, let alone stand. He could only smile and watch as the flags of the alliance coalition were placed upon the defenses, claiming Hu Lao Gate for Yuan Shao and the others.

You two have done well. A voice said from behind. The key bearers looked to see Xiahou Dun and Cao Cao mounted upon stallions. It was Xiahou Dun that addressed them. I guess I owe you two an apology. You certainly aren't novices. You managed to fight off Zhang Liao's troops and force them to flee. You went head to head with Lu Bu of all people, and you even managed to destroy Hu Lao Gate by means of elemental chi. It is I who am the novice.

No need to let yourself down, Mr. Dun. Sora replied. And no need to thank us. We just did what we do best.

Well, I can tell you that you have done a good day's work for today. Cao Cao implied. You two stay behind and get your wounds mended up. The rest of my men can take it from here.

We can still fight. Riku said.

And no doubt you can. But so far, you are the only two, besides Liu Bei and his brothers to actually go head to head with Lu Bu and actually survive to tell about it. You more than deserve a good day's rest. Riku could only sigh and lower his head.

Thank you! -

Cousin, Xiahou Dun said, We must join with Liu Bei and the others.

Understood, Cao Cao replied. They thus continued riding alongside their men until they disappeared out of sight.

C'mon Riku, Sora remarked, helping his friend up, You need a good rest after that. You also need to get those injuries mended up. He slung Riku's arm around his neck and heaved him to his feet.

You don't have to do that, Sora. Riku replied. You're in worse shape than I am, with that gaping cut in your side and all.

Ah, that's nothing. I've had worse remember. It'll take more than this little thing to slow me down. -
You're right, -

Close together, the two key bearers withdrew to the rear to seek much needed medical attention.

An hour had passed and things grew quiet. Now the soldiers were collecting their dead and healing their wounded. The sound of moans and shrieks could be heard from those mortally wounded. After a nice patch job with the doctor, the two key bearers assisted with the wounded and comforted them. The smell of blood and death was everywhere. The smoldering remains of war machines littered the ground. Tattered banners and broken weapons lay all about. After helping out with their tasks, the key bearers took a breather under a bare maple tree. Winter snow began to fall faintly, pelting the wounded with cold flakes.

These winter campaigns, Sora grumbled, I really hate them. It gets so cold at times.

I know what you mean. Riku added. It seems like everything gets a little sluggish after a battle.

Just then, their conversation was interrupted by the galloping sounds of horses returning from the front. The key bearers and many of the soldiers looked to see who approached. Sure enough, it was Yuan Shao, Sun Jian, Cao Cao, and Liu Bei.

Make way, a soldier cried, Make way for the general!

The warlords halted their gallop, their horses bucking up and whinnying before settling down on all four limbs again.

I can't believe this has happened. Yuan Shao growled as he dismounted to stretch his legs.

It was all due to Lu Bu's holding action. Cao Cao added.

Hey, you guys, Sora asked, What's with the long faces?

Dong Zhou managed to get away. Liu Bei replied. The key bearers were shocked, along with everyone else.

He got away? -

Yeah, he withdrew from Luoyang, setting the capital ablaze when he made his escape. -

No, Riku was stunned, He burned the capital city? But why would he do a thing like that?

He hoped to escape secretly amidst the flames. Sun Jian remarked. In most cases, he did get away.

Damn it, Yuan Shao shouted, Just when we were this close to eliminating Dong Zhou once and for all.

If Lu Bu hadn't gotten in our way, Cao Cao added, He is a stubborn man. And one who just won't go down.

Where are the others? Sora asked.

Guan Yu and Zhang Fei along with Lord Xiahou Dun and Lord Huang Gai are still at the front hoping they can begin a pursuit. Liu Bei explained.

At this rate, I highly doubt they'll make it. Yuan Shao said.

Do you want us to go and take care of things? Sora asked.

You two are still recovering from your injuries. Liu Bei said. It's best not to overdue things in one day you know.

We'll be alright. Riku stood up and twisted about, showing that he was in top physical condition. Leave this to us.

Yeah, Sora agreed.

But Liu Bei didn't feel comfortable sending in two wounded youths back into the field.

Aw, let them go. Cao Cao said.

But Lord Cao Cao? -

Those two young men have the knack for battle. Let them do as they please. -

Still? -

Lord Liu Bei, I am highly confident that if we had more warriors like Riku and Sora, as well as your

brothers and you, we would be able to settle this dispute with Dong Zhou in less than a week. Liu Bei could see it was useless to argue.

Alright, alright, he turned to the key bearers, You two can go.

We won't let you down! Sora said, saluting.

Just be careful. -

Right, -

The two key bearers scurried off. Liu Bei watched as they made their way to Hu Lao Gate before turning his back.

It looks like we're back to the front. Riku said.

Let's give that Dong Zhou and one, two, three. But no sooner had they left for the front, they found themselves suddenly suspended and consumed by light. The key bearers were bewildered. They watched as the light consumed their limbs one at a time. Riku, what's going on?!

Oh no, here we go again! -

I guess our task is finished in this world. -

That means there's only one more battle to fight. -

Liu Bei turned around again to see the key bearers on their way. By this time, however, Riku and Sora had completely disappeared and the light vanished without a trace. Liu Bei was curious.

Well, where did they go? he said. The other commanders looked at him. They then looked to Hu Lao. The key bearers had vanished.

Those two are fast, Cao Cao implied, I'll give 'em that.

Back to the matter at hand gentlemen, Yuan Shao implied. The warlords continued their meeting as if nothing had occurred from the start.

8 - Saiyans

Saiyans

Riku and Sora once again had been transported to different world again. They no longer found themselves before the remnants of Hu Lao Gate. Instead, they entered a green yet rocky terrain. There were strange mountains and rock formations that popped up in random places, separated by fast flatland. However, the region was not a foreboding, hostile place. The greenery of grass and shrubbery hit the jaggedness of some of the formations, giving the place a smoother look.

Where are we now? Sora moaned.

I don't know. Riku gave a huff of fatigue. Good grief, I wish we wouldn't be thrown into some other parallel world like that.

Thundro really needs to rethink on how he works his simulators. Sora and Riku then looked at each other. Again surprised, but not at all shocked, they found themselves wearing different clothing this time. They were strange outfits at that.

Riku was wearing what looked like a dark blue body suit that was tightly snuggled up to his every curve, revealing the hardness of his muscles. Over his chest and abdomen, he wore what looked like a futuristic armor piece, with gold straps and lined center for his lower torso and lower back. He wore white gauntlets and white boots with gold tips.

Sora on the other hand had more elaborate entourage. Like Riku, he too wore a jumper, but unlike Riku's, the color of the jumper was black and it did not extend the full length of his arm and leg. The sleeves were cut short reaching up the middle of Sora's upper arm. The leg length was cut short, reaching slightly over his knee joint, much like a cyclist's wardrobe. His armored piece had an extension over the shoulders that if he were to extend his arm, the length would reach his elbow. He too wore gauntlets and boots. But unlike Riku, Sora's gloves had a reinforced, gold band around them, which separated the hand piece from the arm guard.

It looks like we're in different clothing again. Riku said.

Do you think it's a little revealing though? Sora asked.

What makes you say that? -

Well, I'm armored all over my upper body, but... Sora slightly blushed. Riku looked down seeing that nothing else was below that, except the bare jumper and a little skin. Not to mention, the jumper was tight against Sora's body, giving perfect muscle tone. Riku only sighed.

I see what you mean. Well, deal with it, Sora. We don't have any other means for wardrobe. -

I feel like I'm wearing tights. -

Considering that you are. But you shouldn't complain, Sora. I'm wearing the same kind of clothing you are. Besides, I think it looks great. The armor isn't too loose, but it isn't too tight. It's like I'm wearing nothing at all. -

Thanks for that detailed description. Sora was blue in the face.

Well, enough about that. We gotta find out where we are. -

Hey, you two! a voice suddenly shouted. The key bearers stood in their place. The voice was deep and threatening. I'm talking to you two! Are you the Saiyans?!

Saiyans? What the heck is a Saiyan?

The key bearers turned to see who was addressing them. When they gazed upon the face of the person

who addressed them, they were in utter shock at what they saw. Before them was a large green man. He had a stern and ferocious look upon his un-browed face. His ears were pointed like an elf's yet his teeth bore fangs like a vampire. He was dressed in a purple get up, a top tucking to baggy trousers which tightly caressed his ankles at the end. Sleeveless, his arms showed a strange design of muscle, lined and colored an almost pinkish hue, representing the flexing muscles such as the biceps. His fingernails were sharp and pointed, much like a demon. Upon his feet were two brown shoes with a smooth point at its tip. He was cloaked in a white cape that extended the length of his elbows, giving him a more menacing look. At the collar, the cape was fluffed like a lion's mane. Upon his head he wore a white turban with a purple top.

Oh my God, Sora cried. But he was quiet all of a sudden after Riku knocked him on top of the head. Shut up, Sora. He grumbled.

Answer my question. The tall green man demanded. Are you the Saiyans that were prophesized to come here to earth?

You still haven't told us what the heck Saiyans are. Riku said. What the heck is a Saiyan?

Now I don't look that ignorant do I? I've already come into contact with that type of battle gear. The key bearers looked down at their wardrobes. Only Saiyans wear that type of armor!

Listen, pal, I still have no idea what you're talking about, but you have the wrong guys. I don't even know what a Saiyan is. -

I think a Saiyan is like what Goten and Vegeta are. Sora whispered. Their hair turns to gold when they power up, a Super Saiyan I think Goten called it.

Well we're not Saiyans then are we? We can't turn our hair into gold. -

What are you prattling on about? The green man demanded. If you're not Saiyans, then what are you?

I don't think they are Saiyans, Mr. Piccolo. A voice implied. The key bearers looked to find a small boy peering behind one of the rocks. He was small, no higher than three feet. He wore a similar outfit to the green man, except without the cape and turban. He wore a white band around his head in place of a turban instead. He seemed an innocent young lad. His skin was a beige color and his hair was dark and flowing, reaching slightly down to his neck. He came out from behind the rocks and took his place alongside the green man. He walked up to the two key bearers and looked behind them. You see, Mr. Piccolo, they don't have tails like the Saiyans do.

Tails&? Sora uttered.

This just keeps getting weirder and weirder. Riku grumbled.

Alright, Piccolo said, If you're not Saiyans, then explain those uniforms.

How can we explain them? -

You're wearing them aren't you? -

Well, yeah, but we didn't know they meant anything. -

I see. -

I think he's telling the truth, Mr. Piccolo. The boy said. He turned to Riku and Sora. My name is Gohan. That man is my teacher, Mr. Piccolo. What are your names?

I'm Sora. Sora said.

And I'm Riku. Riku added.

So you honestly didn't know what garments you were wearing, is that what you're trying to tell me more or less? Piccolo asked.

For the hundredth time& -

I suppose you're right. Piccolo folded his arms in front of him. Besides, from what I can pick up, you two aren't even worth detecting.

What do you mean by that?! Sora grumbled.

Drop it, Sora. Riku said. We re getting nowhere with this conversation. He looked at Piccolo. Piccolo was it? Tell me, why would you mistaken us for Saiyans and why would you be so interested in them? You re not fully aware of this probably, but it was prophesized about a year ago that two Saiyan warriors would come to Earth to challenge us and attempt to take over this world. But perhaps their main goal is to track down the seven dragon balls and have a desired wish granted. -

And who told you about this? -

It was the first Saiyan that tried to do battle with us one year before. His name was Raditz. -

Raditz, eh? Sora was curious.

That s right. Piccolo continued. That s why I was concerned the moment I laid eyes on you, because Raditz was wearing a similar entourage.

Well, you have nothing to worry about, Mr. Piccolo. We re not your enemies. -

What did he want in this world anyway? Riku asked.

He was originally hoping to entice his brother, Goku to join him. The name immediately struck a chord in the memories of the key bearers.

Goku&? Sora asked. We know him.

You know my dad? Gohan asked.

How is it that you re acquainted with Goku? Piccolo asked.

He had to deliver some senzu beans to us. Riku said. It was about six years ago.

But before Riku could initiate a conversation, a sudden surge of energy caught all their attentions. And unlike most, the strengths they felt were extraordinarily high.

That surge of energy. Sora uttered. What was that?

I don t know. Riku added. Sweat drops appeared on his brow. But whatever it is, it s huge.

There are two of them. -

So, Piccolo uttered, They ve finally arrived.

Who has? -

The Saiyans, The key bearers were stunned. The energy they felt was beyond comprehension. After a full year of waiting, they ve finally made their presence known. But their strengths are far greater than what I had imagined.

You re kidding, Sora wavered as he sensed the energy. Those are the Saiyans.

That s them alright. -

My God, Sora s thoughts returned to days long passed. I haven t sensed this kind of power since we battled with the Dark Empire. The power levels are nothing compared to what Vegeta unleashed back in Lyzand, but it s still just as formidable, especially for us.

It feels like they re not moving anywhere. Riku said.

I hope my dad gets here soon. Gohan said.

Suddenly, there came a bright light that bellowed in the distance. Then came the aftershocks as powerful sound waves, uplifted the soil and caused the winds to blow profusely, nearly sweeping the warriors off their feet. They threw their arms in front of them, blocking the debris that flew into their eyes at the same time protecting their pupils from the blinding light. A low roar was heard, like that of a distance explosion.

After less than a minute of mayhem, the chaos suddenly ceased and things were as they were before, say for the clouds of chaos that bellowed high into the sky. Soon after, there was an uneasy lull, like a great part of the world had suddenly vanished from existence.

This feeling, Riku said, What is this feeling? It feels like life was just purged in that area.

It was. Piccolo explained. The Saiyans landed in a city not too far from here. They must have obliterated it from existence.

But why&? Sora asked.

Because they're Saiyans, they value no life. I've seen the extension of their cruelty. I wouldn't be surprised if obliterating a city was just their way of showing off, or if that's the Saiyan manner of a formal greeting. -

No sooner had Piccolo finished his statement, the two great powers suddenly started moving fast and towards the very spot they were standing.

They're coming this way. -

Get ready. Piccolo turned to the key bearers. So do you intend to stand by us and battle against these Saiyans?

Of course, Riku replied, We can't just let those two get away with what they've done, destroying a whole city without a second thought. He turned to Sora. You ready for this, Sora?

After battling against the Dark Empire six years ago, we should be accustomed to this kind of feeling. Sora, however, had something on his mind. But seriously, Riku, despite that, we're still highly outclassed to both power levels. Do you really think we'll be able to hold our own against such a threat?

It's the right thing to do. -

Be on your guard, you two. Piccolo ordered. They're coming in fast. He looked at Gohan. Gohan, stay focused.

Right, Gohan replied.

We'll be having our hands full with this lot. Piccolo took off his cape and turban, revealing the full size of his biceps. His head was completely bald. And just above his brow, two little antennae stuck out, slightly limping at the ends. The key bearers looked on in awe.

Look, Sora snickered, A Martian... Riku slapped him at the back of the head.

Shut up, Sora. He grumbled. Mind your manners.

Get it together. Piccolo said. This is gonna be a very difficult fight. I don't think that we'll be able to fend off such powerful foes on our own. It was then at that moment, another twitch of energy was felt. What was that, another twitch of energy?

That's impossible, Gohan said, I thought there were only two of them.

There should only be two. -

I don't think so. Riku said. This power doesn't seem as threatening

Suddenly, from out of nowhere a young man appeared. He was a small built man, bald and nose-less. He had upon his head six dots, in two columns, inscribed on his skin. He wore an orange battle outfit, consisting of slightly baggy pants and a sleeveless shirt with the insignia titled Turtle. Both were secured by a blue belt tied firmly around his waist.

Hey there, the short man said, What's up? I hope I'm not late.

It's dad's friend. Gohan implied.

So Krillin, Piccolo declared, You decided to join us, eh? I haven't been training all year for nothing you know. Krillin then happened to look at the key bearers. The striking similarity with Saiyan armor caused him to jolt back. Are those the Saiyans?! Stand back, I'll take care of those two!

Hey, hey, relax Krillin, they aren't the Saiyans. -

How do you know? -

They don't have tails, see? The key bearers turned around. And there, where a tail was expected, there was no sight of a simian fifth limb.

Oh, I see. Krillin had a sheepish grin on his face.

I hope we don't have to show off our butts all the time. Sora grumbled.

Well, when the real Saiyans come, we won't have to worry about that. Riku replied.

Sorry about that. Krillin said. I'm just a little antsy that's all. He approached the key bearers. My name is Krillin. I'm a member of the Earth Special Forces.

I'm Riku. -

And I m Sora. Sora added.

You guys certainly fooled me the way you were dressed. Krillin implied. You almost look like Saiyans in that battle armor.

It s not the first time. -

So, Krillin turned to Piccolo, Goku isn t here yet?

So far, Piccolo told him, I haven t sensed his approach.

Well, I hope he gets here soon. -

I hope so too. Gohan added. You grew up with my dad didn t you, Krillin?

That s right? He and I are almost the same age. -

But how is it that he got taller? Of course Krillin took immediate offense, but tried to laugh it off.

Heh, heh, kids say the darnest things. He put his hands upon his waist. Well, I wish I could have grown taller like your dad, the little& He grumbled behind his tongue before quickly changing the subject. So tell me, Gohan. What was it like to train with Piccolo of all people?

It wasn t as bad as you think. Piccolo may be a little rough around the edges, but you get used to him. -

You must be a hard taskmaster, eh Piccolo? Riku chuckled. But he later noticed that the green man was rather silent. Are you alright?

That s enough of your pointless bickering, you four. Piccolo replied. We have company.

The four looked up to behold a frightening sight. Above them in the sky, like a terrible omen, the two Saiyan Warriors hovered in the air like vultures. One of the Saiyans was a big, bald behemoth, with a thin moustache just above his lip. His muscles were bulking, at least two to three times the capacity of any of the warriors present. By the look of his size, he must have stretched at least eight to nine feet tall. He wore the full fighting jacket of a Saiyan Warrior. A full body suit of blue and gold with extended shoulder and hip guards. He wore thick metal arm guards extending from middle forearm to palm. His boots were heavy as well, blue body with gold ankle guard and toe tip. Upon his left ear, he wore a purple lens scouter.

His companion was smaller, at least half his size. He wore the same type of armored fighting jacket, except with the absence of blue. He wore a blue jumper, similar to Riku s outfit, along with white gauntlets and boots, except without the gold tips. He wore a red lens scouter, like Thundro wore. Upon his head, he had an impressive plumage of hair that spiked up like the head of asparagus. Down his forehead was a deep and formidable widow s peak.

Around the waists of both warriors was a brown furry band, indicating that they were tails. These were without a doubt the Saiyans so grimly anticipated would arrive.

What powerful auras. Krillin slightly wavered, sensing the magnitude of the Saiyans strength. I can feel it, it s overwhelming. We re supposed to contend with that?

Quiet, Piccolo ordered, They re descending.

So those are Saiyans, eh? Riku said.

I didn t even sense their approach. Sora added.

We were too occupied in our conversation, that s why. -

They watched as the space invaders descended towards them. A dark shadow loomed like a bringer of doom. This was without a doubt, a judgment day for the entire earth and all its inhabitants. The only thing standing in their way was the Earth Special Forces. Lightly settling upon the soil, they stood as an unstoppable fighting duo. The little Saiyan had his arms folded in front of him, while the larger Saiyan stood tall with one hand upon his waist.

So, we finally meet at last. The little Saiyan chuckled. I was wondering what kind of warriors the Earth had to offer. But I realize now that you re not much to look at.

You re pretty overconfident aren t you? Piccolo said. But you ll soon realize the extent of your folly.

That voice, I see, you re one of the warriors who was responsible for killing Raditz a year ago, aren t

you? Piccolo was baffled.

How do you know that? -

Come now, I m sure that Raditz didn t leave out that little bit of information. Our scouters also act as universal transmitters. We can hear any message received as clear as crystal from anywhere in this universe.

Hey, Vegeta, the big Saiyan uttered, The green ones from Namek isn t he?

Vegeta&? Sora said inwardly. It can t be.

Yes, he s a Nameccian. Vegeta said. I m not surprised that Raditz would have such a hard time against such warriors.

I m an alien? Piccolo thought. Could this be true?

You were unaware that you are of an extraterrestrial origin weren t you? Perhaps you ve be meandering about this miserable little planet for so long that you have forgotten your true ethnicity. But you should have had a clue that you were different from everyone else. The green skin and pointy ears, as well as those little sprouts sticking out of your forehead should have been a dead give-away. -

So I am not originally of this world. It s surprising, but for some reason, I believe it s true. This sudden nostalgia with where I came from. No wonder such mixed emotions had inhabited me for so long. -

You were the ones who told Raditz of the dragon balls. So tell us where we can find them. -

Where can you find them? Krillin was puzzled. How should we know?

Don t play dumb with us, pal, The big Saiyan shouted, We know that the dragon balls are here. We came here only for those, aside from obliterating life from this planet. One way or the other, we will get our hands on those balls. So if you know what s good for you, you ll tell us what we need to know. -

So you wish to find the balls by force, eh? Piccolo chuckled. You wanna play hard ball with us. Well, as far as I can see, it s a lose-lose situation for us. You want the dragon balls, but at the same time, you want to purge earth of its life. Well, we can t have that. The only way for you to get what you want is to go through us first! Piccolo and the others took their battle stances. So go ahead and threaten us until you re blue in the face. We won t budge from this spot.

So you prefer death over negotiation, eh? Vegeta chuckled. So be it.

Vegeta, Sora suddenly shouted. The two Saiyans laid eyes upon the key bearers. Beholding their dress conduct, Vegeta and his partner were stunned.

Nappa, Vegeta said, Do you see what I m seeing?

Yeah, Vegeta, Nappa replied. I m surprised I didn t notice those two warriors before. Why is it that they re wearing the same type of armor we are?

I don t now. Vegeta suddenly turned his attentions towards the key bearers. You there, who are you, what are your names.

You mean to tell me you can t remember us, Vegeta? Sora asked, It s me, Sora. And this is my friend, Riku.

What do you mean? I ve never laid eyes on you before! -

So you know those two Saiyans? Piccolo asked. The Z fighters backed away from the key bearers, once again apprehensive on whether they were really friends, or if they were possible enemies.

I knew it. Krillin shouted. You two were on their side all along weren t you?

No, no, Sora said. He walked up to Vegeta. Vegeta, why is it that you re acting this way?

I have no idea what you re blathering about! Vegeta growled. Are you trying to make me look like some kind of any idiot?!

You should know me! -

Well, I don t. All I see are a couple of defectors!

But& -

No use trying to explain to him, Sora. Riku implied. You forget that we re engaged in battles long past.

This was before Vegeta even met us. Like Lu Bu, he has no idea of who we are or what's been going on in our own world. Riku glared at the small Saiyan. Besides, you can tell from those eyes that he intends to kill anyone and everyone that gets in his way. Vegeta is the antagonist in this world, which might explain his attitude and the declaration he gave back at the Lyzand Valley in our world.

So you mean? Sora looked at that familiar face. He started as a bad guy?

There's no doubt about it. -

No wonder Vegeta has such a big ego. -

Tell me, Vegeta interrupted suddenly, where did you acquire those uniforms? Are you a part of our organization and have taken it within your own power to turn against Lord Frieza?! -

Frieza, Riku wondered, Who the heck is Frieza? The key bearers' explanations began to wear down on the Saiyan.

Don't patronize me as if I'm some sort of an idiot, you little fool! Nappa and I have been accustomed to those style uniforms for as long as we can remember. Only members of Frieza's empire have that sort of dress, unless the earthlings have somehow developed a similar style, which is highly unlikely. Now tell us, who are you really?! -

If you must know, Piccolo declared, Their names are Riku and Sora. Now of course, Piccolo's reiteration of the key bearers' statement further aggravated Vegeta.

You need to learn how to listen a little better, you incompetent Namek. -

What was that? -

I'm fully aware of their titles. Vegeta folded his arms in front of him once again. Riku and Sora was it, so what business do you have here?

It's really none of your business now is it, Vegeta. Riku replied.

Heh, cocky aren't we? Well, you'll regret showing such insolence to me. -

The conversation was broken when from out of the blue, the sound of a dozen rockets were heard. Above the heads of the warriors, cruisers and flying vehicles approached. Each one bore a news crew that had destined themselves to the battlefield to supposedly record events of the upcoming battle with the two Saiyans.

News crews, Sora gasped, What the heck are they doing here?

Don't they know it's dangerous? Riku added.

But danger was not a thing to fear to an eager reporter hoping to get the scoop. But they realized their own mortality soon enough. The big Saiyan, Nappa, suddenly turned towards the air space where the camera crews hovered. Using an energy wave, he sent a burst of power flying towards the news hawks. In the attack, two to three of the cruisers were destroyed, obliterated before the eyes of the key bearers and the Z fighters.

My God, Krillin uttered. He watched as those who were still alive, plummeted to their deaths alongside falling bits and pieces of scrap metal.

Well, if it's dangerous. Nappa said. They're a little too late to think it over.

They blew up some of those cruisers. Riku was shocked, And with all those people in them.

The bastard? Sora growled. He and Riku drew out their keyblades at the same time the Z fighters took their fighting poses. But their sudden aggressiveness did not waver the Saiyans who only looked at their futile intimidation with gusto.

So you won't cooperate, eh? Vegeta said. Are you longing for death that much? You'd rather have more suffering?

Well, that's fine by me. Nappa chuckled. If those idiots want to die so much, then I'll be happy to oblige them. Nappa suddenly raised his hand. Now, let's see how strong you really are. He clicked the button on his scouter's earpiece. And he examined all five of the warriors present. He first examined the key bearers.

Heh, Nappa chuckled at the readings, Nothing to worry about from them. The pip-squeak with the big hair is at level 125. And that silver-haired upstart is at around the same. Not much of a threat there. He then turned towards the three Z fighters, starting with Gohan and going down the line. Let s see, the brat s at 1000, the Namek is at 1400, and the midget s at 1100.

Is that so? Vegeta said.

The scouter s readings are accurate. We don t have anything to fear from any of them, though I must say that those three, the kid, the Namek, and the small fry, are ten times stronger than those little imps with the funny looking swords. Nappa put his hands upon his. You little imbeciles, do you really think you can beat us with such puny power levels?

I wouldn t underestimate them if I were you, Nappa. Vegeta advised as he discarded his scouter and dropped it on the ground. Have you forgotten that the fighters on Earth also have the capacity to concentrate their energy and raise their fighting powers? They can suppress their true strength and later reveal the full capacity of their auras when we least expect it. Don t forget that Raditz was enticed to believing his scouter s reading was absolute. The figures are thus unreliable in this case.

Oh yeah, good call, Vegeta. Nappa took off his scouter too. Yes, Raditz did allow himself to be persuaded by the scouter s readings, which is why he lost his fight with Kakarrot and the Namek, the weakling. The big Saiyan released his scouter, dropping it to the ground. But then again weaklings usually do.

Impossible, Piccolo uttered. He called Raditz a weakling.

A guy who could even take out Goku, Krillin said, And he s the runt of the litter? Great, just when you think things couldn t get any worse. I thought Raditz was a monster. But compared to these two, he looks like a toothpick.

Perhaps we can open these festivities with a little entertainment, eh Nappa? Vegeta implied. Let s start by sending in our front men to test out the full capacity of these earthlings.

I get ya. Nappa said. Are you talking about the Saibamen?

That s exactly what I mean. -

Saibamen, Sora asked, What the heck are Saibamen?

I don t see any men. Gohan said.

Maybe these guys are just pulling our legs. Riku thought to himself. But then again, I m known to be wrong at times.

They watched as Nappa pulled out a small transparent capsule from beneath his armor. The capsule contained two sides. One was filled with what looked like little greens peas. The other contained what looked like a purple liquid. Nappa inspected the capsule, counting the pea size spheres in one compartment.

Well, well, he said, we re in luck. There are six left.

Six will be just fine. Vegetal remarked. Except for the Namek, I m sure that the others would find the battle more than intensifying enough.

Nappa poked six holes into the fertile ground. Later, he dropped in one pod in each hole then buried them. He then drew out the purple liquid, letting every drop fall upon the soil.

What the heck are they doing? Krillin asked.

I think we re about to find out. Piccolo replied.

That should do it. Nappa declared, throwing the empty vial away.

Sure enough, there was a slight rumble in the soil where he planted the seeds. From out of the little holes, little green men appeared. They stood no higher than three feet tall. The Saibamen were a hideous bunch. Their eyes illuminated a solid red, say for the little black pupil that looked about. Their heads resembled a brain with its wrinkles and crevices separated in two hemispheres, almost like a head of cauliflower. No brow was born upon their faces. There were two pointy ears at the side. Their

main body was a solid green shell, resembling the exoskeleton of a rhinoceros beetle, while its limbs were short and striped looking, bearing a trio of claws on each limb. They snickered and twitched like narcissistic junkies, yet their movements and reflexes were fast like monkey or a lizard.

The key bearers looked at the grotesque little creatures like victims of a plague or pandemic.

Gross, Sora grumbled, They just popped out of the ground like moles.

They re more like giant insects. Riku added.

Gohan in the meantime, started to get a little scared. Being a young boy who had never once fought with anyone, he seemed to waver and back away slightly.

Gohan, Krillin advised, stay focused, buddy. We need you.

R&right& Gohan tried to summon as much courage as he could.

You don t have to be scared. Piccolo said. Remember your training, concentrate!

Yeah&! -

This should be a pretty good match up. Vegeta remarked. These Saibamen are thirsting for a little blood and action.

Alright, Piccolo said. Let s split these guys up. Riku, Sora, you take those two on the right. I ve got those two on the center left.

I ll take on that one on the very left. Krillin added.

That leaves you, Gohan. You take on the one on the center right. -

Okay&

You re pretty confident to fight the Saibamen one on one. Nappa chuckled.

Let them have their fun, Nappa. Have them indulge in their overconfidence before they meet their end. -

You certainly have a mean streak don t you, Vegeta. -

I enjoy watching low levels being put in their place. -

Watch who you re calling low levels, Vegeta. Sora shouted. We re tougher than we look.

Then by all means, show us your power. -

Alright, you six, Nappa shouted, Teach these arrogant earthlings a thing or two about real fighting!

Suddenly, the six Saibamen suddenly attacked without warning.

Here they come! Piccolo shouted.

Get ready! Sora declared. Out of the five warriors present, four rushed into the fray. Gohan, however, being his first engagement in combat, was reluctant to join in the defensive. He could barely see the movements of his friends as they jumped about almost invisibly around him. There were kick-ups of dust and flashes of light, gusts of wind and sudden pangs of striking fists, but he could not see their movement.

They suddenly reappeared, lulling on the ground or in the air. Just as things seemed to have calmed down, the Saibaman Gohan was supposed to battle suddenly appeared behind the boy. Gohan looked to find the creature about to strike.

Oh no& he said in his mind as time itself seemed to slow down.

But suddenly, a burst of flame appeared and struck the little alien, deterring it from its attack. It fell to the ground and skidded along the dirt, but it quickly regained its stamina and jumped back on its feet.

Are you alright, little guy? Sora asked. Gohan looked to find that it was Sora who had deployed the defensive attack.

Uh&Yeah&thank you, Mr. Sora. -

That s good to know. The key bearer lowered his weapon.

Stay focused, Gohan, Piccolo growled in an almost scolding tone. Don t rely on others to save you!

That s a weakness, you know that! Gohan lowered his head in shame. I taught you better than that!

Sorry, Mr. Piccolo& -

Don t apologize, just do it! -

Right! Gohan stood up with renewed determination.

Well, well, Nappa mocked, Isn't that cute, you got yourself some good bodyguards kid.

There's no need for losers like you to be here. Vegeta added. Why don't you go back to your mother?

Shut up, Krillin shouted. Gohan has every right to be here.

Well, as far as I can see, he's only getting in the way. -

Bastard! -

Both sides separated to reform their ranks again. Sora in the meantime, went to check on Gohan. He smiled at the boy.

That was a close one don't you think? he asked.

Yeah! Gohan replied. But Sora noticed Piccolo's cold stare towards him. The Namek then shook his head. Though words were not spoken, Sora understood Piccolo's jester and he immediately backed off.

Don't get too dependent on those two to protect you, Gohan. Piccolo implied. You let Sora and Riku come to your aid in the heat of battle and you'll be expecting it. You'll only burden them. And that may prove to be fatal.

Sorry! -

Not bad for a first skirmish. Vegeta chuckled.

This is bad. Krillin thought to himself. No casualties so far and those sprouts don't look fatigued at all. Just then, a voice much like that of a small child was heard from above.

Krillin, it cried. Krillin looked up to find two young warriors descending.

One was a large, bald individual. Named Tenshinhan, or Tien for short, wore green pants supported with a red sash and locked at the shins with yellow shin warmers and black footwear. He wore no shirt, thus revealing muscular torso and abdomen. There was deep scar across his chest, possibly inflicted by some sharp weapon. Strangely enough, he had three eyes, the third just above the bridge of his nose.

Are you seeing this? Sora uttered.

That guy has three eyes. Riku added.

The second young man, Chaozu, was smaller, no larger than two feet high. He wore black trousers with red sash, yellow shin warmers, and black shoes. He wore a sleeveless shirt to cover his pale white body. His face looked like that of a doll with eyes that never seemed to blink and red dots on his cheeks. On his head, he wore a Chinese cap with a balled, red tassel at the top.

Hey, Tien, Chaozu, Krillin cried, jubilantly waving. I'm glad to see that you two made it in time! More insects, Nappa grumbled. The two stood before the group.

So I see that the Saiyans didn't come alone either. Tien said. They even brought their cronies with them as well.

Actually, they grew them here. -

What? Chaozu asked.

Don't ask. -

Well, it really doesn't matter. Tien gave that unbroken glare at each of the enemy before him. He then happened to look to his right to find a young boy standing next to Piccolo. Who's the kid, is that Goku's little boy?

That's right. His name is Gohan. He's been training with Piccolo for the past year. -

He's strong like his father. Tien then gazed at the key bearers. And those two, who are they?

That's Riku and Sora. They came to help us fight too. -

Who is that? Sora asked.

That's Tien and Chaozu. Krillin explained. They're old friends of ours.

So why is it that they're dressed in the same battle armor as the Saiyans are? Tien asked.

Don't ask, Riku grumbled, It'll only make things more complicated.

Just know that we're your friends and not your enemies. Sora added.

Well, as long as you stand with us, that's all that matters to me. Tien said.

Enough of this chatter, Nappa shouted. You know there's no point in continuing. These Saibamen are worth every one of you. They can take you down all on their own.

The Saibamen advanced ever so slowly, biding their time, feeling the urge before striking. But their advance was once again halted by another voice and the appearance of another Z fighter.

Wait up, you guys! the voice cried. Everyone, including the Saiyans, glanced to the direction the voice originated. Suddenly, another young warrior appeared. He wore the same outfit as Krillin did with the same insignia on the back. He was a tall and brash youth with long black hair. Upon his left cheek was a cross shaped scar and above streaking over his right eye was another scar, most likely caused by a sharp weapon.

Hey, Yamcha, Krillin gave an excited greeting.

Glad you could make it, Yamcha. Tien said.

Sorry, I'm late though. -

Nope, Krillin chuckled, You got here just in time.

Cool, Yamcha turned to see the serious faces upon some of his comrades. He then happened to glance at the Saiyans. So I take it that those are the ones, the Saiyans.

That's them alright. Piccolo implied.

Well, they don't look so tough. Yamcha then happened to glance at Riku and Sora. And who are you guys? I've never seen you around before.

I doubt anyone has. Riku grumbled.

Don't mind my friend. Sora said. It signifies nothing!

That's Riku and Sora, Yamcha. Krillin explained. They're gonna help us fight.

Is that so? Yamcha said. Then why is it that they're dressed in those Saiyan uniforms.

It was merely a bad suggestion of wardrobe. Riku explained.

Like we really had a choice though, Sora whispered in his friend's ear.

Look Nappa, Vegeta chuckled, Another cockroach to squash.

Will we be expecting more of your friends? Nappa said.

Now, now Nappa, this could work out better than expected. -

How's that, Vegeta? -

Let our Saibamen soften them up a bit. If they are indeed compressing their power levels, at least the Saibamen will be able to deprive them of their stamina. -

I see& -

Gentlemen, Vegeta declared to the key bearers and the Z fighters, What do you say we make this confrontation one to remember. You get to battle us once you finish off our pod soldiers. What do you say?

You think this amusing don't you?! Piccolo growled. This is all just a big game to you isn't it! You think we're here to frolic about and waste our time! No, we've come to battle!

Now, now, Krillin advised, Take it easy there, Piccolo. You forget that Goku hasn't arrived yet. Perhaps if we abide by their request for a while, we can buy more time for Goku to get here.

No Krillin, that's exactly what they want. This is all just an attempt to soften us up. That way they can finish us off faster. -

Well, Krillin pondered on what Piccolo had said and realized that that may have been what Nappa and Vegeta were hoping for. I never really thought about it that way.

If that's the case, Riku said, stepping forth before the Z fighters, Then I'll go first.

We'll go first. Sora remarked, stepping aside his comrade.

Look at that, Vegeta. Nappa chuckled. The little weaklings are gonna fight first.

I'll give them credit though. Vegeta said, Volunteering to start off the battle.

Alright, Sora declared, Which one of you little green freaks wants to start off first?
Very well, Vegeta looked to one of the Saibamen, you go battle him. Finish him off and be quick about it.

No, Riku suddenly shouted. The Saiyans and the Z fighters were bewildered, We re fighting them all at once.

What was that? Yamcha uttered.

They want to fight all six of those things by themselves? Krillin added. But that s crazy!
Pretty brash for a guy with only a power level of 125, Nappa scoffed.

Riku, Sora whispered, Don t you think that s going a little overboard?
I m not about to back down to weeds! Riku replied. Are you just gonna stand there and let a bunch of cabbage heads push you around, Sora?
Of course not! -
Then let s take em all on at once. If we can battle head to head with Imperial troops, then these guys should be no more of a challenge. -
Yeah, You re right, Riku! The key bearers drew up their keyblades. Let s do this!
C mon, -
So be it. Vegeta said.

Alright, Nappa bellowed, You want it that way, then you got it! Saibamen, hold nothing back! Kill those two upstarts! I want their hearts on a plate!
The Saibamen acknowledged and suddenly sprang forward at incredible speed. The key bearers, however, did not hold back. They unleashed their full potential as well.
Sora, Riku cried, Evasion technique!
Gotcha, Sora replied. Thus, then unleashed their double attack of light and darkness. The flashes of light and lingering of shadows bewildered and awed the Z fighters. The Saiyans too were impressed. Within seconds, all six of the Saibamen were found prostrated on the ground. The key bearers on the other hand still remained fresh.
Impossible, Nappa said.
Those two took down all six like they were nothing. Krillin uttered.
Where the heck did these two guys come from? Tien wondered.
Riku and Sora, Piccolo thought, How in the world could they have accumulated that kind of strength? I could barely even sense them before. Now all of a sudden their energy has boosted itself beyond what I could even comprehend.
It looks like you have a hold of a weak batch there, Nappa. Vegeta scoffed.
No, it s impossible, Nappa growled, These Saibamen are the crme of the crop amongst their peers. They should have won without any trouble. Their power levels are at least 1200. That means that each and every one of them has a fighting strength equal to&equal to Raditz.
Then it is as I had predicted. The earthlings are compressing their power levels to deceive us in the long run. Vegeta slightly snickered. But still this is a situation that we can handle on our own.
What shall we do then? -
Let the Saibamen continue with their little onslaught, let s see how far they re pushed. -
One by one, the Saibamen staggered and once again surrounded the key bearers.
Those little buggers just won t give up. Sora said.
That s fine. Riku replied. They want to keep going, let them.
Again, the Saibamen attacked. But again, the key bearer managed to hold their own.
Man, Krillin said, Riku and Sora are awesome.
They re actually holding their own against all six of those little freaks. Yamcha added.
The Saibamen simultaneously attacked, but their efforts proved ineffective against the key bearers. Two

of the Saibamen unleashed a strange attack. Their heads suddenly split wide open, much like the mouth of a Venus fly trap. From out of their hollow skulls, white ooze spurted out.

What the heck is that stuff? Sora said, cringing at the sight of the milky liquid. The key bearers evaded the wet substance. And it was a good thing they did. The moment the liquid splattered onto the ground, it dissolved through the soil, creating rather deep holes.

That s acid, Riku said, watch out and make sure it doesn t hit you!

Man, Krillin grumbled, what else can those things do?

Look what they did to the ground. Tien implied.

You ll have to do better than that, you little maggots! Sora shouted. Using their keyblades, both youths pummeled the Saibamen once more. Let s see you try this on! He looked to his friend, Riku, combination wind technique, flaming funnel!

I gotcha, At once, the key bearers unleashed one of their combo attacks. A mighty twister emerged. And combined with Riku s Cinder Canister, the flames engulfed the column of wind, turning it into a flaming inferno. The Z fighters were astounded, the Saiyans concerned.

Look at that. Vegeta uttered.

How powerful are these guys?! Nappa wondered. Not only are they taking on the Saibamen by themselves, but they can also do something like that!

That s exactly what their weakness is. Vegeta smirked a little.

The flaming funnel surged upon the battlefield, sweeping up each of the Saibamen, singing and burning them, at the same time slicing away at their bodies with strong air currents. In the end, as the fiery column diminished, all six plummeted to the ground. Their impact with the soil caused shallow craters to form and clouds of dust to billow. Motionless they lay. No doubt that the attack finished what was left of them.

Impossible& Nappa uttered. All six have been defeated?

Inconceivable& Vegeta added.

Well, Riku said, It looks like you little makeshift army failed to defeat us, Vegeta.

They were nothing compared to us. Sora added with a smile.

Why you little& Nappa growled.

Nappa, easy, Vegeta advised.

Now with all six of those squealing sideshow freaks down for good, that leaves you. Riku chuckled.

Alright, Riku and Sora, Krillin cheered.

They did it! Chaozu added.

It s a good thing that they re on our side. Yamcha said.

But their jubilation was short lived as Vegeta suddenly began to chuckle uncontrollably.

What s so funny? Riku said. I must have missed something.

You honestly think that you ve won? he asked.

Of course we won. Sora replied. Why would you think otherwise?

But no sooner had Sora blurted out those words; one of the Saibamen suddenly sprang back to life. The key bearers tuned to see the thing rushing at them. It was Sora the creature was going after. Sora had no time to react. But Riku at the last minute pushed him out of the way. Sora tumbled to the ground. The creature latched on to Riku, locking its hands and feet together, putting Riku in a submission hold. The Z fighters were shocked at this sudden twist. Sora quickly looked to his friend seeing him grapple with the green enigma.

Riku, he cried.

Let go of me, you little bastard! Riku strained to get out of the submission hold, but it seemed that the harder he struggled, the tighter the Saibaman s grip became.

He s got him! Tien uttered.

Fight it, Riku! Yamcha cried. Fight it!

I told you to let go of me! Riku again tried to break free, but the Saibaman would not let go.

Vegeta suddenly cracked a smile, watching the events unfold before his eyes.

As I said before. He said. Did you honestly think you have won? There s one thing that the Saibamen are most feared for. If they cannot win a battle, then they will unleash the one attack only used as a last resort&self-detonation.

What&? Sora asked. His eyes wide with fear.

That s right, they ll latch themselves onto their enemy and never let go. At the same time, they accumulate their energy from within, set to explode. Thus, they blow themselves up and take their foe with them. -

No, Sora turned to Riku and rushed to his aid. Riku, But the other Saibamen, much like the one, suddenly sprang back to life as well and attacked Sora. Sora saw the other five coming and quickly evaded and fended them off. In the meantime, Riku could was still struggling.

With a sinister grin upon its face, The Saibaman suddenly started to glow. Within seconds, its body detonated still clinging onto Riku. Sora could only watch on helplessly as the little green sprout erupted with a terrible explosion. There was a bright flash of light, a sonic boom, which nearly knocked the Z fighters off their feet, and a billow of dust and debris into the clear sky. Behind the chaos, the sound of Riku s bloodcurdling scream as death fell upon him. Sora covered his eyes, at the same time the other Saibamen withdrew to a safer distance.

Eventually, the smoke cleared and those present now beheld the carnage of the aftermath. There, lying upon the ground was Riku. His body smoldered, his once unsigned uniform had been torn about and charred with heat. Sora could only look on at the horror.

Riku, he uttered. He quickly ran to his friend s side. What he found caused him to shriek out in bitter terror and sorrow. Riku s entire front had been blown off. The armor had shattered at the front and the jumper was torn to shreds. This bare abdomen and chest, once delicate and beautiful skin, was not burned in some places, and rattled with pieces of shrapnel sticking out, some of the shards from the armor, others from the detonating Saibaman. His eyes had lost all signs of life. There was no breath, no stir. Riku was dead. Sora roared out as he picked his friend up in his arms.

A kamikaze, Piccolo said, There s no way to defend against that kind of tactic.

Oh well, Vegeta sighed, It looks like a draw. Your little team has been broken up. And with it, your so called invincibility. Let s see how strong you are now fighting alone.

That little bastard, Sora growled. Riku&I m sorry&

What a waste of a life. Nappa chuckled. Well, at least that s one less insect to worry about.

Pick up that worthless trash of yours, boy. Vegeta mocked.

Sora could only grip onto Riku s lifeless body and hold it tightly against him. The tears of sorrow quickly turned cold and transformed into tears of hate and anger. He glared at the two Saiyans.

Vegeta, he sneered, You ll pay for this! There was a sudden change in his eye, a look of loathing.

You ll all pay for this! Sora lay Riku down and glared at the Saiyans. His body started to glow that bright gold.

The Saiyans were astounded by what they saw. The Z fighters trembled at what they sensed. Sora had unleashed Lu Bu s infamous Musou Rage.

What is this power? Piccolo thought. Where did it come from?

That kid is something else. Tien said.

Sora stood before the Saiyans, sternly and unwavering.

I ll kill you. He declared.

Is that so? Vegeta said. Then let s see you try.

Sora suddenly attacked, swiftly and without mercy. But the Saibamen quickly entered the fray too and all

of them attacked Sora at once. But the key bearer's strength had increased dramatically and moved about the Saibamen without trouble. Using his keyblade, he struck and slew two with one hit. He then pushed the remaining three away from him and struck two more dead. He then turned towards the last of the Saibamen and slashed his keyblade upward, slicing the thing in half.

Man, Krillin was frightened, He cut those things up so fast.

Look at that heat in his eyes. Piccolo added. That's pure rage!

Sora then drew up his keyblade. A sudden ball of energy appeared before its tip and without hesitation or second thought; he practically fired the beam point blank at the Saiyans. The Saiyans, however, seemed not concerned and allowed the blast to hit them. There was an earth shattering rumble and an ear-piercing explosion. Light, dust, wind, and debris were heightened.

In the aftermath, the Musou Rage diminished and Sora fell to his knees. He gasped and labored in his breath, realizing that he had wasted over half of his fighting strength to unleash that one powerful blast.

Man, he pounded 'em! Yamcha stated, Both those little green men and the Saiyans.

At a boy, Sora, Krillin cheered.

That's showing 'em, kid! Tien added. Sora looked on with a smile on his face, sweat drops falling from his brow. He looked to carnage he caused with energy wave.

I did, Riku, he uttered, I did it.

Oh, yeah, a voice suddenly thundered, You did it alright!

Immediately, Sora's smile turned to a fearful stare. The Z fighters' joy turned to terror. The impossible could not be happening. Sora hoped that it was all an illusion. But such a dream proved a reality as the forms of Nappa and Vegeta emerged from the screen of dust like phantoms in the shadows.

9 - Cause and Effect

Cause and Effect

Sora's eyes grew wide with fear and apprehension as he saw the two Saiyan Warriors appear from the debris clouds. Smirks on their faces, the two Saiyans, Nappa and Vegeta were not thirsting for a comeback.

Not bad, boy, Vegeta chuckled. Not bad at all. You certainly had us running for our money back there. It can't be. Sora thought to himself, I put everything I had into that shot. Sora cringed as he gazed down at the ground. Damn, if only I had brought the rage collar with me before this simulation session started, I would have been able to unleash the rage and Saiyan devotion and inflict at least a significant amount of damage on them. But I only have the Musou Rage as my trump card this time.

I don't believe it. Krillin was terrified. There's not a scratch on 'em.

If Sora couldn't even hurt them, even after going all out, Yamcha added, I wonder how the rest of us will favor against them?

There strength is insane. Piccolo implied in his mind. How could they withstand an attack that massive?

The Saiyans slowly approached.

I have to admit, Sora. Vegeta said as he and Nappa stopped in their tracks only twenty feet away from the key bearer, You're strong, stronger than I originally thought. Quite a surprise really, but even so, your level of skill still pales in comparison to us. The only thing that you have managed to do is send you and your comrades out of the frying pan and into the fire.

You got that right. Nappa chuckled. Because you took out our Saibamen so quickly, you've sealed your fate faster than usual. Now, it's our turn to battle. The large bald Saiyan turned to his partner. Hey, Vegeta, how about I take on these guys by myself for a while. There's no sense in both of us having to stress ourselves out over this rabble. Besides, I've been meaning to get some payback for that last little act of insolence.

I suppose you're right. Vegeta folded his arms in front of him again.

So I have your permission to kill them then? -

Kill as many as you want, Nappa. Kill them all for all I care. But I caution you on one detail. -

What's that? -

The Namek, Piccolo, make sure to keep him alive. He's the only one who can tell us the whereabouts of the dragon balls. -

No sweat, I'll beat that walking mollusk into submission so he can't fight back. As for everyone else & Nappa advanced, leaving Vegeta to stand about, acting as a bystander. Now, I'm not gonna waste any time to choose which one of you dies first, The large Saiyan glared at Sora instantly, Because I already know who it will be!

Without hesitation and without warning, Nappa charged the young key bearer. Sora immediately reacted. He unleashed his combination attack, Tundra Canister and Twister Strike. A swirling column of ice engulfed the Saiyan, but to no avail. Nappa charged through. Ice particles were attaching all over him, but did not decrease the intensity of his charge.

It can't be. Sora uttered. His attack, though devastating to any soldiers of the Imperial Axis, Heartless,

or Nobody, proved ineffective against the enraged Saiyan. Nappa threw out his leg and kicked Sora straight in the gut. The key bearer flew through the air and tumbled across the ground.

No, Sora, Krillin cried.

Sora, Gohan added.

The youth skidded and halted upon the soil. There he lay, motionless. The Z fighters feared the worst for him, believing that he might have died.

Sora, Tien uttered.

That guy took Sora down with one kick. Yamcha thought to himself. He looked at Nappa who grinned like a jack-o-lantern. He's something else. He's a monster. If Sora could go down so easily with one hit, what chance do we have? Nappa suddenly glared at him. Yamcha backed off, his eyes wide with indescribable fear and terror.

Don't worry, friend, Nappa chuckled, You'll get your chance soon enough. He then looked at Sora who was slowly staggering to his feet. The result of the kick had hideous results. The armor had broken all the way through, shattering like glass, and pieces of metal were now lodged in the young man's flesh. Where the kick had made impact the jumper had been torn and Sora's skin had turned an unworldly black and blue. Blood flowed from his mouth as he gasped and coughed, indicating that his body had suffered severe internal injuries and perhaps his organs had ruptured. But still, he stood up. Weary eyed and dying, he could only make a futile gesture, lifting up his keyblade for a defensive stance.

One kick, he uttered, How can I possibly deal with a guy that powerful all on my own. I've never felt this type of pain since I battled Lord Cavendish himself.

I wonder about that boy. Vegeta thought inwardly.

Now you die! Nappa roared. The Saiyan suddenly unleashed a powerful energy beam from his mouth. Sora, unable to move, his body heavy, and his eyes not fully focused, could only watch helplessly as the beam came towards him. Almost as if time had slowed down to make a more epic demise, Sora could only smile.

Riku, he whispered. He looked at the lifeless body of his friend on the ground. I have failed you. Within seconds, there was a blood curdling scream overwhelmed by the energy and the explosion that followed soon after. Only light was seen, followed sudden darkness.

The sound of the battlefield suddenly blurred, mellowing with every second passing. There was the maniacal laughter of Nappa in the distance, as if a dream or some nostalgic thought. Then there came the familiar sound of a large object. Like an annoying cuckoo, it clanged tic-toc-tic-toc. Sora opened his eyes. The chamber was illuminated by the transmutation circle designs about the chamber. There, above his head, the great pendulum swung back and forth. He had returned.

I'm alive, he uttered, I'm back.

We're back. A voice said. Sora turned to find Riku standing next to him. Sora, overcome with joy, leaped onto Riku and hugged him.

Riku, Riku, you're alive! -

Of course I'm alive. -

I thought you were dead! I saw you die when that thing latched onto you and& -

I know, I know, it was frightening, Sora, but it's alright. It was just a simulation. Sora looked to find that he and Riku were still in the Imperial battle uniforms they had put on in the morning when they started.

I'm glad to see that you two managed to survive the simulation. Riku and Sora turned to see Thundro standing not too far away.

Thundro, Sora uttered.

How long have we been in the simulation? Riku asked.

You've been in your trans for about twelve hours now. Thundro replied. It's evening at the moment,

about six or seven I believe, somewhere around there.

That simulation, Sora said. It seemed so real.

That's what the result was supposed to be. The simulation mimics what you would feel during a real battle, both physically and mentally. Did you feel pain? -

Yes, -

Did you feel emotion? -

Yes.

Could you distinguish that it was a mere simulation? -

Not really, -

We tried to persuade ourselves believing that it was just a simulation. Riku explained. But even so, everything we felt was so real. I didn't even think that we were in simulation, but a real live battle.

As expected, Thundro said. He walked up to the key bearers, placing his hands behind him. So tell me, how did it go? How did your battles go?

Well, The youths were silent, unable to bring themselves to speak. They couldn't really determine on whether their achievements were really victories or defeats.

I'm sure that you did well, battling against very powerful enemies. Thundro turned away. Come with me. Rest for a while.

Yes, -

The key bearers followed Thundro out of the room and returned to the main hall. Sora and Riku sat down on a cushioned centerpiece. The Death Lord stood before them with arms locking each other behind him.

Now, let's analyze the battles one at a time. Thundro said. Since I had programmed the simulation, I will have a good idea of what had occurred. Tell me how the battle in the forbidden lands went?

Well, Riku started, though hesitant at first, we helped this guy, Wander, defeat these monsters called colossi.

I see. -

That fight was more difficult than we expected. Sora remarked. Those things nearly killed us.

Wander was hoping to revive his love, Mono, who was sacrificed for a cursed fate. Riku continued.

And what was the nature of the outcome? Thundro asked. Was it as you expected?

We thought that we were helping Wander fulfill his desire and help revive a life he held dearly. But instead, the opposite occurred. We later found out from this shaman, who appeared out of nowhere, that what we were doing was actually something bad, helping unleash this entity called Dormin. Dormin was actually a dark being who was sealed away centuries before. He tricked Wander into thinking that he could grant any wish he desired. As a result, because Wander defeated the sixteen colossi, Dormin's power was resurrected. -

Those colossi were actually guardians, Sora added, acting as keepers for each segment of dark power that was once part of Dormin.

We helped unleash an evil in that world. -

We had to fight Dormin, even though Wander's body was acting as a host. -

And what was the fate of this youth? Thundro asked.

For some reason, he was sucked into this vortex and consumed by this bright light. Riku continued.

When we later found him, he had been regressed into the body of an infant, an infant with horns.

I see. -

So all of his efforts were in vain, Sora lowered his head.

How so? -

Well, even after accomplishing his task and defeating all sixteen colossi, his wish was never granted. The life of Mono was not restored. We saw it, her lifeless body still lying on the alter where Wander put

her in the beginning. -

So as far as we know, Riku implied, Wander is there all alone and helpless in the form of a baby.

So you say, Thundro suddenly smiled, but the reality is that his wish did come true. The key bearers were puzzled.

His wish came true? Sora asked.

How do you know? Riku added.

It is because the story of Dormin and Wander actually happened. Thundro continued. It was an actual event in that world.

But how? -

First things first, The Death Lord stared into the eyes of the key bearers, How do you feel about the outcome? Do you feel as if you've accomplished something or vice versa?

It was all just a waste. Sora replied. We helped defeat creatures that looked evil, but were actually good. We released a monster that was more insane than wise. A young warrior lost his body, mind, and soul to the darkness. We had to fight and defeat the monster, at the same time harming our friend. His wish was never granted and we had to leave him as a horned infant all alone and helpless with no care. As far as I know, he'll be dead within a few days. I would hardly call that an accomplishment.

On the contrary, you spurred a chain of events that would have a significant impact in that world's history. -

How so? Riku asked.

For one thing, Wander's love, Mono, was resurrected from the dead, perhaps a few minutes after you were sent to the next simulation. Mono found the baby Wander and took care of him, watching him grow strong. Thus, Wander matured again, but this time as a young man with horns. Thus, he gave rise to the bloodline of the famous and supposedly cursed horned boys. -

What does that have to do with anything? Sora wondered.

The shaman you met, Lord Emon as I recall, ended up spreading the word about the horned infant, calling him the offspring of Dormin. Thus, rose the belief that any boy who was born with horns was of Wander's bloodline and wielded the cursed essence of Dormin. Because of this cursed essence flowing in their veins, the people believed that the horned boys would bring famine and failure of crop and community. Thus, when a young horned boy reached his tenth birthday, he was bound and sacrificed, being left to die in an ancient ruin. Thundro turned about, so his back was towards the key bearers. It is believed that the one destined to break the curse would be denied his fate.

And what's the significance of this story? -

The boy who broke the curse of Wander and Dormin was named Ico. Immediately, the name stuck a chord in the memories of the key bearers. From what I understand, you were acquainted with Ico when you were battling against the Cavendish Shinobis six years before.

Are you trying to tell me that Ico is? Riku uttered.

That's correct, Ico was the one destined to break the line's dark fate. He is the ancestral descendent of Wander. -

I never would have guessed. Sora said. Ico was Wander's descendent?

So though you helped to resurrect a demon from his prison, you allowed a life of the future to be ordained. However, had you somehow prevented the events in that world from occurring, Ico would have been denied his right to exist centuries later. You might say that the outcome you believed as bad had some positive results in the long run.

So our deeds weren't entirely in vain. Riku quoted from within.

Now, Thundro continued, let us assess the second battle you encountered with the same question. Did you find the nature of the outcome to your liking?

You mean the battle at Hu Lao Gate? Sora asked. He looked away before making eye contact again to

speak. Well, it was a bit of half and half.

And why do you say that? -

Well, we did manage to win the fight for the coalition somewhat. We went head to head with this guy named Zhang Liao and managed to hold our own. -

That's good then. -

But we blew it when fighting against Lu Bu. -

Even though this Lu Bu was weaker than the Lu Bu we fought, he still had that stamina. Riku said. It's hard to believe that he was so strong even back then.

But then those three brothers Guan Yu, Zhang Fei, and Liu Bei managed to fight Lu Bu off and force him to retreat. -

So do you consider it a victory? Thundro asked.

For that moment yes, the battle was won. Riku's fist tightened slightly. However, the long run effect was anything, but a victory.

Why&? -

The guy in charge of Lu Bu and Zhang Liao, I think his name was Dong Zhou, managed to reach the Imperial capital and had it burned to the ground. -

Correct. Thundro put one fist to his hip, while the other hung loosely at his side, giving him that upstart general look. In the end, the Han capital city of Luoyang fell to the torch. Dong Zhou then withdrew from Luoyang, taking the young emperor with him, and established the new capital at Chang An.

Well, what happened after that? Sora was curious to know. What happened in the end?

The coalition then divided and returned to their respected lands once again. Of course this conclusion shocked the key bearers.

You mean Dong Zhou actually wins? -

No, Dong Zhou is eventually defeated, but at the hands of the one person he never suspected. -

Who&?

Lu Bu of course. -

What, Riku uttered, Dong Zhou would fall at the hands of Lu Bu?

But I thought that Lu Bu was his adopted son. Sora said. I remember that being mentioned somewhere, I think by Sun Jian or Cao Cao.

But why would Lu Bu do that? -

It was for the sake of young woman named Diao Chan. Thundro explained. She enticed Lu Bu to turn against and oust Dong Zhou.

So everything turned out alright in the end then. Sora sighed relief, but Thundro's stern look told otherwise.

No, Dong Zhou's reign was only the tip of the iceberg. In later years, those men who had formed the coalition to fight against Dong Zhou would in proceeding years turn against one another. The key bearers were stunned again. Thundro continued his lecture. Cao Cao would soon turn against his close friend Yuan Shao and eventually oversee his defeat at the Battle of Guan Du. He would later found the Kingdom of Wei. He would then end up turning against Liu Bei and forcing him to flee into the southwestern regions of the country. Liu Bei would later establish the Kingdom of Shu. In the meantime, Sun Jian would establish his kingdom, the kingdom of Wu, in the lands along the Jiang Dong River, but would eventually be killed in one of his later military campaigns. His son, Sun Ce would rise to power and further increase the territory of Wu. But he too would succumb. Finally, Sun Ce's younger brother, Sun Quan, took the role as the leader of Wu. Thus, the three kingdoms of Wu, Shu, and Wei were formed giving way to the famous Three Kingdoms Period. And in the years to come, all three kingdoms would do all in their power to assure the demise of the others. Though there were temporary alliances

between them, the reality was that none of them fully accepted the others' existence.

So what Lu Bu said was true then. Riku said. Thundro's curiosity was perked.

What do you mean? -

He said to Liu Bei that it was not him or Dong Zhou they had to fear, but rather the allies who fought along side them. -

Excellent insight, Riku, such is the fate of ambitious men hoping to unify the land. -

But what ever did happen to Lu Bu? Sora asked. I mean, what would his fate have been like had he not been integrated as an assassin of the former Dark Empire?

From what the history books have said, the Imperial gave the insight of his knowledge, Lu Bu would gain a notorious reputation as a betrayer. The reason for this was because he always wanted to be on the side of strength, that way he'd be able to guarantee his rise in power. As you know, Lu Bu in those days had a fear of death, which is the reason for his ruthlessness at times. In the end, however, he started to get out of control, both to his enemies and his allies. Thus, he was betrayed and captured by his own men, brought before Cao Cao and later executed.

Man, that's harsh. -

So I guess Lu Bu's employment by the Dark Empire was really more of a godsend. Riku added.

More or less, Thundro remarked. Thundro placed his hands behind him again. Now, enough of that second assessment. Let us proceed to the final assessment, the battle against Nappa and Vegeta.

Great! Sora suddenly grumbled. His sulking quote made Thundro curious.

Is there something wrong? -

Well, that fight we never even got to finish. -

Is that so? -

Well yeah, Riku said. Those two Saiyans managed to kill us in the simulation.

Could you explain the nature of the fight? -

Well, we were met by all these guys. I guess they were Goku's friends. Then we confronted Vegeta, which I had a feeling started as a bad guy. He and his bald headed friend, Nappa suddenly unleashed these little green men that we had to fight. -

Saibamen I think they called them. Sora added.

Well, anyway, we managed to battle all of them at once. Until one of those little green bastards took me by surprise and blew up in my face. I think I died after that because I saw only darkness. -

You did die, Riku. Then I tried to avenge you and defeated the remaining five. I even tried to shoot down the Saiyans. But I only managed to anger them even more. Then that Nappa guy suddenly attacked and kicked me in the gut. That kick actually broke through the armor I was wearing. After that he killed me with a beam from his mouth. Before I knew it, I was back in the pendulum room. -

I see, Thundro pondered, trying to visualize the battle.

But how in the world were we supposed to fight against those guys. Nappa just took me down with one kick to the gut and that was pretty much it. -

Then it's a good thing that you were wearing that battle armor. -

But that battle armor made Piccolo and those other guys suspect that we were Saiyans. Riku said.

Why couldn't we have been given some other types of uniforms like what the rest of the Z fighters were wearing?

The reason for that was because I knew you wouldn't have been able to withstand the impact of a punch or a kick from those Saiyans without them. Had you not been wearing that armor, Nappa's foot might have gone all the way through, Sora.

I never thought of it that way. Sora said, His face turned a pale blue. If I hadn't been wearing that armor, things might have been a little messier than what happened back there.

Exactly, -

But what was the significance of that battle? Riku asked.

I wanted to show you that sometimes battles don't always turn out the way you expect them to. Despite your determination, you knew from the start that your chances of actually winning were slim. -

That's right, -

So let me ask you this, if you knew from the start that the chances of you surviving, let alone winning were non-existent, why is it that you continued to fight? -

Well, because it was the right thing to do. -

We couldn't just let Piccolo and the others fight the battle on their own. Sora said. That's why we stayed to help. Besides, we thought that if we put our mind to it, we might have a chance to actually win.

So would you say that it was a matter of pride as well as duty? Thundro pondered.

Yeah& -

That's very good. And in the end, you died with honor. -

So what's the story behind that fight? Riku asked.

The Z fighters did manage to fend off the Saiyans, but at a heavy price. Thundro pondered again. How many men were present when the battle began? The key bearers pondered, recalling the number of warriors who were on the field.

I'd say about six of those Z fighters were present. -

That meant that by the time Goku had returned to join the fray, two thirds of the men who engaged in that fight with Nappa and Vegeta would lose their lives. Riku and Sora couldn't believe what they heard. Out of the six that Z fighters that were there, only two would survive. Then, counting their own deaths, it was a total of six losses. At times, boys, battles cannot be won without a great deal of sacrifice.

I never would have thought of that. Sora said.

Well, that's enough for today. Thundro implied. He turned away from the key bearers once again.

There is supper waiting in your quarters, gentlemen. I placed them on your bedside tables. You will eat and retire for the night.

You mean it's over for today? -

Don't expect the same treatment tomorrow, Sora. Tomorrow is a new trial you have to face. -

Oh& -

Then we take our leave, Thundro. Riku replied.

Don't address me with such informality from now on, boys. The youths were curious. Since I have taken you under my tutelage, then I expect you to show a great deal of respect in return. From this point on til the day you depart, you will address me as Master Thundro. Thundro then glared at them. Do you understand?

Yes, Sora uttered.

Yes what?! -

Yes, Master Thundro& Sora felt a little uncomfortable addressing a Death Lord as Master, but then again, he really had no other choice.

Then be on your way. -

Thank you, Master Thundro. Riku and Sora made a respectful bowing gesture before retiring to their quarters. Thundro watched as they entered their room and closed the door. He then withdrew to his own room, a smile upon his face.

So far, so good, he muttered.

The key bearers turned in, closing the door behind them. They ate their set meals, which were still warm, then turned in to bed. Riku was the last to hit the sack. After a jostle with the provided tooth brush, swirling it about his pearly whites, and after a quick gargle, he sat himself upon his bed. Wearing only his jeans as night attire, he laid his head on his pillow. Sora was already half asleep. He turned and watched

with half open eyes as Riku tucked himself in.

Hey, Riku, Sora said, What do you think Thundro has in store for us tomorrow?

I don't know. Riku replied. We'll just have to wait and see.

What did you think of that pendulum room? -

Well, Riku thought about what he had experienced that day, I don't know about you, Sora, but I don't care if that was a simulation to strengthen our mental abilities. Those battles seemed so real, I thought they actually were happening.

Yeah, me too, I could feel the pain, the stress, the emotion. You never would have thought it was a simulation. Sora looked up to the ceiling. I wonder what the next challenge will be.

Probably as grueling as the last one, if not worse, Riku turned to his side, facing Sora. We'll never know until tomorrow.

Yeah, He pondered a final thought in his mind before giving his thoughts a rest.

So what do you think, Riku? -

About what? Riku wondered.

About this whole Master Thundro thing, do you think that's going a little too far with the authority on Thundro's part? -

I am a little uncomfortable addressing an Imperial as Master, but then again we don't have much of a choice. If we want to beat Saber, then we'll have to undergo whatever abuse Thundro throws at us for the time we spend here. He may be the only one to help us. Besides, he may be an Imperial, but he's not a sympathizer anymore. He turned away from that path long ago.

Yeah, I guess you got something there. Thundro isn't your average Imperial Lord anymore. Sora made a big yawn and put the blanket close to his chin. Well, good night, Riku.

Good night, Sora. -

They made themselves comfortable and were fast asleep. Of course, weary minds tend to slumber faster. However, it was later that night that Sora had that terrible dream.

Where am I? Sora thought. He looked about to find himself alone, engulfed in a thick cloud of fog. Hello, is anyone out there?! There was no response, only silence in the lingering of shadows and the thick mist.

Sora, Riku, a voice cried out, I can't find you, where are you! Sora immediately recognized the tone of the voice that called him.

Kairi, where are you? -

I can't find you?! -

Stay where you are, Kairi! I'll find you! -

But no sooner had Sora fumbled about, he heard Kairi scream. The shriek caused Sora's spine to stiffen. The cry was like that given when inflicted with a death blow. Sora feared the worst and rushed towards the area where he thought he heard Kairi. He was panicked stricken, fearing for her life.

Kairi, Kairi, he cried, Where are you?! Kairi, Kairi, please answer me! But not only silence surrounded him. Then another voice cried out.

Sora, it cried, Help me, they re killing me! It was the voice of Riku.

Riku, Sora could hear his friend in pain, perhaps near the brink of death. Riku, I m coming! Kairi, hold on! I ll find you too!

Sora, cried Kairi,

Sora, hollered Riku. But the mist was too thick.

Then came the sound of a distant battle and carnage, the sound of a thousand men having at each other. Death cries and war cries were heard. Sora ran towards the carnage. But it seemed that the closer he got to the fighting, the further it seemed to go away. Finally, the screaming and sounds of carnage ended and again all was peaceful.

Kairi, Riku, anybody, Sora cried, Please talk to me, where are you?!

But he suddenly stumbled. Sora looked to see what it was he had tripped over. The mist seemed to give way for a moment. And when it did, the young key bearer beheld a horrific sight. A dead faction soldier with eyes and mouth open wide, displaying the final death blows before the last breath was given. The slain soldier s pupils were a pure white, his lips were a death blue, and his limbs were mangled about in semi-rigor mortis, stiff and gnarled with hands clutched in a claw like form. He was dressed in a black frock with green trim, indicating that he was a trooper of the Aryan Faction. There was a deep wound in his chest, indicating that he d been struck in the heart. At his side was a fallen sword.

Sora then looked to his front. The ground seemed to disperse the mist as if a magic spell was cast to withdraw the fog. Thus, the clearing revealed a scene more terrifying than the solo body of the slain soldier. Before Sora, were the mangled bodies of thousands of soldiers, much like the scene he witnessed at Agrabah, China, Lyzand, and Long Valley. Fallen weapons ad tattered banners either lay aside the one who wielded them, or lodged in the ground and draped over the dead like unfurled death shrouds.

In the distance, a flaming inferno appeared, further dispersing the mist. It was a town, a settlement that set ablaze. The longer Sora looked at the inferno beyond the corpses, the more the structures of the town seemed familiar. Just then, it hit him, he knew what town burned. And when he did, his heart sank with fear and sadness.

My God, he uttered, That s my home. The town that burned before him was the little inhabitanace which he grew up in. He ran to it, fearing the worst. He reached the settlement, fire billowing up and roaring with great ferocity. Structures crumbled around him. Amidst the chaos, he heard what sounded like clashing steel intermingling with the blaze. Sora, drawn by the sound, searched for the clashing amidst the flames.

He eventually came to what once was a town square. And there clashing before him were two warriors. He looked at them and recognized one of them. One of them was none other than Riku.

Riku, he cried.

Sora, Riku shouted, stay back!

What's going on? Who is that guy?! -

It's&

But before proper explanation could be given, Riku was suddenly stabbed in the gut.

No, Sora's eyes grew wide with fear, watching the blow delivered. There was a death throw as Riku grasped at the sword thrust into him.

Sora, he gasped before going limp upon the blade. Sora only watched helplessly as his friend hung, impaled at the end of a sword. He looked at the individual who had dealt the blow. To his worse fears, he beheld the face of the murderer. He too was Riku. But unlike the Riku Sora knew, this Riku had the glowing eyes of a heartless. The Dark Riku withdrew his sword from his other's body and let the lifeless body fall to the ground. He then looked at Sora.

Now it's your turn. The Dark Riku replied.

You bastard, Sora growled, drawing out his keyblade, You killed Riku!

And unfortunately for you, you're next! The Heartless like Riku rushed at Sora, ready to deliver a significant blow.

Sora, Sora, Riku cried, Wake up, wake up, buddy! He held down Sora as the youth kicked about in his bed.

Riku, Sora shouted, still in his violent slumber, Riku,

Sora, wake up! Eventually, Sora did wake up drenched in a cold sweat. He looked up to see his silver haired comrade looking down at him. Within moments of laying eyes upon him, Sora began to cry. He arose from bed and threw his arms around Riku, embracing him tightly.

Hey, hey, Riku tried to push him away, but took no further action to repel the young man as he heard Sora's sobbing.

You're here, the youth sobbed, You're still here, Riku. This is not a dream.

It's alright, Sora. Riku patted his friend on the back and pulled him away. It was just a dream.

I thought, I thought that you were& -

I was what&? But Sora thought of the consequences that might arise if he told. Thus, he didn't take the liberty to explain his dream to Riku, fearing what he would think in the long run.

It was nothing. -

Are you sure? -

It was just a nightmare that's all. -

Well, go back to sleep, Sora. Riku advised. Everything's alright now.

Yeah, you're right. Thanks Riku. Sora lay his head back on his pillow. Riku smiled and returned to his own bed.

Little did both of them realize that the racket had aroused Thundro from his own slumber. And now the Imperial was standing just outside the door hearing everything that was going on. Without whispering a

word, he walked back to his chamber.

The next morning, the key bearers awoke again after a restless night, dressed themselves into their Imperial uniforms and assembled at the main hall where Thundro was again waiting for them.

I see you have decided to wake up on time today. Thundro said.

Yes, Master, Riku replied.

We didn't want to undergo what happened yesterday, Master Thundro, sir. Sora added.

Very good, Thundro said. You've learned from your mistakes then. Thundro pointed towards the north corridor. Well, shall we, gentlemen?

Yes, sir, both key bearers declared.

Follow me. They once again entered the northern corridor where the four chambers resided. They went straight ahead to the silver door. This is your next challenge, boys. Are you ready?

Yes, Master, Sora addressed.

Then let's proceed. -

The next challenge&The Gravity Chamber

10 - The Gravity Chamber

The Gravity Chamber

The three followed Thundro into the room. There was not much to the room except that it was a large gritted dome. At the center of the room, a large steel pillar stood stationary to its surroundings. At its base was a control panel.

Behold, boys, Thundro declared, This is the gravity chamber.

It doesn't look like much does it. Sora said.

Do not be fooled by its simplicity, Sora. This chamber can be a death trap for anyone who abuses its incredible power. -

So what exactly does this chamber do? Riku inquired.

The gravity chamber helps to increase your physical strength. Under extreme pressure, you will be able to overcome the limits that presently hold you back. -

How do you mean? Sora asked.

Let me ask you this, Thundro put his arms behind him, Have you ever once in your life experienced a change in gravity beyond what you're accustomed to.

Well, Riku pondered, recalling any event they encountered in the past, There was one time when we battled against the Midnight Faction forces in the Rurouni realm.

Oh yeah, Sora recalled, That chamber where we fought that guy, Vermoncht Delinor. That had a gravity difference.

And how did that make you feel? Thundro asked.

It was like I was being weighed down. -

And how did this Vermoncht Delinor maneuver himself. -

It was like he was accustomed to the gravity difference for a while. Riku implied. He moved about the increased pressure like a fish in water.

And that is exactly what I'm going to do to you. Thundro explained. I'm going to let you train in this chamber for an extensive amount of time and at a certain level of gravity. That way, you'll become more accustomed to fighting in such an environment if the time arises. At the same time, the intense pull will increase your stamina at normal gravity. Thus, you will break your limits, becoming faster, stronger, more agile, and whatnot than you were before. You might say that everything around you will seem to pace itself in slow down.

Wow, Sora gasped.

We'll start you at the basics, taking a little step at a time. -

Exactly how much can you increase the gravitational pull in here, Master Thundro? Riku asked.

You can increase the gravity from the minimum of two times greater, to the maximum of a thousand times natural gravity.

A thousand, Sora gasped.

That is why I said that this chamber is also a death trap. If you increase the gravity too high, you'll end up flatter than a pancake, literally. I've seen it happen. You will start small, from three to five times the natural level just to get your feet wet. Your bodies will become more sluggish and more stressed, but after a couple of days, you'll get used to the pressure. Thundro walked up to the control panel and inputted the necessary settings. Since this is your first time, we'll initiate a trial run and see how far you

go. He pressed a few buttons. We'll start at three times the natural gravity just to see how much you can tolerate it. He then paused for a moment and looked to the key bearers. Before we begin, however, I need your guarantee to confirm if I can activate the simulation. Are you ready or not?

We're ready, Master. -

No arguments here, Master Thundro. Riku added.

So be it. Thundro activated the gravity simulation. Within a few seconds, there was a sudden rumble from the system. Then, like a hand pressed upon their heads, the key bearers were knocked to their knees. They stressed and strained as the sudden change of gravity weighed them down like a ton of bricks.

My God, Riku staggered to his feet as best he could, This is tougher than it looks. I can barely walk. You should consider yourself lucky, Riku. Sora grumbled, I can barely move, let alone walk. He then happened to look at Thundro who was walking about as if there was no gravity at all. Hey, Master Thundro, how come you're not affected by the gravity?

It's because I've been exposed more to such training as this. I've been training in this kind of atmosphere since the day I was created. I've mastered the gravity level to its maximum.

You mean you trained in a thousand times the natural level? -

That and higher. The gravity room you're training in presently is insignificant to the ones built for His Excellency Master Cavendish. Those simulations can reach the maximum of one million times the natural gravity level.

Impossible, Riku uttered.

Not for Master Cavendish. -

No wonder he was so powerful. Sora thought to himself.

For your first set of training exercises, Thundro began, I want you to run ten laps around this room. Run? -

Yes run. -

But that's impossible, Master Thundro. -

You will run as I have instructed, Sora. Either that or you can take a good thrashing from me. Sora backed off. You know you wouldn't stand a chance against me though. Now will you run or suffer the consequences.

Yes, sir, Master Thundro, we'll run. Sora and Riku moved their feet, increasing their pace to a jog. Their legs felt as if great weights were holding their feet towards the ground, making it extremely laborious to move. But despite that, the key bearers continued their run side by side ten times around the dome.

Move it, move it, move it, Thundro shouted, like a military drill instructor, I've seen glaciers that move faster than you! Pick up the pace, you two!

Yes, sir, Riku shouted.

The first lap proved a difficult task. The second lap proved just as formidable. The third was unbearable, but the key bearers continued with their laps, despite the fact that already their legs were throbbing with a pulsating ache. The fourth and fifth were just as equally unbearable as the third. Only half way to go, but already the gravity was taking it toll on Riku and Sora.

I can't keep this up. Sora panted.

You gotta keep it up, Sora. Riku encouraged him. It's you and me all the way. You gotta keep going. I'll try. -

Move faster, Thundro shouted, Keep it up, only half way to go now! The sixth and seventh passed. By this time, the key bearers were already starting to feel the numbness in their legs overcome the pain. They felt no sensation as if their legs were made of jelly. The only thing they could feel was the hardness of the floor at the bottoms of their feet as they continued their lapping.

This is so hard, Sora gasped, sweat dripping down his face.

I know, Sora, I know. Riku replied. But we gotta keep going.

But I can't feel my legs. -

Neither can I. Think about something that'll keep your mind occupied as you run. -

Like what? -

Think about home, our friends, our mission, or something else to keep your mind from thinking about the number of laps we have to run. -

Right, Sora concentrated, thinking about the things that he left behind on Destiny Island, his friends at Traverse Town and in other worlds awaiting their return. He then thought of King Mickey and Queen Minnie who have been confined for over a month now. Those thoughts helped to motivate Sora and keep him going forward.

Thundro looked on as Sora and Riku finished their eighth lap and were in the middle of their ninth. He watched them closely, gazing at their breathing, their chests going in and out as a new breath of air was taken in. The sweat dripped from their foreheads and their legs seemed to decrease in stride. But still they pressed on.

That fire in their eyes. Thundro thought to himself. It's just like all my other students and pupils. They have that raging determination to continue. The key bearers, Riku and Sora, they have that same attitude. They're going all out no matter what. They want to succeed. Though their bodies feel pain and their minds are weary, telling them that it's enough, their hearts urge them to continue. They know that surmounting the pain is the only way to overcome the hardship of this chamber. He smirked. These boys, they are out to do great things, perhaps greater than those who came before them.

Riku and Sora now finished the ninth lap and were now running the tenth and final lap.

Just a little further, Sora thought to himself, Just a little further.

That's it, Sora. Riku remarked. You're doing it. We're doing it.

But by the time they entered the second half of the final lap, despite Sora urging himself to continue, his legs could not bear the stress and tear. Thus, as if running into an invisible barrier, the young key bearer collapsed to the floor. Riku saw as his comrade fell.

Sora, he cried. He stopped and turned around. He knelt by Sora's side.

I can't, Riku, Sora uttered. I've reached my limit. I can't feel my legs anymore. I'm so tired.

It's not over yet, Sora. Riku said. Come on, you can make it.

Sora looked up at Riku. Noctin Tilandir extended his hand, wishing to assist him. In his eyes, Sora saw in Riku a vision of himself. He had done the same for Riku, giving him hope. Now it was Riku who gave the hope to him. Sora smiled and took hold of his friend's outstretched hand. He heaved up and staggered to his feet. The two young men supported each other. Riku put Sora's arm around his neck. The youth gazed at Noctin Tilandir, a faint sadness in his eyes.

Thanks, Riku, Sora whispered. Thanks for keeping faith in me.

We're gonna beat this thing together. You and I are a team. -

Yeah, -

It's only the two of us. -

Yeah, -

We have to look out for each other, bro. I'll never let you go, just as you have done for me. -

Yeah, Sora looked ahead, then back at Riku, Just a little further.

Let's go. -

The key bearers reached the ending mark together, though their pace had been reduced to a snail's speed. Slumped in each other's arms, they reached the finale of their task. Thundro watched in awe as he beheld the determination of the key bearers unfold before him.

Such dedication towards friends. He thought to himself, Riku and Sora, they only live for each other. They never leave each other behind. Their bond, their friendship, it's greatly intertwined like knotted

chains, firmly established like the very foundations of Oceanaria itself. Nothing could ever break them apart.

The key bearers reached the end, falling to their knees and gasping for breath. The weight of the gravity made their bones feel brittle and their muscles like thin tissue paper. Sweat fell from their faces like rain.

Man, Riku said, That was a workout and only ten laps too.

It makes me feel like I m completely out of shape. Sora added.

This feeling of fatigue will soon pass, boys. Thundro explained. Soon it will be no more than a distant memory. Now, get up and let us continue.

Awe come on, Master Thundro. Can t we have a break? -

There will be no break for you if you keep whining, now on your feet, you two! -

Can t we at least take these uniforms off? They re really stifling me right now. -

I d have to agree with Sora, Master. Riku agreed.

I suppose your right. Thundro thought about it. You re not adapted to the change. So I ll allow you to strip down.

Thanks, Riku and Sora took off the heavy shell jacket, then the vest and gloves, then the long sleeve shirt. Both decided to train shirtless. I feel much better.

This is just this once, boys. The next time, I expect you to keep your uniforms on, agreed? -

Agreed, -

Then for your next exercise, you will both do a hundred crunches. -

A hundred, Sora gasped.

Is that too much for you? -

Well, Sora sneered, of course not. I can take a hundred crunches no problem.

We ll just see about that then. -

The key bearers lay themselves on their backs and started doing crunches, hardening their abdomens. Thundro folded his arms in front of him and began the count. However, performing a hundred crunches were completely different in heavier gravity than it was in normal gravity. To the key bearers, it was like someone was forcefully holding them down. Again, after only a set of twenty, the key bearers could feel the pressure. But still they continued, despite their weariness. Through their minds, they concentrated on the battle ahead, thinking of that significant fight that would erupt in the future, the fight against General Saber.

That s it, boys. Thundro said. Take it at a nice, steady pace. Up, down, up, down.

Remember, Sora thought to himself, straining to keep his mind off of the battle to come, Your friends need you, Sora. King Mickey, Queen Minnie, and Daisy, they all need you. I have to do this to avenge my friends and allies, Cuchulain, Edward and Alphonse, Athrun&

That s it, Sora. Riku said. Let your mind wander. Crunch sets fifty through sixty passed and the key bearers were only slightly aware.

It looks like they re getting the hang of this new gravity. Thundro inwardly spoke. They re faster than most, impressive.

Seventy through eighty passed by and still the key bearers did not relent in their crunches. It was around number ninety that the key bearers started to lose focus. They were at the end and wanted to much to get to the end. But it seemed as if the gravity had gotten a lot heavier, ninety-five, ninety-six, almost there.

Just a little more, Sora cried. Then with one last thrust upward, the final crunch was reached. The key bearers then lay exhausted on the ground. We did it.

Yeah, Riku panted.

Not bad, Thundro looked at his watch. You managed to accomplish those a hundred crunches in only ten minutes. Quite a foot indeed, considering that the gravity pressure is three times greater.

You can do anything if you put your mind to it. -

I'll give you two a five minute rest before starting the final warm up exercise. -

What, Sora was stunned, You mean what we've been doing were merely warm-ups?

That's correct. Your real training will be to battle against me. -

Oh man, -

Now, you have five minutes. Rest a while before we commence again. -

Right, -

Five minutes was not an extended period though. The key bearers barely had enough time to regain their strength before Thundro called them to their feet again.

Alright, boys, he declared, Your five minutes are up.

Already, Sora said.

Yes, Riku and Sora staggered to their feet, their youthful bodies still drenched in heavy perspiration.

Your final task is to perform a hundred push-ups.

A hundred push-ups&? -

Yes, I'll count off. -

Alright, Riku implied, Let's do this, Sora. Sora could only nod, though he detested the thought of a hundred push-ups in such heavy gravity. They got on their hands and extended their arms straight under them.

Let's begin. The key bearers bent their elbows and the count down began. One&two&three&four& As before, the key bearers did all in their power to focus on something else other than the task at hand. Up, down, the process was repeated. Half an hour would pass before they would reach the end of the third task. And in that time, when the numbers began to wane, the minds of the youths began to waver, back and forth. Though their minds encouraged them to continue, their bodies could not keep up. By the time the Thundro cried out one hundred, the key bearers simply flopped themselves onto the ground, soaked in a puddle of their own sweat.

I can't do anymore. Sora uttered, I'm too tired. This gravity is taking its toll on me.

I have to agree, Master Thundro. Riku complied. My legs, arms and abs feel like they're made of jelly.

I'll give you boys a ten minute break to regain your strength. Thundro said. Then you better be ready to battle.

At this rate, I don't think we'll have enough energy to stand. -

Well, you better get used to it, because you'll be feeling this kind of pressure from now on. I've been too soft on you already, allowing you to strip down, giving you five and ten minute reprieves. From this point on, you better be ready to die if necessary. We have already spent a full two days of our three week regimen and yet we have accomplished very little. I expect you to toughen up and take whatever I throw at you from this point on, got it?! -

The key bearers could only give a nod. Ten minutes of rest and the rest of their stay would be nothing, but hell.

The reprieve was brief and Thundro once again took his role as the taskmaster.

Alright, boys, he declared, Back on your feet. We still have the rest of the day ahead of us.

Yes, Master, Sora replied. The key bearers bore the strain and staggered to stand. They wavered for a minute or two, but regained their composure.

Now, Upon his side, Thundro wore a gold hilted saber in a white scabbard with gold trim. He drew out the sword, revealing its flawless, glimmering, and razor sharp blade. Let us see how you favor against me.

The youths drew out their keyblades and took a defensive stance. Thundro posed himself, making that intimidating stance as well. There was a lull between both sides as they analyzed any possible attacks

that the other might engage in.

Thundro was the first to attack. He moved fast enough so that the key bearers would have a difficult time to battle him. But not so much that it would be impossible for Riku or Sora to even have a chance. There was the first clashing and clanging of steel as Thundro appeared between the two and knocked the key bearers away from each other. The youths staggered, but regained stamina.

He s fast, Sora thought to himself. Thundro s moves are like lightning, even in this kind of gravity.

You think this is swift? Thundro chuckled, I m barely even trying, if not trying at all. Thundro attacked again. The key bearers did their best to regain their stamina, but the gravity pressure made them feel sluggish. Thus, their reaction time was a lot slower. Back and forth the battle went, the key bearers waning in their defense as the Death Lord struck at them from all sides. Attack blindly if you must. Attack me as if I am your enemy and I am sworn to kill you and everyone you know.

But what if we hurt you? -

That is the purpose of sparring! You have to fight as if you are fighting the foe themselves, whether they be a teacher, a parent, a sibling, or even a close peer or best friend. The only thing you have to be concerned with in the heat of battle is defeating your enemy. And at times kill them. -

But we don t want to kill you! Riku said. This is just a practice run!

That s not open for discussion! Thundro lunged at Riku and easily pummeled him to the ground. Riku groaned as he tried to stand. Thundro only stood over him, one arm at his hip, the other wielding his sword. This is pathetic. Is this all that the infamous Noctin Tilandir can do?

Leave him alone, Thundro! Sora roared. He lunged at Thundro. But the gravity still weighed him down, making his approach sloppy. Thundro saw the attack coming well in advance and evaded with barely any trouble.

Another pathetic loser, and so disrespectful as well Thundro somersaulted over the youth s head and bashed him at the back of the head with his sword hilt. Sora tumbled to the ground, skidding next to Riku. Thundro eased himself upon his toes as if he were lighter than air. I told you to address me as Master, didn t I. Your insubordination will eventually lead you to a swift downfall.

Sora, Riku approached his friend s side, Sora, are you alright?

He s making us look like a couple of chumps. Sora growled.

I know, I know, but there is a way to beat him. -

How&? -

Our team effort is our strength. If we fight together and as one, as we always have before, I believe we might be able to beat him. -

Yeah, you re right, Riku. Sora staggered to his feet. We can take this guy down. They raised their keyblades again, daring Thundro to attack them.

I see that you re back on your feet. Thundro said.

Yeah, -

This time around, you re going down! Riku shouted.

Is that so? Thundro only snickered. Well, I highly doubt that even with a tight effort of teamwork, you would not be able to hinder me.

You keep talking, -

I think I will. Thundro suddenly pulled out from his pocket two spheres, one of glass and the other of gold. Both had little bells inside that jingled and jangled. Tossing both spheres into the air, the Imperial closed his eyes and concentrated in heavy meditation. Lifting up his sword, he held it at a slight angle, with the blade s sharpened tip pointing upward. The two balls descended and delicately landed onto the fine tip of the sword, not giving off a single ring from the bells within. They rolled down the blade, tapping each other as they hit the hilt and still no sound from the bells. I m so confident in your inability to fight; I ll bet that you couldn t even distract my concentration on balancing these orbs on my saber s blade. Of

course these comments angered the key bearers.

Watch what you say, Thundro, Sora said in an aggressive manner. You're talking to the guys who defeated the Cavendish Shinobis and went head to head with the top lords of the former Empire, so don't you dare mock us!

I'm free to do whatever I have the urge to carry out. I already know that you're not a threat to me. -
You've gone too far with your taunting! -

The key bearers attacked, preparing to initiate the technique that they relied on from the start, the evasion technique. But Thundro did not waver. He suddenly tossed both spheres into the air, just as the key bearers unleashed their attack. Light and shadow filled the room. Within seconds it was over. The spheres fell towards the ground, but landed gently upon the blade of Lord Thundro. The key bearers on the other hand had fallen to the ground, struck by Thundro.

Well, the Imperial implied, I see that you're not as cracked up as you had thought yourself to be.

But how, Sora uttered, How could our evasion technique have failed?

It's impossible, Riku added.

It was the most obvious attack you would use. Thundro explained. You give off a certain signature level for that attack, which is the reason I was able to evade you. Thundro rolled the glass and gold spheres on his saber's edge with such ease and grace, at the same time giving a flaunting gesture, telling his two apprentices that they stood no chance against him. Well, well, well, will you look at that? It seems I was able to keep the two orbs balanced on my blade's sharpened edge without any trouble.

Stop making fun of us! Riku shouted. The two key bearers suddenly leaped up and lunged at him again. Let's see how you favor when both of us are attacking you at the same time!

They sliced and jabbed at Thundro with random attempts, all in completely different intervals. Up, down, side to side, in and out, backwards and forwards, Riku and Sora did all they could to hinder the Death Lord, or at least make him regret his own confidence and arrogance. But alas, their efforts against proved futile. To their utter shock and amazement, Thundro was able to battle them both at the same time, evade, dodge, and counter, at the same time not allowing either ball to strike the ground. They flew into the air, or swerved upon the Imperial's blade, or bounced off the hilt and back onto the tip without making a single clang or grunt all the while not making a stirring jingle from the bells. In fact, the entire spar only sounded the grunts and cries of the key bearers as they attempted to cut the Imperial.

For twenty whole minutes, the two youths attacked and struck with all they had, but still not a scratch was made on Thundro. Even the belled spheres didn't speak. So flawless and graceful was Thundro's swordsman skills, he easily fended off the key bearers without ringing a single tone from the bells within the spheres, let alone dropping them to the floor. In the end, he was able to give a good kick to the key bearers, knocking them to the ground once again. At the same time, the belled spheres landed upon this sword's razor edge and still not a ring sounded. He then threw them up into the air and caught them in his hand. Only then did the bells jingle, very boastfully at that.

He looked at the key bearers who were dead tired and unable to rise from their fatigue.

Well, I have proven myself correct, boys. Thundro sighed. I told you that you were incapable of battling with me.

But how, Sora asked as he panted, his hard, youthful body drenched in sweat, How is it that you can move like that and not let one of those balls fall to the ground?

Forget that, Riku said, How is it that you're able to move like that and not let the bells in side ring even once?

I've had a great deal of practice. Thundro answered. My mind was clear of any thought. The only thing on my mind was those two orbs and how I would be able to catch them without letting either ring.

But we were attacking you from all sides and at either the same or at different times. -

It just goes to show how undisciplined you are. -

Undisciplined, Sora asked, How could you say that? Riku and I are a tight team! We've never lost many of the battles that we fought when we fight together.

And what about your past scuffles with General Saber? -

Well, that was different. -

How so? -

Well, uh& -

I can tell you why you lost. It was a combination of many factors. -

What kind of factors? Riku asked.

For starters, Thundro explained, The gravity you were fighting in was three times greater than what you're usually used to. As a result, because of the added weight affecting your bodies, your reaction time, agility, and speed were reduced tremendously. Thus, I was able to predict every movement you made. Not to mention the fact that you wasted a great deal of your energy with those exercises I made you do previous to this fight. The key bearers slumped with awkward stares on their faces. At the same time, you were attacking with a mix of outer emotion and interior thoughts. When meaning exterior emotions, you were inwardly enraged when I mocked you, thus you were only concentrating on how to get back and me and redeem yourselves of your supposed incompetence. This flaw in mentality clouded your sense of judgment. Coinciding with this, you might have been thinking about other things outside the battlefield. You friends, your family, if you'll win, if you are truly incompetent, questioning your ability, even thinking of your own demise and faults. These factors further cloud the mind and affect your efficiency in battle.

Well, of course we would be concerned with our friends. And of course we'd be a little ticked off after you taunted us. Anyone would have reacted the same way. -

No argument there, Riku. I would react the same way as well and I still have a tendency to do so. But if you were to let those things go for the duration of the battle, then you will have a better time of combating a stronger opponent. That's what an enemy like Saber will do. He will seek out your weaknesses in both mental and physical strength. You can counter this by only accepting the taunting and throwing it aside. You must not think of anything outside the battlefield except the task that you were sent there for in the first place. It may be cruel, and it may be a way of decreasing your motivation. But you concentrate too much on the people on the outside, who need you then you limit your own abilities.

But we usually find that to be a source of strength for us. Sora told him.

That may be true, but you let it override your concentration and that sentimental value will be your downfall. Thundro swerved the orbs around his palm, the bells not jingling. Let your mind focus on the battle itself. Feel for your foe's movement. You concentrate on that and you'll know where they will strike next. It'll take discipline to achieve this state of mind. Thundro then tossed the orbs at the key bearers, each catching one. Sora caught the glass orb while Riku got his hands around the gold orb. The bells inside jangled loudly. Before the three weeks are up, I expect you two to master the use of these orbs.

Use of these orbs? Sora gazed at the glass ball, seeing his rounded reflection on its surface.

In other words, you will be able to perform the same as I did in our spar, balancing the sphere upon your weapon without having it jangle or fall.

What, The key bearers were shocked. But that will take months or even years to master!

Then I suggest you start working on it and fast. -

And how do you expect us to do that? Riku asked. Even after three weeks of rigorous, twenty-four hour training, we'd never be able to move that gracefully and accurately by even a fraction.

You never know what you can do until you try. -

But we also have those other things to do, conditioning our mentality and physical strength. Sora said. So how do you expect us to master that kind of discipline and accuracy in only three weeks with all this stuff piled on our shoulders? -

I have my ways. You just leave that to me. Thundro turned and walked to the control panel and upped the gravity pressure to level five. This sudden change in weight pressed down on the key bearers, making it harder for them to move, let alone walk.

What are you doing, Master Thundro? -

I m increasing the level of gravity from three to five times the natural level. -

You re going to kill us. Riku strained to stand.

God willing, -

C mon, it s impossible for us to move in this. -

Then I suggest that you get used to it and fast. Even if you have to bust an artery and start bleeding out your ears, you will grasp and adapt to this pressure before the day is ended. -

So much for the royal treatment, Sora thought to himself.

I told you, if you re going to train under me then you better be prepared to die. Thundro walked before the straining key bearers with no strain himself. To him, the gravity wasn t even worth noticing. He then drew his saber forward. Now, prepare to battle again. Attack me!

You re kidding! -

This is no humor or falsehood, young Sora. You will do as I say or I will have no problem to thrash you about like a rag doll. The more you cry for mercy, the more you plead for me to go easy on you, I m only going to make myself more cold-hearted and act more ruthlessly. And the thrashing you receive will be ten times more than what you ve experienced presently. Now are you ready. -

We don t have much of a choice. Riku complied.

The key bearers drew up their weapons and again they attacked. Thundro had proved good to his word. The training was anything, but a joy ride. From sun up to sun down, he pushed the key bearers to the brink of death. Their bodies were torn and muscles were stretched beyond their limit. The five times gravity broke their bodies a hundred times over, but the key bearers did not relent. Though they hated it, though they despised Thundro s mocking and taunting, they took every blow without complain. By the end of the day, the key bearers realized that nothing would persuade the Death Lord otherwise. This was Thundro s realm. Ergo, they had to abide by his rules, regulations, and way of training. Sweat fell like rain, blood flowed in streams, and their bodies became infested with indescribable levels of pain.

Nighttime fell and the key bearers were now prostrate on the ground side by side, gasping and nearly suffocating as the pressure pushed down on their chests. Thundro on the other hand hadn t even broken a sweat. He simply yawned with boredom.

I can t do this anymore. Sora said. I m so tired, sweaty, and I m bleeding and aching all over.

You and me both, Riku added. I m aching in places I didn t even know existed.

Well, well, well, Thundro chuckled, It looks like you two managed to stay alive. Bravo.

It s over for us. We can t do this anymore. We did more rigorous training in this one day than we ve done for the past ten years. -

Then hopefully, you ve gotten stronger. -

I certainly don t feel stronger. Sora complained. But I ll definitely feel the pain of this training later.

I think not. Thundro bent over the key bearers, placed his palms upon their chests, and accumulated his energy over them. The key bearers were filled with a great surge and within seconds, their energy had been fully restored and their bodies were healed of their ailments. The key bearers sat up. Now, perhaps you won t be as whiney. Thundro pulled out his watch and checked the time. Well, boys, let s do this.

Alright, Riku said. He and Sora stood up again, but now the gravity pressure didn t seem to bother them as bad. They drew their keyblades up again. But to their surprise, Thundro only sheathed his sword.

And what are you two think you re doing? Thundro asked.

Well, I thought we were gonna fight some more. Sora said.

That s enough for today. I ve tortured you enough. My watch gives the time about 8:30 p.m. which means we ve been in here for just a little over fourteen hours. Thundro turned to the control panel and deactivated the gravity simulation. Immediately, things seemed lighter to the key bearers. Get dressed and go back to your quarters. I ll have dinner brought up.

I never would have thought I would be so happy to hear the word dinner. The key bearers picked up their gear. But for some reason, their bodies felt different, as if they were lighter. Hey, Riku, do you feel different?

I do, Riku replied. I feel a little&lighter.

Those are the effects of the gravity. Thundro explained. You ll get used to it. Your bodies are becoming accustomed to the heavy weight. Sora, give a swing with your keyblade. Sora did as he was instructed and pulled out his keyblade. He then swung his keyblade. But for some reason, the keyblade seemed light, almost weightless in his hand. It no longer seemed to strain his arm as much. To add, the swing was so swift, even Sora didn t see it.

Did you see that, Riku? he asked.

I did. Riku drew out his keyblade and did the same. The result was just as surprising. You re right, I feel faster and the keyblade doesn t seem as heavy.

It just goes to show that your bodies have already adapted to the weight. Thundro said. The longer you work in such heavy gravity, the faster you will become.

Wow, -

No more dawdling now, boys. Back to your quarters the both of you. -

Right, -

Sora, -

Yes&? Sora replied.

I want you to stay behind. I need to talk to you. Sora was a little apprehensive at first, but agreed to remain. Riku, go ahead and clean up. You have done a good days work.

Thank you, Master Thundro. Riku replied and scurried off back to the room. I ll make sure to leave you some hot water, Sora! When Riku had left, Thundro spoke his peace.

So what is it that haunted your dreams last night, Sora? Sora looked at him, surprised and rather apprehensive.

You heard? Sora asked.

How could I not? You were wailing in your sleep crying out Riku s name. -

Did you hear us talking? -

Yes, I did. You seemed rather despondent though when he asked you what it was about. Perhaps you can tell me about it. Sora didn t want to unveil anything that he might regret in the future, but he saw that stern glare in Thundro s eyes. As an added pressure, the thought of the dream weighed heavily on his mind, troubling him. He knew the only way to release this pressure was to confess it to someone.

Well, Sora hesitated for a second or two before speaking again, The thing is that I ve been having this dream repeatedly.

Oh&? -

I started having this dream about six years ago, when we were battling against the former Dark Empire. The first half always changes, but the battle that involves Riku is always the same, perhaps with a slight few changes in the way he looks. -

And what is this part of your dream? -

Well, Sora took to memory each account he saw within his mind, I always see Riku battling against himself. It s a tough fight and he never seems to beat his enemy. The thing is, the battle never had a

conclusion until tonight.

And how did it end? Thundro asked.

I saw Riku killed. -

Is that so? -

I fear that this dream is leading up to some inevitable event and there s nothing I can do to stop it. But how is it possible for Riku to fight himself? I don t know if it s literally fighting against himself, or a metaphor. Riku does have that tendency to reject the darkness after our return from that realm eight or nine years before. -

I believe that there may be a darkness lingering in Riku s heart that is slowly edging out. Because he is holding back, he may without a doubt unleash a terrible flood and that flood of emotion or hidden strength may overwhelm him and change his being entirely. -

But what is all this supposed to mean? Sora asked.

No can really determine that right now. It s only a matter of what actions will be taken to prevent or enhance its occurrence. The thing is that you know its coming. The conclusion is inevitable. -

But how do I prevent it? -

Perhaps if you told Riku& -

No&I can t& -

And why not? Thundro asked.

If I do, I fear I ll only burden Riku with an unnecessary emotion. And that in itself might interfere with out own objectives. -

That s the reason you didn t tell him? -

Yes& -

Well, Thundro folded his arms in front of him, I can guarantee this much, Sora. Whether you tell him or not, the event will occur. If you ve had this dream repeatedly and virtually unaltered every time, then there is no doubt that this battle between the Riku you love and the Riku you loathe will happen. And now that you have witnessed a conclusion to that fight, that only indicates that the end is near and you can do nothing to prevent it from this point on. -

But what am I supposed to do? -

The thing you have to truly ask yourself is if Riku s dark side reemerges, will you be willing to kill him if he turns against you? -

I don t know& -

Will you? Sora could only look away, his eyes saddened with the thought.

Riku s my best friend. I ve already seen him suffer and I ve already seen him die once in real life already. The loss was too much for me to bear. I don t want to lose him again. Not again& -

You do what you must do, Sora. Thundro put his arms behind him. Now, enough said Return to your quarters and get a good night s sleep. And do not let this supposed prophecy cloud your judgment.

I ll try. -

Sora saluted and withdrew.

He took his time returning to the room. The thought to the dream weighed heavier than ever. He shook his head, trying to loosen the thought.

Why is it that this dream is making me feel less easy than ever before? Sora thought to himself. It s never bothered me this bad. Is it because I told Thundro and not Riku? When he came into the room, Riku had just finished showering. He sat in bet, his long silver hair a little damp. He placed his towel around his neck.

Hey, Sora, Riku smiled, Why the long face?

I&I& Sora wanted to tell him, he wanted to tell Riku so badly, but he could not summon the courage to,

fearing if he did, Riku's attitude might change. So Sora lied, even though that by doing such a thing, he might have put his friendship with Riku in jeopardy.

I was lectured by Thundro. He said to stop complaining, it wastes time. -

Well, that sounds like Thundro. Anyway, the shower's free. -

Thanks Riku. Sora undressed and walked to the shower. But at times, he would take small glances at Riku, wondering if lying to him was for better or for worse.

After dinner, they tucked themselves in and began another night of slumber. But such a peaceful night was not to be for Sora. His mind was still haunted by the dream, the revealing to Thundro, and the lie he told to Riku.

I should have told him. Sora uttered. He looked at Riku who was sound asleep. I should have told you the truth, Riku. He said it loud enough, hoping that Riku would hear and wake up, asking what the truth was. Then, Sora would be able to tell him and get everything off his shoulders. But Riku didn't stir. Sora only sighed, curled up in his bed and entered a restless sleep.

11 - Unexpected Chaos

Unexpected Chaos

The night swiftly gave way to morning and again the key bearers were awoken from their slumbers by the sound of the beeping clock. Riku was the first to rise out of bed. He rubbed his eyes groggily as he looked at the clock.

Another day, he grumbled, giving a couple of yawns before shuffling his legs to the side of the bed. His feet touched the cold floor and he slightly shivered, wrapping his arms before him. He looked at Sora who was still in a deep slumber. Get up, Sora. It's time to wake up. Sora only moaned, detesting the thought of leaving his warm bed.

No, no, he grumbled, Five more minutes.

C'mon, sleep head. Riku shuffled his feet over to Sora's bed and sat down next to his sleeping comrade. He shook Sora a bit. You gotta wake up, not unless you want Thundro to burst in here and put another pillow on your face.

No, Sora lifted himself up and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. We wouldn't want that now would we?

Then let's get up. Riku tossed back the sheets and pulled his friend out of bed. We have about an hour before we to assemble at the main hall again.

Alright, alright, -

The two young men cleaned up and dressed themselves in their Imperial training uniforms and marched out to the main hall. As was routine, Thundro was already out there and waiting. The key bearers approached him, trying to snap out of their lingering morning fatigue a little.

Another day of training, boys, Thundro implied, Are you ready for the third chamber?

Let's get going and get this over with. Riku said.

I wouldn't be in so much of a hurry, young Riku. This next training day will prove to be one of the most strenuous and the longest. -

Aw man, Sora grumbled.

First thing's first though, do you still have the glass and gold orbs I gave you? -

Yes we do. Riku pulled out the gold orb and it jangled about in his hand. Sora pulled out the glass orb from his pocket.

You'll need those for the next exercise. He turned about towards the door leading to the Northern corridor. Follow me to the northern hall then.

The key bearers followed Thundro back into the North Wing and approached the third door on the first level, the golden door.

This is it, boys. Thundro explained, The Hyperbolic Time Chamber.

Alright, Sora said, Let's go in.

Sorry boys. Thundro put his arms behind him, But you two will have to go in alone.

But why&? -

The reason is because this chamber will only allow two people at a time to enter. No more than that, which is the reason why I will explain to you your tasks from outside the chamber. You will spend your time to train and spar for the duration of the period that you are in there. When you come out, I would have expected you to gain at least a quarter, at the most a half, of the skill in balancing those orbs on

your keyblades. I don't care if they jangle, so long as they don't touch the ground.

Are you kidding? -

I may not be one who gives up so easily, Riku said, But I have to admit that achieving such skill would be impossible to accomplish in one day.

But you will be able to accomplish it within a single day. Thundro assured them.

But how&? Sora asked.

The Hyperbolic Time Chamber will help you with that. You see, when entering the chamber, you will enter a prolonged time expansion three-hundred and sixty five times greater than the time expansion here. In other words training in that chamber will be equivalent to training for a full year. The key bearers were surprised.

A full year&? Sora scratched his head. He was clueless, not grasping what Thundro explained.

I don't get it. Riku said, just as confused. Are you saying that we have a year to train? I thought we were only training for a day.

Once again, you and Sora are missing the point, Riku. Thundro continued. I'll put it in small words. The minute you enter that room, the course of a full year will commence. It would have seemed that you spent a full twelve months training, but once you are finished with that full year and exit the chamber, only a day would have passed in this world.

I still don't get it. Sora implied.

I get it now. Riku figured out Thundro's explanation. What is a year in there is only a day passing here.

That's correct. Thundro complied.

But if we stay in there for a year, will we age a full year too? -

Your age will remain the same, though your bodily functions will continue. For example, your hair will continue to grow and perhaps you'll grow a little taller. But your age rate will remain stationary until you return to the outside world. -

So we won't have to worry about aging then? Sora asked.

Not at all, Thundro put his hands behind him. I can guarantee you that you will get stronger, provided that you use your time diligently. However, I must caution you on a few details. The effects that you will feel in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber will seem both natural and unnatural, from scorching hot one moment to freezing cold the next. Your emotions and feelings will also affect your surroundings. You will encounter illusions and mirages that can and will hinder you. Logistics will change, being turned upside down.

Oh man, -

At the same time, you will endure areas of heavy gravity. The gravity can reach from three to ten times the natural level. The further out you go, the heavier the gravity will become and the denser the atmosphere will get. You will at times feel yourself suffocate because of the condensed air. So the chamber will challenge you both mentally and physically. You might say that the Hyperbolic Time Chamber is a combination between the Gravity Chamber and the Pendulum Room combined into one element and concentrated a hundred fold. Mostly, it tests your endurance and your will power. -

Well, if that's the case, why don't we just spend the entire three weeks in that chamber? -

What are you talking about, Sora? Riku asked.

Think about it, Riku. If we can't age and we train in that room for the entire three weeks that we're here, we'll become stronger than ever. -

That is out of the question. Thundro said.

But why&? -

For one thing the Hyperbolic Time Chamber will only allow the same person to stay for the extent of a full year, then that person has to withdraw from the room for at least a day or so before reentering. As

well, that same person can only train for a maximum of two days altogether. After that, they cannot enter, or the chamber will reject them. -

So in other words, Riku said, two days in the maximum limit that anyone can enter in a lifetime. Is that what you're saying more or less? -

That's right. Believe me, if we had an unlimited time expansion, then I would let you train in there all the time. But unfortunately, that doesn't work with the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. -

Man& Sora grumbled.

Also because of the vastness of the space, I warn you to remain close to the outpost. This is not a room you are entering, but rather another dimension that spreads on for eternity in each direction. If you stray too far, you will lose yourself in that vast world and be trapped in that white dimension for all eternity. So remain within eye shot of the outpost. That is your only link between eternal nothingness and the outside world. There will be a beacon of light, stretching at least three miles up. But still, that's not tall enough to attract you from deepest regions of nothingness. Thundro placed his hand on the door's latch. So are you two ready, or do you have any questions you would like to ask before entering?

Just one question, Riku said. Besides learning to gracefully and effectively move with these orbs, what else do you want us to do?

Just these, use your time diligently, get stronger and above all, stay alive. Thundro twisted the handle. The door's lock made a loud clink and the gold entry opened up. The key bearers beheld a bright light that emerged from the room. They squinted as they entered. Once crossing over, Thundro closed the door behind him. It's just the two of you now. With that, he turned away to do his other duties.

Sora was awe struck as he beheld the features of the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. The outpost was simple, consisting of two large beds, a bathroom with all necessities, and a storage facility with enough food to last for a full year. Above, on the ceiling, a large clock ticked away, silently and slowly. There was also two large hour glass, giving the precise time of the year. Only a small mound had formed, indicating that the new occupants had only been present in the dimensional outpost for only a few minutes.

It doesn't look like much does it, Riku. Sora said.

I don't know. Riku replied. We still haven't seen the outside yet.

The air does feel a little denser and I do feel a little heavier. -

I know, that must be the effect that Thundro was talking about. He did say that the air would be really dense and the gravity would be heavier. Sora then ran to the steps leading to the outside of the chamber. His eyes suddenly grew large with mixed interest and fear.

Before him was a vast nothing. There was only a white world that stretched far into the distance. There was no feature, no object out in the dimensional plain. There was also an unbroken silence that lingered indicating that no living thing existed in that world.

Look at this place, Riku. Sora uttered. Riku was just a stunned as he laid eyes upon the expansion of pure white.

This is nothing like the realm of light. Riku replied. There's nothing. No darkness, no shadow, no nothing. It's just a vast empty space.

Now that I look at it, this place kind of scares me. There's nothing out there. -

Well, we better get used to it. Riku stretched out his arm. This is gonna be home for us for the next year.

I don't think I can do this. I don't think I can stay here for a full year. I'll go crazy. It's just vast nothingness out there. -

I'm scared of it too. But we mustn't be afraid, Sora. If you cave in, I don't know how I'll favor in this place. Sora took a deep breath and trying to overcome the apprehensiveness.

You're right, Riku. We have to overcome this world and its elements. Our friends are depending on us

to return stronger than ever. -

We have to train hard, Sora. This isn't a holiday for us. We have to improve enough if we want to defeat Saber. -

Yeah, -

Then let's do this. -

The key bearers stood side by side and stepped off the haven steps of the lone outpost. Thus, entering into a vast world where time and space did not exist.

A castle long ago, a little red-haired girl runs about in the corridors free and without a care. She is curious to know of her surroundings. There is a smell of pastries and the warmth of the morning sun. Just then, she opens the door to find a little boy standing no more than a few feet away from her. He is the same as she is with that deep toned red hair. The little boy turns and smiled.

Good morning, little sister. He replied.

Just then, that little girl wakes up. It was all a dream and she is left in wonder of who that face was that she saw.

Destiny Island once again met with another peaceful morning. The sound of tranquility, the birds chirping, bees buzzing, and all nature went unmolested. It was on this morning that Kairi again arose from her bed. Dressed in a silk top and shorts, she ruffled her hair and gave a big yawn. She shuffled her feet to the sides of her bed and stretched. She looked at her calendar, crossing off the days that Riku and Sora had gone. The entire month had been crossed and now the first week of the next month was already practically filled.

Kairi then glanced at her dresser, eyeing a picture of her with Riku and Sora when they were still small. Riku, Sora, she thought to herself, How much longer do you intend to stay away? Is the world outside in that much chaos?

Kairi lifted herself up and walked to her dresser. She took out a white tank top, a pair of panties, and a pair of blue Capri pants with inscribed heart and star designs on the back pockets. At the same time, she took out from her jewelry box, a piece that she hadn't seen for ages, a gold necklace with a locket in the shape of a hearts half. The locket couldn't be opened, which is why she seldom wore it, if not at all, and she didn't want to risk damaging it because of its simple eloquence as well as the secret behind it. So it stayed in her jewelry box practically forever. But for some reason, she found it to be a rather unique little piece and one she had not shown to anyone in years. Thus, Kairi took it to wear around her neck. She then made her way to the bathroom for a warm shower. But as an after thought, Kairi looked out her window, the blinds still down.

I wonder, she recalled the event of the night before. I wonder what that rumbling was that I heard? Heeding no mind, she continued with her morning preparations.

After her period of supposed freshening up, Kairi went about to take care of a little business. She had agreed to help Selphie and Tidus with a little task of repairing and cleaning their boats. She made her way down the main road, gazing upon the magnificence of nature's splendor as she walked. Eventually, she reached the beach where Tidus and Selphie had assembled themselves.

The beach was quiet with its beautiful white sandy beaches, flat and clean as paper, indicating that no one had been about yet to imprint upon them. The gentle roar and flow of the waves was soothing and the wave of the palms gave a calming feel to the atmosphere.

I've never seen such a beautiful morning. Kairi thought to herself. I don't know why, but today seems

to stick out more than usual. She put her hand over the half-heart pendant. I should take this as a sign of things to come.

Hey, Kairi, a voice shouted. Kairi turned around to see Tidus and Selphie no more than a hundred feet away from her. Their boats hulls turned over and being scrubbed and washed of sea salt build up and barnacles. It was Selphie trying to get her attention.

We're over here! she cried.

Hey you guys. Kairi smiled and rushed over.

It's about time you got here. Tidus said with sarcastic humor.

Hey, I got up a little late. Give me some slack. -

Well, you two can give me a hand moving this boat. Tidus wiped the dirt of his hands, cleaning them at the sides of his baggy shorts. The three took hold of the boat, heaved up and lifted the hull. They then set it down on the sand and picked up the other boat and put it on the platform.

Hey, Selphie said.

What is it? Kairi asked as they took their rest after setting the boat down.

I've never seen that necklace before. -

Oh this old thing, Kairi showed it to Selphie. This is just an old jewelry piece I was given when I was still a little girl.

It looks like a locket. Whose picture is inside? Selphie gave that sneaky look of pleasure, making fun of Kairi's secret. Is it Sora, or maybe Riku?

Well, -

I know, Tidus chuckled, adding to the fun, It's gotta be a picture of me! He flexed his muscles like a corny first-timer.

In your dreams, Selphie said. You're more likely to attract flies than girls, Tidus. The two young women snickered.

Oh yeah, for your information, the girls flock to me from out of the woodwork. I'm a regular lady killer! -

Yeah, that's right, the girls take one look at you and drop dead. Again there was a snicker.

To tell you the truth, Kairi said, I don't know whose picture is in this locket.

You don't know, really? -

Yeah, -

Well, why don't you just break it open? Tidus said, It wouldn't be that hard.

No, I could never do that. -

But why doesn't it open? Selphie asked.

Look at its shape. Kairi pointed to the locket's design. It's half of a heart, which only indicates that another half goes with it. And when those two pieces are combined, that's what unlocks the mechanism.

Really, Selphie shook with anticipation, Oh who could it be?

Well, I've had it way back when I was a child, so I don't really have a clue. But Kairi knew deep down of the locket's past and who was affiliated with it. She didn't have enough nerve to tell them though. So she remained silent. Then, her eyes suddenly shifted. In the distance, her eyes caught the form of a cloaked figure standing near the beach residential homes. The face was hooded, so the features of the face were impossible to distinguish. Like a phantom, he suddenly appeared in her view. The figure did not stir. It only stood there, watching the three. Though Kairi could not see the person's face, she had this feeling as if the eyes were peering directly at her, cutting straight into her very soul. The sight of him, however, was not threatening in any way, but more curious.

It's him, Kairi uttered. Tidus and Selphie turned to see the figure.

Great, Tidus grumbled, It's that weirdo.

What does he want? Selphie said.

I don't know. Kairi asked.

I gotta tell you, that guy kind of gives me the creeps, how he's always sneaking around. I think he might be a burglar or mugger or something. -

Hey, pal, what you want? Tidus declared.

The man said nothing. He only turned and walked away.

Who is he I wonder. Kairi asked.

I think he might be a drifter. Selphie said. I've never seen him before. He just appeared suddenly about a couple of weeks ago. No one has ever seen his face. We don't even know why he came here in the first place.

Well, whoever he is, Tidus grumbled, He gives me the willies. Tidus went back to scrubbing the boat hull.

Have you encountered him before, Kairi? -

Not face to face, Kairi said, But I have seen him about. Sometimes in the daytime, other times at night. He frequently follows me around too. I always see him peeking behind corners, or standing just under the lamp near my bedroom window, or at times follow me from a distance.

You think he might be a stalker, or something? He's probably a pervert. -

I don't think so. -

Why do you say that? Kairi walked towards the spot where the stranger stood, but halted just a few feet away from the boats.

For some reason, despite his dark figure and faceless expressions, I don't feel threatened. It feels more like he's watching over me than stalking me. Besides, if he really was a pervert, or a rapist, he would have attacked me already. -

Maybe, he's just abiding his time, Tidus said, waiting to spring when you least expect it.

I don't know. -

Well, I'm just saying stay away from that guy. He's nothing, but trouble. You can see it on his face. -

Oh that's quite an insight, Selphie said, since you've never seen his face.

Oh shut up, -

Alright, that's enough you two. Kairi said. Let's get back to what we were doing.

The day passed without further incident. The cloaked figure did not appear again and the three were able to fulfill their task and finish with cleaning and repairing their boats. The three then brought their boats to the dock and tied them off.

Nothing like a job well done, Tidus said, wiping his brow. Thanks you two.

Nothing to it, Kairi implied.

Hey, hey, you guys, a voice suddenly beckoned. The three friends turned to see Wakka running towards them.

Hey, Wakka, Tidus greeted him. What's up?

Didn't you hear? Wakka said. There's some kind of military force heading this way.

What, a military force? -

Ya, Wakka pointed, Can't you hear that? The friends lifted their ears to the quiet of the late morning. In the distance, the sound of drums could be heard. They then saw people flocking to the area where the drums were sounding. You think it had to do with that rumble we heard last night?

Wait a minute, Kairi said, You heard that rumble too?

Practically everyone heard that rumble last night. Selphie said. I heard it too.

C'mon, let's go take a look! Tidus said, leading the way. Kairi, however, stayed behind, still pondering on the events of the morning and the feeling she felt.

Could this be why I was feeling the way I was? she thought to herself. Is this why today seems to stick out more than other days?

C mon Kairi, Selphie shouted.

I m coming, Kairi quickly ran after her friends.

They assembled at the main road, leading into town. The townspeople were assembled to meet with the approaching force. Tidus and the others squirmed through the crowd to get a better view of who approached. Massed columns of soldiers in black frocks with white trimming and exterior entourage approached them. At the side of each soldier was a gold-hilt sword sheathed in white scabbards. Their appearance was both threatening and magnificent. The banner that flew over the heads of the troops bore the familiar symbol of the Imperial crest of conquest. Three swords, two curved and one straight, crossed each other at a center axis. Behind those three swords was an angled lightning volt and below the entire design were the words *Van car Un isk Concorte Irakisin*. But it was the Imperial crest behind the sword and lightning design that concerned Kairi the most.

That symbol, she uttered to herself, Could it be the Dark Empire?

I wonder who these guys are. Tidus said. They better not be looking for trouble.

Along with the thundering of drums and twittering of fifes, there also came the sound of a thousand men in deep vocalization singing out a victory him. There was a sense of pride in the men as they sang, marching with great enthusiasm as they approached the coastal city of the Destiny Islands.

Those Arakis fighting boys

Will never reach the coast

So Sirius Viicous said

It was a handsome boast

Had they not forgot, Alas,

To reckon with the host

While we are marching to conquest

Van car! Van car

Our cause forevermore

Van car! Van car

You hear our soldiers roar

Forward into battle

And to vict ry of the war

While we are marching to conquest

Just then the order was given to cease the marching and cadence.

All units halt! one of the leading officers shouted. The soldiers halted no more than fifty feet away from the town itself. There was great tension as the townspeople beheld the forces of armed soldiers standing in perfect order before them. Questions entered the minds of many of the civilians there. What did the soldiers want? Were they hostile? And what were their intentions?

Suddenly, two individuals came forth. One of them was a young boy, no older than ten or twelve. He was dressed in a black military uniform as the rest of the soldiers were. But the extra display in braids at the shoulders indicated that he was a boy of great importance. Next to him was a young man, dressed in similar garments. But unlike the boy, he had a stern look, like that of a guardian. Both wore plumed cavaliers, a sight unique amongst the thousands of tinted helmets. The boy was the first to speak.

I am Mulian Nidarach Arakis, the boy declared to the civilians, raising his hand in friendship, the son of His late Excellency Lord Drako Arakis, and present leader of the Arakis Foundation. I would like to speak with leader of this settlement.

From the crowd, the mayor appeared and approached the duo.

I am the mayor of this town. He said. How may I be of service? The two approached til they were face to face with one another.

We beseech you, sir, if it would be possible for you to provide us with shelter and provisions. -

And how long do you intend to stay? -

We plan to depart by tomorrow. -

And what brings you here, young man? -

My men and I are tired and are trying to evade pursuers who have been on our trail for a little over three weeks. We mean no harm. All we ask is for shelter and some food. -

Well, the mayor pondered for a while before giving a courteous smile, I don't see why not. You may enter our town provided that you and your men conduct yourselves civil.

Acknowledged, Mulian turned to his subordinate. Prime Minister Crassus, pass the word along. Tell every man in the column that they are to abide by the rules of this town and that any troublesome outbursts amongst our ranks will be severely dealt with.

I understand, Your Excellency. Crassus replied. He turned to the columns of men who were still standing at attention. With a loud, booming voice, he gave instructions to the men. Now listen up, you men! We will be allowed to take shelter in this town for the next twenty-four hours! But while you are here, you will not stir up any trouble! You will not make a spectacle of yourself or take action in any manner that would disgrace the name of His Excellency! You will follow a strict curfew and you will be forbidden to harass any of the civilians or violate their property! Every man here will be responsible for his actions! And it is up to you as comrades to assure that the other behaves himself in a proper manner! And if there is any breach of conduct here, punishment will come swiftly and without mercy! And to assure that this regulation is enforced, for any one man who steps out of line and makes a mockery of our military, then he and twenty randomly chosen men from his outfit will be punished according to the rules of the Arakis Foundation, no exceptions! Is that clear?!

Sir, yes sir! the columns replied.

I can't hear you! -

Sir, yes sir! -

Very good, Crassus turned to Muli, They will abide as promised, sir.

Thank you, Crassus. Muli replied. He faced the mayor. Sir, I thank you for your hospitality.

Think nothing of it, The mayor replied. I am glad to see that you are such a well mannered young man who knows how to keep his soldiers under control. The man extended his hand in friendship. Crassus senses perked up and reached for his sword.

Stand down, Muli said, There is nothing to fear here.

Yes Your Excellency. Crassus replied, and withdrew his hand from the hilt.

Have the men fall out, but tell them to set up camp on the outskirts of town. I do not want to make a bother with these people. And issue liberty for two hours per company. -

Understood, Crassus turned to his men. Alright, fall out and set up camp here on the outskirts, by order of His Excellency!

Yes, sir, the soldiers replied. They immediately dispersed to the open fields just outside of town and began to set up their individual sleeping quarters.

Perhaps, if you were to join me at my residence for a little luncheon, young man, the mayor said. I find it always beneficial to entertain higher ups.

I would be delighted to, sir. Muli replied.

Shall I call for an armed guard to accompany you, sir? Crassus asked.

There is no need, Imetriarch. I would like to keep these people at ease. -

At least allow me to accompany you, sir. -

Of course, if that is alright with the mayor. -

I do not mind. The mayor replied.

Let us go then. -

Young Master Mulian has certainly changed a great deal since his ventures into other worlds. Crassus thought to himself. I guess when your eyes are open to the outside worlds, the politics and reasoning of home, which you once thought as absolute, seem twisted in theory. Perhaps the Universal Alliance had the right idea after all. He watched as Muli gave a sheepish grin, like that of any young boy. In his gesture, there reflected the personality of Sora. Was it Riku and Sora that completed this transformation? If it is, I must say that I have to give those boys credit.

Listen, citizens, the mayor said, See to it that every inn and every tavern is open to these weary soldiers. They have agreed to be civil, we shall do the same. Give them the hospitality of the Destiny Islands.

After speaking those words, the mayor retired back to his estate, accompanied by Muli and Crassus. The crowd dispersed and the soldiers of the Arakis Foundation took in some time to finally relax after eluding the faction pursuers. Only Tidus and his group did not disperse as quickly.

I don t like this. He said. That kid, Muli said they were running away from their pursuers.

So what&? Selphie asked. I don t think these guys mean to start anything. If they did, they would have done it already.

Are you really willing to trust them? As far as we know, that kid could be plotting something. -

Why would he do that? As far as I can see, the town wouldn t stand a chance against such a well armed force. -

Well, Tidus rethought his theory, maybe your right, but what about their pursuers? What if they come here and start making trouble with these guys? Our town will be stuck in the middle.

Tidus has a point there. Wakka complied. It would really suck if that kid brought his problems here too.

Well, the least we could do is provide these men with a little food and shelter. Selphie said. It s not easy finding luxury when you re a soldier. We all should know through our experiences.

I guess you re right. -

What do you think, Kairi? But Kairi seemed somewhat in a daze. Kairi&?

Hey, Kairi, Tidus said. Kairi looked up.

What&? -

What s the matter? Is there something bothering you? -

No, Kairi smiled sheepishly, rubbing the back of her head. I was just thinking to myself. What did you

ask me?

Never mind, it's irrelevant now. -

C'mon, Selphie said, Let's at least try to be good hosts.

I guess so. Tidus and the others dispersed to carry on with what it was they were doing. Kairi, however, stayed behind, still pondering at who the boy was. Are you coming, Kairi?

Oh, no, she replied. You guys go on without me.

Suit yourself. The three withdrew leaving Kairi on her own, engulfed in her deep thought.

Mulian Arakis, she thought to herself, Could it be that? Curious, she hastened over to the mayor's estate. I gotta know who that kid is. Could that kid be related to *him* in any way?

The mayor, Muli, and Imetriarch Crassus were seated at a white patio table with yellow umbrella blocking the sun's rays and keeping them cool. Lemonade and appetizers were the first to be served by the staff. Gentle music was being played on a small radio.

So, the mayor inquired, how is it that you came across our little settlement?

We came here by means of our aerial craft. Muli replied. Our energy generators, which fuel the ship, were running low and needed to be recharged. And it will take at least twenty four hours for us to restore full power. So we had to touch down somewhere. We figured that no one would hope to find us here. The Destiny Islands are secluded enough from the other worlds that we thought it might be a nice haven to spend at least one day. Muli took another sip of the cool lemonade. Besides, my soldiers have been in desperate need for a reprieve. I think some time amongst paradise is a good remedy.

And who exactly is pursuing you? -

Excuse me, a voice said. The trio looked up to find Kairi standing no more than ten feet away, Sorry to disturb you mayor.

Oh, Kairi, the mayor said, What brings you here?

Well, -

Who is this young woman? Muli asked.

This young lady is named Kairi. The mayor replied. She's the foster daughter of my predecessor. Kairi? The name somehow struck a chord with the boy. You wouldn't happen to be the young woman who's in love with Sora are you? Kairi was stunned.

Yes, I am, she said with a surprised tone. But how do you know that?

My father had always mentioned the great trial that he put Riku and Sora under in order to save you. He always said that Sora loved you deeply. And he proved that love through his actions. -

Wait, you're father? -

Yes, my father, the late Lord Drako Arakis. He was a former member of the Three Excellencies. -

You're his son then. -

It is an honor to meet you, Kairi. Please be seated and join us for a luncheon. For a young boy, he was well mannered, standing up before her. Crassus stood, followed by the mayor.

Oh no, it's quite alright. I just -

His Excellency insists, Crassus said. You may take my seat, Miss Kairi.

Well, thank you. Crassus escorted her to her seat. Kairi sat down.

Bring out another chair! the mayor shouted. We have another guest present!

The four seated themselves and began to chat away with one another. The food was brought out and almost non-stop for two hours, they fraternized as if there wasn't a care in the world. Kairi's interaction with Lord Arakis' son was completely the opposite of what she had earlier envisioned of him. Instead of a stuck up, arrogant heir to a vast power structure, she found Muli to be very happy-go-lucky and cheerful. His attitude reminded her of Sora. Within the course of a single luncheon, Kairi's perception that all Imperials were the same was changed forever. As the food began to dwindle from their plates,

down to the last morsels, Kairi decided to pop the question.

So, how is it that you are acquainted with Riku and Sora? she asked.

You might say, Miss, Crassus explained, that it was because of your friends actions that young Master Mulian is still alive.

What&? -

Riku and Sora saved my life and opened my eyes to the outside world. Mulian said. I am eternally in their debt.

They saved your life? -

It was because of them that my men and I are making this trek. -

Trek, Kairi pondered, curious to know where their destination lay. And where is it that you re going?

We are going to the only place where we can seek safe refuge. We re going to meet with President Sneer of the Universal Alliance. -

What&? Kairi was again surprised. You re on your way to meet with Sneer of the Alliance? But why, aren t you Imperials? There was a slight silence, but no tension arose. Muli was more than happy to explain.

If you were to have asked me that same question three months ago, I would have gladly said yes. -

You see, Miss Kairi, Crassus explained, We are the remaining members of the former Arakis Foundation. Young Master Mulian is the legitimate heir to that organization. The former empire had been dissolved and rivaling factions arose to battle against one another. Each major faction hoped to regain the territory of the former Imperial regime.

I too wanted to see conquest only because the elders would always talk about those days. Determined to fulfill that dream, I would use all the resources the Arakis Foundation could muster and retake all the territory lost by the former empire. I was so involved with the thoughts of pure Oceanarian domination over all worlds; I did not realize the cruel truth behind war. I always had this grandiose vision. But that was merely the delusion of a sheltered and pampered little boy, who did not truly understand the meaning of what it meant to fight and suffer. I thought, one day, that it would be fun to go out and join in the fray of battle. Thus, I took on the garments of a drummer boy and joined the front lines. But I couldn t have been more wrong. I realized soon enough that my ideals would have to come at a heavy price. The soldiers I sent into action were not as invincible as I thought. They in fact died just as easily as any other. I soon came to understand that if I were to fulfill this dream, I would be causing great suffering to both the enemy and my allies. I would also have to worry about the crumbling of such a large empire if I ever achieved that goal. And also, by integrating others into my dream, I would be depriving them of their own. Their cultures, their unique lifestyles would be gone with the integration into Oceanarian ways. Muli lowered his head. I realize now what my father had said. He didn t want me to follow his path. He always said that it was better to have happy differences than unhappy similarities.

I see, Kairi said. But why are you seeking haven with the Alliance?

I have taken into consideration a truce with the Alliance and merge the foundation with them. However, this decision on my part caused severe unrest within the Arakis Foundation s top brass. -

A few of our leading commanders decided to stage a coup de tat against Master Mulian and combined their forces to form the new Aryan Faction. Crassus explained. However, Master Mulian is still the legitimate heir to the Arakis Foundation and his very life is a threat to the stability of the Aryan Faction. There are already rumors that a second coup de tat will take place in the near future as the unrest between loyalists and separatists continues to grow. -

If we side with the Alliance, then we can end this period of bloodshed and bring a close to this era of chaos. -

That s why the Aryan Faction has been pursuing us since the coup. They want Master Mulian dead. Only then can they gain absolute power. -

Well, we'll make sure to keep you safe, young man. The mayor said. You seem like a decent enough fellow. It would be a shame for you to lose your life so early.

I thank you, sir. Muli replied. And what about you, Kairi, I've been meaning to ask you, what was your impression of my dad?

Well, Kairi could only pause, not knowing what to say. In her mind, all she remembered was a man who somehow found a sense of entertainment in seeing her tormented. But could have been wrong in her interpretations? Giving a slight shake, Kairi only gave a vague response. I never really knew your father long enough to really get to know him. Muli only shrugged his shoulders.

Not surprising, my father always had that tendency to be secretive. He always said that though some methods of the Empire were extreme, and some of the tactics were cruel, he could not turn against his superiors. -

But why not? -

I think he foresaw what would happen, a sudden collapse of the entire Imperial regime would have occurred. I guess he knew that splitting the Empire up would only give rise to greater chaos, much like what we're experiencing now. -

From here on out, Your Excellency, Crassus remarked, it's an open road all the way to Oceansburg. Yes! -

But no sooner had Destiny Island reach a stage of tranquil harmony, that noontime lull was suddenly broken with the appearance of an unidentified object that appeared in the sky twenty miles off shore.

The foundation mother ship, nestled within a lush green field, picked up a sudden bleep on the radar. The attendant in charge quickly took notice of the incoming unidentified object descending into the atmosphere.

What the hell, he said. He quickly got a visual. What he saw caused him to shout of an alert. Sir, captain sir?!

What's the problem? the captain asked, coming to observe what the fuss was about.

We have an incoming ship appearing out of the atmosphere twenty miles off the coast. -

What kind of ship? -

It's an Aryan transport vessel! -

Damn it, get a visual up! -

Aye-aye sir, The attendant quickly brought the ship's visual on the overhead screen. There was a sudden murmur amongst the men and women as they witnessed their pursuers coming towards them.

How did they catch up to us so quickly?

They must've tracked us down somehow! The captain growled. We have to inform His Excellency! Link us to the Prime Minister's Scouter immediately!

Aye sir, Contact was immediately sent to Prime Minister Crassus, whose scouter sat at the table's edge.

The distress signal was heard and Crassus quickly responded.

This is Crassus, he said, What's the distress?!

There's an Aryan transport cruiser heading in this direction! The captain replied on the other line. Immediately, Crassus threw himself up from his chair, his brow suddenly sweating. The mayor, Muli, and Kairi were curious.

What's the matter? Muli asked.

We have to go, Your Excellency, right now! Crassus replied.

Why, what's going on? -

An Aryan cruiser has just appeared off shore. -

What&? -

We have to go now! -

But how&? The ship won't be ready for take-off for another fifteen hours.

We'll have to manage! -

Your pursuers caught up with you? Kairi asked.

I don't know how they did it, but their presence only means that we have to depart from this world and make it to Oceansburg as fast as we can! Crassus grabbed Muli by the wrist and pulled him away. As the two leaders exited the mayor's estate, they found the rest of the town in an uproar. Towards the sea they pointed. There, hovering off not too far from shore was the Aryan mother cruiser. It was a large disk-like structure spreading over the water with a one mile diameter, a massive ship that could eclipse the sun from sight of the whole town.

Damn it, Crassus growled, They're that close already. He contacted the mother ship, at the same time pulling Muli behind him. I want all engines running! We've got to make it to Oceansburg!

No can do, Prime Minister. The captain replied. Our ship generators have only just reached their halfway point to completion.

It'll have to do! We have to make it to Oceansburg! The Alliance is our only hope right now! -

A hasty lift off won't work, sir. That cruiser will try and shoot us if we take off. And even if we did evade destruction, we'd only have enough power to make it half way to Oceansburg. And if we get stranded out in the middle of our space travel, there will be nothing to protect us. -

Damn it. We'll just have to withdraw from this town! The last thing we want is for these civilians to get involved. I'll assemble the men and tell them to get back to the ship. -

Yes sir, -

Tidus and the others looked on, not too far away. Clutching his fists, Tidus' prediction came true.

I knew it, he said, That kid has brought the chaos with him.

But trouble was not only going to spur the Arakis Foundation, but the whole of the Destiny Islands as well. The leader in charge of the Aryan forces was none other than the venerable General Hector Fortinbras who had helped in the failed assault in Long Valley. He observed as the visual sighted the established camp of the Arakis Foundation.

There they are. He said. Mulian Arakis and his band of rebels are within our sight.

Shall we declare their option to surrender to us? the captain of the ship asked.

Our mission is to eliminate Mulian Arakis before he reaches the Alliance capital. Besides, there is no more suitable death for a traitor like that little upstart. -

But wouldn't it be best if we forewarn that settlement? I don't find it necessary for them to be involved in our little dispute. -

By order of his Excellency, Lord Marcus Montague, we are to execute Mulian Arakis without question. And all those who dare to aid him are just as guilty. This town and this world are just as treasonous for harboring him and his men. Therefore, they will suffer the same punishment. Fortinbras stood up and put one fist to his side. Prepare to fire the barge cannons at that town and have our men board their cruisers and ready to storm.

But sir, that's going a little overboard don't you think? -

Those are my orders. Now do as I say. The captain was hesitant, but carried out with the order.

Bring the barge cannons up. He ordered the men. Set target to the town. And assemble our men. We'll be going ashore.

Aye-aye, sir, one of the head operatives replied.

Don't you think this is going a little overboard for a boy? one of the lieutenants whispered to the

captain. I mean this entire rise to power by the Aryan Faction was a little hasty.

What a way to repay the deeds of His late Excellency, Lord Drako Arakis, by executing his only child. We have a term for such actions&ungrateful& -

Without attempts at negotiating, the barge cannons immediately opened fire on the coastal town. Houses were suddenly demolished in flame, dust, and splintering debris. The citizens were panicked as they beheld this hostile act against them. They fled the streets, seeking cover from the ship's barrage.

What are they firing at us for? Kairi wondered.

It's that young boy, Muli. The mayor replied. They're after him.

But we were never given a chance to negotiate. -

Those people aren't interested in negotiating. They want that young man dead. -

But do they want it so badly that they're willing to attack our town? -

They might be planning to destroy any town or city that harbors him. -

Damn it. Kairi quickly fled to find Muli, despite the explosions roaring around her.

Where are you going, Kairi?! You'll get killed! -

We have to keep that kid safe! As far as I know, he's the only sane Imperial I've ever met! She vanished into the billowing clouds of smoke.

We have to get you to safety. Crassus said, sheltering Muli as the bombardment bellowed around them.

I want all civilians evacuated from here first. Muli replied.

What's the point? It's not our problem right now! -

Yes it is! The Aryan Faction is attacking this town because its citizens harbored us! We're responsible for this hostility! And I am not about to turn my back on these people! I will not take the actions as I had when I was still an ignorant, pampered whelp. I will help these civilians to the best of my ability. -

Muli, a voice shouted. The two saw Kairi running towards them.

I'm sorry, Kairi, I brought this trouble upon you and your town. -

We are departing from this world. Crassus added. We've caused enough trouble.

And let you guys lose your one chance to set things right? You'd never be able to take off from this world all the way to Oceansburg with those guys on your tail, right? So I'll help you! -

But why, your friends and family are dying because of us. Why assist us? -

I've come to realize that if I were in your shoes, I'd be expecting some kind of aid. The then glanced at Muli. Besides, after how you said that you made friends with Riku and Sora and how they changed your aspect on life and death, I'd never be able to look at either of them in the face if I turned you down. It wouldn't feel right to say that I met you and turned my back on you when you needed help the most. Muli was overcome with this sense of sadness, having to burden the people with such weight. He could only do the sensible thing and avert his eyes downward.

Thank you very much. -

Your Excellency, Prime Minister, a voice shouted. From the distance, one of the foundation officers was approaching. He came before his superiors out of breath. The Aryan Faction is deploying their landing crafts! They're sending in their ground troops to execute you!

They're landing&? Crassus uttered.

Yes, -

Damn it! Have all our men assemble at the beach! If it's a fight they want, then it's a fight they'll get! -

Yes sir! -

Kairi, take Master Mulian and withdraw to the rear! Tell all civilians to evacuate! -

What about you? Kairi asked.

I must stay here and conduct our military in this campaign! He took Muli by the shoulders and put him under Kairi's care. You behave yourself, Master Muli.

No, Imetriarch, Muli cried, trying to get out of Kairi's grasp, Don't do this!

The fate of the Foundation depends on your survival, sir. -

No, no, don't leave me! Don't leave me again! -

I will return, sir! It's your safety that I'm worried about! -

But Imetriarch, -

Do as I say! And don't try any last minute heroics! I'll fight a lot easier knowing that you're safe! He looked at Kairi. Take care of him, Kairi! He's the future!

I will, Kairi replied. Imetriarch saluted and withdrew to the beaches where the upcoming battle would take place.

Imetriarch, Muli uttered

C'mon, Kairi pulled him along to the rear. We gotta get you to safety.

In the meantime, the soldiers of the Arakis Foundation took positions along the beach. They watched as the bombardment suddenly ceased. Then, from out of the hovering mother ship, several small cruisers appeared.

Keep your ranks, men! Crassus shouted. Keep down and prepare to open fire the minute those transport hatches open! They watched as the cruisers glided through the water like great iron boxes. Like an ominous presence suddenly in their view, over twenty transport units made their way towards the coast. Once ashore, and the main hatch was opened, hundreds of Aryan Faction soldiers, in their black and green-trimmed uniforms, poured out.

Here they come! one foundation soldier cried.

Then let them have it! Crassus shouted.

Using energy and weapons alike, the Arakis Foundation fired an endless volley of projectiles into the attacking ranks of Aryan Faction soldiers. Dozens were killed in the first volley and the numbers of the invaders were dwindled, but still they would not give up. Instead the Aryan Faction charged forward. They unleashed their own bombardment and leveled the Arakis Foundation troops in some areas of the line.

Both sides collided as gun, sword, and spear clashed. Already, hundreds were left dead and dying upon the beach and the once blue water and white sands were tainted crimson with the blood of the fallen.

Despite having smaller numbers, the Arakis Foundation managed to fend off their former brethren.

Death to traitors! the Aryan soldiers shouted.

Death to the treasonous! the foundation soldiers countered. Skulls were smashed, bodies were impaled, and Oceanarian fought Oceanarian in a bloody civil brawl upon the once quiet hometown of the key bearers.

Send in more men. Fortinbras ordered. And have our guns concentrated on the town itself. Blast that settlement to its foundations if necessary.

But wouldn't we be firing on our own troops? the captain asked.

Of course, but so what, their deaths are insignificant compared to the elimination of the traitor Muli Arakis. I want him killed at all costs. -

Yes sir -

We'll flush that whelp out like a rat. -

Immediately, the cannons began to fire, pummeling the city and blowing structures up one at a time. Crassus looked up, watching the bombardment shift from them to the town.

Damn it, he growled, They're firing on the town itself. As the fighting continued on the beach, the town

was slowly demolished little by little. If they keep this up, there will be no town left to defend. Using his scouter, he contacted the foundation mother ship. Captain, can you hear me, over?

Aye, Prime Minister, I can hear you loud and clear. The captain replied.

I need you to get the ship up and moving now! -

But sir, we'll never make it to Oceansburg. Are you sure you want us to depart with our generators only half full? -

We're not going to leave, we're going to fight! -

To fight? -

That's right. I want you to get the mother ship up and confront that Aryan super carrier. -

Fight against the carrier? Are you out of your mind, sir? -

Just do it! -

With all due respect, Prime Minister, that tactic is out of the question! We're flying a C class battle cruiser! The Aryan Faction is armed with a class B super carrier! They outrank us in firepower, defense, and speed! They're at least twice as big as our own ship. -

I'm not asking you to fight the cruiser directly! Crassus said. I want you to knock out their barge guns! That's all that matters! We have to keep them silent and protect the town as best we can! -

I understand, sir. We'll get right on it! -

Very good, ending transmission, Crassus deactivated the scouter's transmission system and continued to battle. It's up to you boys now! -

Activate all generators! the captain ordered. We're going into battle!

Into battle?! one of the staff officers asked. Against who? -

Against that, The captain pointed to the Aryan Faction's super cruiser. When mentioning their mission, there was not a single man present who feared this action.

Going into battle against a B class super carrier? There's no way we can win fighting something like that head on! -

Fortunately for us, we're not gonna fight it head on. The captain looked to the crew. Now do as I have ordered and get this thing into the air!

Aye-aye sir, the lieutenant addressed the crew. Activate all generators to their maximum! -

Aye-aye sir, the crew would reply as the orders were passed about the bridge.

Have all barge cannons up and ready to fire! the captain said.

If I may be permitted to speak freely, sir, but how do you intend to fight a B class super carrier? -

We're not going to battle it. We simply have to deprive it of its outer defense weaponry, nothing more. That way, there will be no way for them to provide covering fire for the ground troops. -

I understand, The generators were activated, the rockets rumbled, and the great ship lifted into the air and slowly made its approach towards the Aryan mother ship.

In the meantime, General Fortinbras watched as his barge cannons destroyed homes and buildings within the coastal town.

This would be a lot easier if I had Gatler tanks and Mobile dolls in store, he grumbled, but those bloody higher ups said that they were needed elsewhere! All I have for support are these blasted barge cannons! he sighed. Oh well, at least that's better equipment than our enemies. They have nothing to aid them, which are all more favorable to us.

General Fortinbras, captain, one operative said.

What is it? the captain asked.

There is a large object heading towards us from starboard. -

On screen, an image was activated and there coming towards them was the foundation ship. That's a

C class cruiser.

Is it of any threat to us? Fortinbras asked.

No, a C class cruiser wouldn't be able to contend with us. We have a B class super carrier, which is far more superior. I don't know what they're trying to accomplish. Going against us is out of the question, it only guarantees their deaths. Our barge cannons will be able to break holes in their armor with very little effort. -

They must be desperate then. Shoot it down! -

But sir, we'd be attacking our fellow Oceanarians. -

We are the ones who are carrying on with the true cause of the former Dark Empire! Those people are traitors to the Imperial cause and the millions of comrades who sacrificed their lives for the good of a united universe! Now shoot it down! -

A&aye, sir, The captain turned to his crewmen. Set our starboard barge cannons towards that cruiser. Shoot it down.

But sir& one of the operatives said.

We have no choice. The commanding officer has told us so to do. Again there was silence amongst the crew. They would be going into battle against soldiers who up to a few weeks before were their most trusted allies.

Aye-aye, sir, the operative complied.

From the perspective of the foundation, the cannons began to appear from out of their holds.

They're ready to fire. The captain said. Alright, take aim and fire at the cannons. Wait until their barrels start glowing.

But sir, one of the attendants said, If we wait for their barrels to start resonating, that means that they're ready to fire.

But it also means that if we destroy the cannons while they're increasing their energy, there will be a larger maximum of damage. We have to aim well and time this perfectly. I want all shields to their maximum and all guns accurately aimed and ready!

Understood, -

The foundation cannons were deployed and ready, waiting for the first broadside from the Aryan Faction. Sure enough, they watched as their hatches were opened and the defense cannons emerged, their long barrels protruding like the quills of a wild porcupine.

Hold steady on my order. The captain said.

This ought to finish those fools off for good. Fortinbras chuckled as he watched the ship battle unfold before him.

All artillery pieces have been aimed at the carrier. One operative confirmed.

So be it, the captain replied. He bowed his head in repentance. God forgive us for turning against our brethren. Throwing out his hand, he gave the order. All starboard batteries commence firing!

Aye-aye, sir, -

The cannons' barrel ends began to glow, indicating that an inevitable blast would emerge. But that was what the foundation was waiting for.

The barrels are glowing! a foundation operative shouted.

Fire away! the captain ordered.

All at once, the carrier's cannons deployed a devastating fire. The beams struck the open portholes and destroyed all the barge cannons. The great carrier swayed and shook violently as the blasts crippled the starboard side of the ship.

What is going on? Fortinbras demanded.

They unleashed a barrage into the open hatches of our artillery! an operative shouted. All cannons starboard of the ship have been damaged beyond repair. -

Damn it! -

Sir, that attack has caused severe internal damage on our starboard side. -

They attacked our barge cannons when they were on the verge of being fired. The captain said. That's what they were aiming for. They hoped to inflict the maximum amount of damage on us.

Well, it looks like they've succeeded. Fortinbras growled. Turn this ship around and give them a reply.

But sir, the commander said, We have to support our ground troops.

If that stupid foundation cruiser is still airborne, then we won't be around long enough to offer support! As long as the foundation is in the air, we are vulnerable to attack. We shoot that foundation cruiser down for good! -

Yes sir! he turned to the bridge attendants. Shift this ship's gun turret around ninety degrees! Use the fore guns to shoot and destroy that vessel!

Aye sir. A response came from the bridge.

With a low mingled roar, the massive ship turned itself around, aiming its fore guns at the foundation cruiser. Little did they realize that the foundation was already prepared.

The crew of the C class carrier watched as the guns came to bear on their hull.

Alright, the captain shouted. They're bearing their fore guns at us! Prepare to open fire on the hatches if they open! The crew watched as one by one the cannons popped out of their cubbies and accumulated the necessary energy to fire.

They're turning about. An operative said.

Cannons on stand by and ready to fire, another added.

Good, fire away then.

Again, the foundation, pummeled the cannons from their stations, rendering them completely useless. With each cannon ready to fire, each was destroyed as they aimed at the hull. However, some of the faction artillery managed to hit the smaller cruiser's hull and cause crippling damage.

We're taking on damage! one operative cried.

What is the status? the captain asked.

It's about a ten percent status of damage. -

Then we're still in the game! Maintain fire until each of those fore guns has been demolished! -

Yes sir, Like a clash of old mast galleons, both ships took on an incredible amount of damage. But already the Aryan Faction had already lost all starboard guns. Now, all Fore-guns had either been destroyed or were beyond proper repair.

Keep it up, you men! the captain cried.

The hull has taken on too much damage, one Aryan faction crew man cried. We've already lost fifty percent of our heavy artillery!

Damn it! the commander growled. Now all of our fore-guns have been destroyed.

Turn this ship around again. Fortinbras ordered. Use the portside guns.

It's too risky, general. They'll most likely target those too. -

Then find a way to fire at those bastards without having them target our cannons! I don't care if you have to blow through the hatches! You shoot that eyesore down! -

Y&yes sir. -

The ship turned again, using the portside. One of two battery rows remaining, the portside guns were

powered up. But unlike before, this time, the hatches were not opened. Instead, it was decided by the captain to fire the cannons while they were still being charged up. The hatches were flimsy enough to break up when shot at.

As the portside guns were aimed and ready, some of the crewmen were surprised.

Do they intend to shoot their guns off when the hatches haven't been opened yet? a subordinate asked.

I don't know. The captain replied. Just be ready to open fire.

Suddenly, the hatches exploded, blown from off their hinges. Then from out of the portholes, powerful energy beams went flying at the foundation cruiser.

Evade, the ship was suddenly pulled up and half of the blasts passed by harmlessly. Others however, hit their mark, causing great damage at the hull. At the same time, the cannons returned fire and pummeled Fortinbras' carrier, eliminating over half of the barge guns. The captain wiped his brow and sighed. This ship may not be as strong or as fast as that monster, but there's one advantage we have, a C class carrier has better maneuverability at close range.

What just happened? Fortinbras growled.

They lifted up an entire side and evaded over half of our attacks. The commander said.

Damn it, how did they do that? -

We overpower the C class carrier in every field except for maneuverability at close range. Because they're smaller and have less mass, they can move about easier than we ever could. -

Blast, Fortinbras stood up from his seat, his teeth and hands clutched tightly. I want you to destroy that thing no matter what!

Sir, over fifty percent of our artillery and outer defenses has been obliterated! Of that fifty percent and over, the majority of the damage has been on our fore and starboard batteries. A hundred percent has been permanently placed out of commission. That means that the foundation will be able to fire at us from the starboard and fore sides and not have to worry about any type of retaliation from us. Overcome with rage, Fortinbras stomped his foot on the ground in his frustration, causing the floor to crack.

Those bastards, we have no choice now. We'll have to withdraw for the time being. Fortinbras scoured the coast. To the north there was a small peninsula, large enough for the ship to be docked until proper repairs were made. Land the ship at that peninsula. We'll be able to work on the damage.

Yes sir. -

Until then, we'll just have to depend on the infantry to execute Mulian Arakis. I want the second wave deployed. -

Yes sir. -

More troops were deployed as the carrier withdrew.

They're withdrawing, sir. The operative said. The foundation is withdrawing to that skinny peninsula up the coast.

Shall we follow them? another operative asked.

We have them on the run and we've eliminated over half of their outer defenses. I don't see why not. The captain folded his arms in front of him. Why not, give the order to pursue.

That's not a wise decision, sir. The lieutenant implied.

And why's that? the captain asked curiously.

In that skirmish, we too lost twenty-five percent of our outer defenses. To add, that last assault by the Aryan Faction managed to deliver crippling blows on us. There is a large gaping hole on the starboard bow of the ship and it's a severe exposure. If the Aryans wanted to, they could exploit that weakness

and hit the very core of the ship. -

Damn, -

Also, our own energy supply has been depleted by over a quarter, which means we have less than a quarter of what we started with when we first landed. If we lose anymore power, this vessel will not be able to sustain itself airborne for long and will plummet. And it'll be no more of use for anything except as a giant paperweight. -

What do you suggest we do then, Lieutenant? -

We'll have to withdraw for the time being and regain our strength. We also need to make repairs on those gaping holes and cracks on our side. -

Very well then, our confrontation with the Aryans' carrier will have to be postponed for a later date. -

Without further attempts to battle one another, the two great ships withdrew and the battle in the air had ceased for the time being. However, the battle on the ground of the Destiny Island was far from over. By now, the coastal part of the town had been demolished by the endless barrage of the Aryan Faction. Now, because Fortinbras' men had gained numbers as well as ground, the forces of the Arakis Foundation could not hold for very long and many of them began to flee into the town.

Imetriarch Crassus and his loyal soldiers continued to fight even beyond their own capabilities. Five times the Aryans charged the line and five times they had been repulsed. Despite depleting numbers from every attack received, the bravery of Crassus' men was a sight, which would be praised by scholars and historians for centuries to come. But such valor and bravery was not enough to hold back the swelling ranks of the Aryan Faction. Crassus slew another soldier before ceasing his bloodshed to gaze at the carnage that erupted around him. He looked on as one by one his favored and elite troops were killed one after another.

We won't last here much longer on the beaches, sir! one soldier cried before a bullet struck him at the temple, killing him instantly.

They're overpowering us! an officer said. We have to withdraw from here!

His Excellency instructs that we must protect this town. Crassus replied.

We've lost over fifty percent of our men in the front line, sir and the Aryan ranks are still swelling, especially with the arrival of that second wave of troops. It will only be a matter of time before the Aryans overrun us. -

Damn it. -

I advise that we fall back into the town. At least we'll be able to hold off a better defense in a house to house and street to street combat tactic. -

I hope these people and His Excellency forgive me for what I'm about to do. Crassus thought to himself. He later openly declared with a deep sigh. Very well, tell the men to fall back into town. Tell them to engage in hand to hand combat and surprise attacks. Do whatever possible to psychologically prevent these scumbags from advancing any further. We keep them near the coastal area.

Yes sir. -

The order was given and the Arakis Foundation soldiers withdrew from their positions on the beach. Smoke bombs were thrown as they retreated, concealing their movements.

We have them on the run! one Aryan faction officer cried. Drive them back! Track down Mulian Arakis and have him killed! But some of the soldiers were a little hesitant when that order was given. But their commander's word was law and they had no choice, but to obey.

In thin columns, the Aryan Faction ranks advanced across the bloodstained beach and into the town, passing the bodies of hundreds of slain soldiers in the process. Eyes wide open, tongues hanging out of their mouths, and limbs mangled in their final struggle, the dead was almost nightmarish, especially amongst the lingering clouds of smoke made from the smoke bombs. The faction soldiers scurried into

town, taking their positions behind fences, in courtyards, at the sides of buildings still standing, hoping to find the foundation forces, engage them, and destroy them. But like phantoms, the forces of the Arakis Foundation had vanished into thin air. More smoke bombs had been unleashed into the town. And the still air made the white clouds linger like a fog, making the atmosphere all the more foreboding to Fortinbras troops.

Only the sound of crackling fires from demolished buildings could be heard. Not a soul was in sight, say for a few scared civilians who had shut themselves up in their homes and were peeking from out of windows and doors.

There s no sign of the foundation anywhere. One soldier said.

They re here. An officer replied. Be on your guard. The soldiers went deeper into the town and the surrounding countryside, their eyes visual for the enemy. Little did they realize that Crassus elites were hanging about the vicinity. The Arakis Foundation was still present, while one half stationed themselves to seal off the forces from the beach, the rest of the force lay in wait to ambush the soldiers from within the town. And because the Aryan Faction stumbled blindly about the town through the thickened screen of the smoke bombs, it made the task all the easier for the foundation to make their move.

Take them! Crassus shouted. Almost immediately, the foundation soldiers emerged from their hiding places and slew the Aryan soldiers with very little effort. The Aryans were left bewildered and fired blindly in the smoke, shooting at anything that moved. The shouts and screams of hundreds of soldiers could be heard as they attacked and bashed, struck and slew, maimed and killed.

However, not all the attacks were successful. Some of the Aryan Faction soldiers emerged from the smoke, reaching the supposedly sheltered and secured area of the town, where the majority of the civilians still took shelter. And it was unfortunate that Kairi and Muli were in the same vicinity. Kairi had taken up two sharpened twin swords that she had used for daily solo practice, which is the reason for its sharpened edge. She had never once used her swords to kill. But now, with both the life of a young boy and the fate of her home at stake, Kairi had no other choice, but to take up arms.

She sat diligently, with Muli at her side, listening to the carnage that was taking place at the shoreline.

I can t believe this is happening. She said.

This is all my fault. Muli uttered. If I hadn t decided to land here&

You shouldn t blame yourself like that, Muli. You couldn t have predicted this any better than I or anyone else for that matter. -

But your homes, your people, -

At least you rallied them to defend us. That s good enough for me. But Kairi realized her words alone would not comfort the boy. Muli s eyes dripped tears and he slumped down into a ball against the house they were beside. He hid his face, concealing his supposed shame. But Kairi only put her arms around him and nestled him tightly.

None of this is your fault. Don t beat yourself up. You re still young, you don t need this kind of grief on you mind. -

But I m scared& -

It s alright, Muli. As long as you re with me, you have nothing to fear. I have learned from the best you know. -

Riku and Sora&? -

That s right, -

Hey Kairi, a voice shouted. Kairi looked up to see Wakka, Tidus, and Selphie coming towards them, armed with their prized weapons. It was Selphie that gave the greeting. I m so glad to see that you re alright.

We re fine, Kairi replied. I m glad to see that you guys are okay too.

It looks like your friends caught up with you, kid. Tidus addressed Muli in a rather scornful manner. I

told you guys that trouble would be coming with him. Now look, our hometown's being attacked by an aggressive band of misfits. That's never happened before. Tidus gripped his fists. I mean if it wasn't for that brat,

Lay off, Tidus! Kairi stood up stern, defending Muli, You've said enough!

But Kairi, -

You think it's easy for Muli?! He never intended for this to happen! We were no more aware of the danger than he was! If we all were, Muli would never have landed here in the first place and the mayor would never have accepted to give him and his men shelter. Tidus, unable to find a suitable argument to back up his own view, backed down, uttering no further comment of cynicism. I was entrusted to protect Muli and that's what I plan on doing. Your job is to protect the citizens, so go and do it!

Understood, The three withdrew to help fight off any Aryan Faction soldiers that might have penetrated into the heart of town.

Thank you, Kairi. Muli said.

It's nothing to it. Tidus can be a jerk sometimes. I think he let's his heart run away with his head. He hasn't really been the same since he had that incident with General Triiken. -

Triiken&? Muli was stunned. Are you saying that one of the feared Gatler Generals was here?

Yeah, he came here looking for Riku and Sora. And unfortunately for Tidus, he was the first one Triiken encountered. -

I didn't know. -

Ever since then, Tidus hasn't really taken to trusting outsiders. -

I see, Muli looked up at Kairi, hoping to smile and assure her of his regained comfort. But his smile was turned into a frightful whimper. Kairi noticed this strange expression on the boy's face.

What's wrong, Muli? she asked.

Kairi, above you, he pointed to one of the rooftops. Kairi turned to look and found fifteen Aryan Troops glaring down at her and upon the ground, another ten. They were soldiers who managed to somehow find their way into the inland part of town and happened to stumble upon Muli and his bodyguard.

Well, well, well, the officer in charge chuckled. What have we here? If it isn't the traitor, Muli Arakis, and look, he has a bodyguard with him as well.

A female bodyguard. One soldier chuckled.

Not a bad looking one too. Another added. Maybe we could spare her for later.

I don't see why not. -

Mind your business, men. The officer said. We have a mission to fulfill. The soldiers descended from the roof and landed gently upon the ground. Give us the boy, girl! We have no beef with you&for now at least. -

Muli, Kairi implied, Get behind me. Muli quickly took shelter behind the young woman as she drew out her twin swords.

Now, now, the officer wooed, don't be foolish young lady. We have no quarrel with you personally. It doesn't have to end with your death. Just let us have the boy and you can walk away without a scratch.

Sorry, Kairi rose up her blades, I can't do that.

You can save yourself a lot of grief. Hand over that boy now! -

If you want him, come and get him! But you'll have to go through me first! The officer only lowered his head and sighed. Then raised his eyes with a sinister smirk.

I hate to have to do this to such a fine young wench, but if you insist on getting in our way, then so be it. But don't expect my men to go easy on you. -

Are you done blathering? Kairi's sarcastic tone somehow got under the officer's skin.

Insolent girl, he drew out his saber from his scabbard. Men, kill that upstart female and the boy now! Put them in their place!

Yes sir, five of the soldiers attacked one at a time, believing that Kairi was no more than an arrogant amateur. But their perceptions soon proved false. Kairi did not hesitate and slew two of them without pause, at the same time maiming the other three. The soldiers were stunned at her abilities.

You little strumpet, the officer growled. How dare you strike down the elites of Lord Marcus Montague. Save your squawking. Kairi replied.

Kill her! The next five attacked all at once. This time, they were not giving Kairi a chance to breathe. Kairi launched her own attack and battled all five at once. She was stabbed and slashed at, but she evaded, blocked, and countered as gracefully as any. One of the soldiers tried to pass her and go for young Mulian Arakis, but Kairi quickly threw herself in front of the soldiers and knocked him back. You thought it would be that easy to get by me? The officer was infuriated.

Come on, you idiots! It's just a girl you're fighting! -

Just a girl, am I? It looks like you got more than what you bargained for. -

Get in there, the lot of you and kill her! -

More of the elite soldiers attacked, sweeping at Kairi from all sides. Kairi had to do her best to keep them from smiting Muli, at the same time keeping an eye on her own safety.

Again, another soldier lunged forth and tried to strike Muli, but again Kairi fended him off. But no sooner had she forced back another trooper, two others lunged at her and swiped powerful blows upon her. Kairi could only block at the last moment. The impact of the blades was so great that both her swords were knocked out of her hand.

No, she uttered. The soldiers snickered.

It looks like there's no way out of this for you now. The officer chuckled.

Muli, Kairi said, Get out of here while you still can. Go,

But what about you, Kairi? Muli asked.

Don't worry about me. You're the one they're after. Get out of here now. -

But Kairi, -

Do as I say, Muli drew back his falling tears and quickly ran away. The officer watched as the boy made his escape.

Go after him and kill him. He ordered.

Yes sir, five of the soldiers ran after Muli, leaving the others to finish off Kairi. They neared her little by little, the edges of their blades aimed at her fair blazon.

They'll take care of that little traitor soon enough. He then glared back at Kairi. As for you, girl, your time is up here and now. There's no way out for you this time. He gave the signal to his men. Kill her. Five of the soldiers attacked without mercy. Kairi saw her life flash before her eyes as her final moments came towards her in the form of a dozen glittering blades.

So this is it? she thought to herself. I never got to see Riku and Sora and tell them good-bye.

But as it seemed fate had decided to shift Kairi's fate towards death, it again swung about, denying her demise. From out of nowhere, the cloaked man appeared before her, revealing two large blades. With one strike, he slew all five men. The elites fell dead before his feet. His presence stunned the officer and the other troopers.

Who are you?

There's no use giving my name to those who are about to die. The man replied.

12 - The Battle of the Destiny Islands

The Battle of the Destiny Islands

There was a sudden awkward moment as the soldiers observed the sudden arrival of the cloaked man. With large twin blades in hand, the man had struck down five of the attacking elites with one strike. Now, the other soldiers were on guard, their blades still drawn outward.

You fool, the officer mocked, Attacking alone, perhaps you are too concerned with glory.

That has nothing to do with it. The cloaked man replied. He turned his ear to Kairi. Are you alright, Miss?

I m fine& Kairi replied.

If there is one thing I hate more than snot-nosed brats and sassy little girls, the officer declared, its last minute heroics! Well, it doesn t matter. If you are so eager to save this girl, sir, then both you and she can acquaint yourselves in the after life!

Quit your blathering. The cloaked man said. He suddenly locked the overextended hilts at their ends, turning his once two separate blades into a doubled bladed bow, or voulge. If you wish to get your point straight with me, you d better be prepared to lose your life.

It is you whose life shall be cut short! The officer threw out his blade. Kill that insolent bastard! I want his heart on a plate! -

Five other soldiers attacked the stranger and struck and slashed from all sides. But the elusive man evaded and countered with such grace and agility. He maimed three of the soldiers, slew one, and forced another to fall back in fright. The other troopers sneered. The officer himself was shocked by the outcome. His men had fallen so easily to the hooded stranger.

But it was Kairi who was most astounded. For some reason, she seemed not threatened by this man s appearance. In fact, there was a comforting feeling in his presence. At the same time, there was that admiration for his skill.

This guy, Kairi thought to herself, He s good, very good, but who can he be? Could it be possible that&?

You fended off five elites again? The officer uttered. Who are you?

If you must know, The man suddenly threw off his cloak, Then behold the truth behind the shadow. Before Kairi and the soldiers stood a tall and dashing youth, no older than Riku, his hair a dark toned red and his eyes were a sky blue, similar to the damsel he was protecting. He wore a short, black shell jacket with red cuffs, interior, gilded lining and was double-breasted with two rows of buttons. On his shoulders were brass armored blades that reached to the joint of his elbow, to prevent any upper arm damage. His trousers were black as well, with red rank lines at the side. He wore white gloves and boots with gold tips. This distinguished features of his uniform indicated that he was a member of the Midnight Faction.

It s that traitor! the officer was stunned, Prince Kirin of the Flaming Blades!

Kirin&? Kairi said. The name suddenly struck a chord.

What the hell are you doing here anyway? -

I ve come to find a certain someone in this town. Kirin replied. And it would bog me down if I found out

you and your cronies killed them.

Traitor, the officer sneered, I'll see you dead! Death to all traitors who stand against the Imperial Axis! Kill him!

This time, there was no holding back. The remaining soldiers charged without pause against the prince. But Kirin was quick, throwing himself over the heads of the soldiers, cutting the throats of some, killing them instantly. The soldiers swarmed around like wasps, but none was a real threat to the agile monarch. Back and forth they battled, Kirin evading with incredible skill and the Aryan soldiers a step behind trying to slay him.

Can't you do better than this? Kirin mocked.

Shut your mouth, boy! one soldier shouted. From all directions, they attacked, but to avail did they smite the youth. Swirling about his voulge, Kirin slew three more.

Why is it that Kirin is fighting so ferociously for this girl he doesn't even know? the officer thought.

Unless... The officer soon realized. I see, so that's why...

Kairi looked on as this stranger battled with such integrity as if his main goal was to protect only her.

Is he fighting for me? Kairi thought to herself. But just then, at the corner of her eye, she saw the officer suddenly charge at her without warning.

It's you who he fights for! the officer shouted. Now die!

Kairi cried out as she saw here emanate death befall her once again. Kirin turned to see her in danger of being smitten.

Kairi, he suddenly shouted. He pushed back his attackers and went in defense of the young woman. Just as the officer's saber fell upon her, the blade was blocked by Kirin's voulge.

What, the officer uttered. He looked to see the suddenly demonic glare in the eyes of the prince.

You keep your hands off of her, you filth. Kirin pushed the officer away, swung around and lunged one of the blade ends deep into the officer. The officer keeled over, blood rushing from the ghastly wound in his belly. Attacking her has cost you your life.

Damn you, a soldier shouted, rushing at Kirin from behind. Kirin quickly turned. There was a sudden pain in his left shoulder as the trooper's pike had managed to strike underneath his shoulder armor.

No Kirin, Kairi uttered.

I got you, traitor. The soldier replied with a chuckle. But his smile turned inward as he saw the rage in the eyes of the monarch.

Do you think you're dealing with an amateur? Kirin drew up his weapon and sliced the man's face in half from the chin up. The other soldiers though elites were themselves fearing this crazed youth who had already maimed and killed many of their companions and their leading officer as well. Have you forgotten who I am?! I am Kirin of the Flaming Blades! Striking his blades upon the ground, the voulge became an inferno of raging fire. Now you will all burn! The fire seemed to dance about with a mind of its own.

Fearing and mesmerized by the dancing flames, the elites stalled in their attempts to defend themselves. One by one, they were struck by the intense heat and the sharpened steel of Kirin's voulge. Of the twenty-five or so soldiers who engaged, only ten managed to survive unscathed. They picked up their wounded comrades and quickly withdrew into the now lifting fog of the smoke bombs.

Kirin grasped his wounded arm as he watched his adversaries withdraw from the field. The blood stained his white glove and shirt, but he didn't pay any further mind to his wound. He could only look on as the last of the Aryan soldiers vanished into the distance.

Kirin, Kairi uttered.

Are you alright, Miss? Kirin asked.

Uh...yes, I'm alright. She then looked at Kirin's shoulder, watching the fine cloth stain with crimson.

Here, let me help you.

There s no need. Kirin pulled his arm away.

C mon, let me help you. Kairi put her hands upon his shoulder again. The least you could let me do is mend you up a little bit.

Well&I& -

Kairi, a voice suddenly shouted. Kairi turned to see little Muli running towards her.

Hey, Muli, Kairi replied, embracing the boy. Are you alright?

Yeah, I m okay, Muli then happened to look at Kirin. Thank you, sir, for saving me.

It was nothing. Kirin replied, turning away.

You saved Muli? Kairi asked.

I was just in the vicinity that s all. -

I see, Kairi walked up to the young man. Then I guess I owe you twice as much for saving Muli as well as I. Kirin didn t dare make eye contact. But as he was continuously enticed into gazing into Kairi s blue pupils, he had no other choice, but to give in to temptation. Let me mend up your wound for you, Kirin.

I guess& Kirin was a little hesitant at first.

There was a sudden cheer in the distance, attracting the threes attention. From the thinning clouds, Imetriarch appeared with a handful of jubilant soldiers.

Victory has come to the forces of the Arakis Foundation this day! he declared openly. The forces of Montague have been quelled and are now in full retreat!

Imetriarch, Muli cried, running to his old friend.

Your Excellency, the two embraced, I see that you are still alive and well, young master.

All thanks to Kairi and Kirin. -

Kirin&? -

Yeah, the guy sitting next to Kairi, Muli pointed. The foundation soldiers were stunned.

Isn t that the infamous Kirin of the Flaming Blades? one soldier asked.

What the hell is he doing here? another added. The soldiers murmured amongst themselves.

Enough, Imetriarch calmed them down. I m sure that there is a logical explanation for him being here.

But he s a member of the Midnight Faction. He can t be trusted. -

If that s so, why would he go out of his way to save our master? The soldiers couldn t find an explanation. Their silence confirmed their confusion. If Kirin is a member of the Midnight Faction, he would have done as his lord had commanded and kill Master Muli without a moment s notice.

You do have a point, prime minister. One of the officers concurred.

Kairi, in the meantime, took out a clean piece of cloth that was originally supposed to be used to clean the boats earlier that morning.

Could you please take off your jacket and shirt? Kairi asked. I need to bandage up that wound of yours really good.

Of course, Kirin took off his coat, armor and shirt, revealing a tight and muscular physique. Kairi was almost enticed by his youthful form, but shook it off to help mend the wound. But as she attended the injury, she noticed a half-heart locket around his neck. Kairi was shocked, but turned away as if not to notice it. But Kirin caught a glimpse of her intrigue, but said nothing.

Prince Kirin, Imetriarch declared as he approached, I thank you for coming to the aid of young Master Muli.

It s quite alright. Kirin replied.

But how is it that you have come here? -

I have been branded as a traitor and have been condemned by the Midnight Faction and the Imperial Axis. -

I was unaware, sir. We have been on the lamb for quite some time and news seldom reaches us. -

I am now scouring the worlds to find a certain someone. -

Is that so? -

I'm close to finding her, I can feel it. He might have been trying to drop Kairi the hint.

Well, I hope you find this person. Imetriarch replied.

And what about you? Kirin asked. What brings you here? Is it true that you have decided to make peace with the Universal Alliance?

That is correct, sir. -

Well, then I won't stop you, not like I have any reason to do so anyway. But if you do make peace with the alliance, the closer we'll be to ending this chaos. And then Lord Sirius Viicous will finally pay for all the cruelty he has inflicted on others -

Aye, Imetriarch bowed. Well, thank you very much Miss Kairi, Prince Kirin, for taking care of master Muli. I shall take it from here.

Very well, -

Shall we, Master? -

Yeah, Muli replied with a smile on his face. He turned to his friends. Thank you very much, Kairi and Kirin. He bowed and the two walked away, their soldiers a little behind them in pursuit.

I guess Mulian Arakis is not the ambitious tyrant he was portrayed as by the Imperial Axis. -

Yeah, Kairi replied. There was a sudden awkward silence, broken only by the ruffling of Kairi's wrapping of the bandage. Then came the increasing sniffles of sadness. Kairi, for some reason began to cry. She suddenly laid her head upon Kirin's back.

Are you alright, Miss? -

You knew my name. Kairi replied. You called out my name. Kirin knew right away that she was aware of who he was. You have the same style locket as me. I have to know something. I have to ask you a question, but I fear that I might be disappointed about what you might say.

What is it? Kirin asked. Kairi stalled, but summoned the courage.

Are you my brother? Are you the one from my dreams? Are you the little boy that I always see playing with me as a child? I've always been under the impression that I had an older sibling. Kairi pulled out her locket and showed it to him. I have to know, are you him? There was again another awkward silence. This time, Kirin broke the tension, not with words, but with his actions. He took from his neck, his locket and handed it to Kairi.

Kairi took his locket and connected it with her own. The two halves were a perfect fit, a heart with insignias and designs that interwove and coincided with one another. But Kairi was still apprehensive. She knew that the locket could only be opened when the two proper sides were brought together. She tried to pry open the lid. Sure enough, to her shock, the lid did open upon their hinges. The soft tone of a sad and cheerful melody rang out and there in the heart was a united picture of a young boy and a young girl. The little girl was her. Kairi gasped with her eyes still teary. She then looked up at Kirin who had suddenly turned and was looking at her with that solemn and comforting look.

You're my& Kairi could only utter those two words. But Kirin only smiled and nodded. Overcome with such joy, Kairi threw herself in Kirin's arms and wept. You're my brother&

Yes, Kirin tightly held her in his arms, I needn't have had to tell you. You figured it out all on your own. But was that you all this time, the cloaked man? -

Yes, -

But why didn't you just say something to me? -

You would not have believed me. -

But our lockets& -

Our lockets are insignificant. They signify nothing when the emotion is not present. I wanted you to find out for yourself. -

I& Kairi was dumbfounded, not knowing what to think, but she didn't care. She had been reunited with

her brother. His touch, his smell, they were all nostalgic feelings and she felt no apprehension or tension. She released her feelings for that one brief moment.

I've always been looking forward to this day when I would finally meet you again, Kairi. Kirin said. Our destinies have led us here. He then pulled her away to gaze into her eyes. There is nothing to be so sad about now.

I'm not sad, Kairi replied. I'm happy, so happy that you're here. But how did you find me? How did you know where to look? And why didn't you come sooner?

For a long time, though I remembered who you are, I had long forgotten your name and had no idea where to locate you. I had no links or whereabouts of where you were. But that all changed when I met two old friends of yours. -

Old friends&? -

Riku and Sora, Kairi's eyes grew large.

Riku and Sora&? Did you see them? -

Yes, it was because of them that I gained the one lead to finding you. They told me that you were also aware of my presence. -

I guess it was that story I told them years ago. But how did you come to encounter them? -

It was under the most unpleasant of circumstances. Kirin suddenly turned away, as if avoiding conversation or eye contact. Kairi was puzzled thinking that maybe there was a dark secret behind the encounter between her brother and her friends.

What encounter was that? she asked.

We met as enemies, Kairi. They were off to fight against the Midnight Faction. I was fighting for it, which is the reason for this uniform I wear. -

You were enemies? Kairi was starting to get a little concerned.

There was a point where I tried to kill them both. -

No& -

Yes, but fate was against me, as if to say that those two young men were not to perish by my hand. -

Are they alright though? -

They emerged victorious in the end with barely a scratch to show it, while I was apprehended as a defeated man. Kirin looked at his sister. So tell me, Kairi, can you look at me and accept me for what I've done? I had always promised myself that if I ever met you, I would be truthful to you with everything and open up as best I could. That's the reason why I kept my distance these past couple of weeks, because I knew that you, Riku and Sora are close friends. Could you accept a lost brother's words over the concern of the friends you have been near with since childhood?

Of course I could, Kairi stood up and confronted her brother. I know now that Riku and Sora are alright and that they're still safe and sound! But even they could not close the gap that was left in my heart, despite their concern and love for me. Kairi grasped her brother's hand. I needed you there as well. And now, I don't feel worried or lost anymore. I know that I have a brother, I always have. Now that little space left in my heart has been filled.

Kairi, They locked eye contact, brother and sister. But their precious moment was shattered with the sound of guns bellowing off in the distance and the clash of battle once again echoing in the distance. Soon thereafter, Imetriarch and Mulian, along with hundreds of soldiers were seen running towards them, heading for the northern outskirts of town.

What's going on? Kirin asked.

The Aryans are starting to advance from the northern flanks. Imetriarch replied. And they're attacking in full force again.

Is that so? Is there anything I can do to help? -

If you would care to battle alongside us, -

I shall do so, sir. -

Kairi, Imetriarch glanced at the young lady, Would you care to take care of Muli again.

Of course, Kairi replied.

But Imetriarch, Muli objected, let me go with you.

We can't afford to have you in harm's way, sir. Let us deal with this. Muli knew that arguing was futile.

Very well, -

Let's go then. Imetriarch led the troops to the battlements. In the meantime, Kirin has redressed himself.

You take care of yourselves while we're gone. He said.

But what about you and your injury? Kairi asked.

I'll live. I've had far worse than this. -

But Kirin, -

Don't worry about me. Kirin picked up his blade and followed the column of soldiers to the fray.

As both sides engaged again, General Fortinbras was busy overlooking the battlefield. He drummed his fingers impatiently.

Of all the times for this to occur. He grumbled. He observed the fighting. Then, observed the Foundation craft not too far off on the southern side of the island. Damn that foundation cruiser, destroying our starboard and fore gun batteries, who would have thought that there was that much fire power and spunk in one of those lower ranking battleships. If only we had mobile dolls and mobile droids on board, then we could have demolished that eyesore and the rest of the foundation with very little effort.

There was nothing we could do, sir. The captain replied.

And what of our status in repairs? -

It's not going as well as we had planned, sir. We've suffered a great deal of damage. Our exterior has suffered over 52% damage, due to that battle we had with the foundation carrier. Of that 52%, 47% was due to the obliteration of our entire artillery battery on the starboard and bow. As for our interior damage, three of our generators have been severely damaged, so taking off would be out of the question for the time being. I'm surprised we were able to sustain ourselves for as long as we did without crashing into the sea.

Damn it. -

Well, look on the bright side, sir. The foundation cruiser took on a lot of damage in that fight as well.

Though their guns are still working, their outer defenses have been blown to hell. They'll keep quiet for a while. -

How long will it take for repairs? the general asked.

Well, even at a non-stop repair pace for twenty-four hours a day, the captain replied, It'll take at least three to four days.

Then if we're going to be here for that long, the least we can do is cause as much damage to the foundation ground troops as much as we can. We can shift our port side guns towards the town correct?

Yes we can, sir. -

And we're in range of the town correct? The captain knew of Fortinbras' intentions and wished to openly oppose, but doing so was also treasonous.

Y&yes sir. -

Then if that's the case, bear down our cannons towards that settlement and flush the foundation out. We attack by day and bombard by night, depriving them of sleep. Soon, the opposition will be so exhausted, after being pummeled by our cannons, they'll eventually be overrun. I don't care if we have

to destroy that entire town. -

But they will most likely pull out, sir, in concern for the people's safety. -

It doesn't matter. These Destiny Islanders deserve to have chaos reign on their doorstep. We will target the town for principle's sake, so the foundation can curse itself for ever touching down on this world.

Fortinbras folded his arms in front of him. Besides, we're planning on conquering this land in the near future. Let's give them a reason to fear us. Again, the captain was hesitant.

Aye sir, -

Then unleash hell with our remaining guns. I also want transmission scramblers up and running. That way, no transmitted messages can be sent anywhere in this world. -

But sir, our ship's anti-scrambler was rendered useless when it was hit in the battle with the foundation carrier. If we use the transmission scrambler, then we aren't immune to the effects of static interference. Transmitted communication we use will be affected too. -

That too is irrelevant. As long as they can't call for reinforcements, that's all that is required. -

But sir, we won't be able to call for backup troops either. The captain said.

There will be no need for that. Fortinbras chuckled. The fighting might have gone bad for us in these early stages, but we still have superiority in numbers and fire power. Eventually, the remainder of the former Arakis Foundation will fall and the threat of them merging with the Universal Alliance shall fail. -

I understand, sir. -

Then let us show these arrogant fools what true strength is. -

Dusk was already falling as the fighting continued into the late afternoon. Skirmishes near the town's northern outskirts had erupted and battle occurred back and forth. The Arakis Foundation's thin lines of defense swayed back and forth like waves. A mile of shrub lands and clear fields saw terrible carnage. Five times, the forces of Fortinbras advanced. Five times they pushed back the Arakis Foundation. Five times the foundation held and countered. And five times they pushed back the Aryans and regained their ground.

With the help of Prince Kirin and the defenders of the Destiny Island like Tidus, Wakka, and Selphie, Fortinbras was not able to go beyond the mile outside of town. By day's end, the fighting subsided and many of the soldiers had created shallow barracks and trenches to hide and seek shelter behind.

By this time, Kirin, Imetriarch, and the island defenders had withdrawn temporarily, leaving the subordinate commanders in charge of the battle line. Kairi and Muli were awaiting their return near the outskirts. As soon as they saw their comrades approach, smiles were exchanged.

Brother, Kairi said, You guys are alright.

That was intense fighting though. Kirin replied.

I can't believe this is happening. Tidus mumbled. How is it that our home would become a battlefield? I never would have thought to see blood on the beaches or to see the land pocked with battle scars. He looked at Imetriarch and Muli. I mean, you guys could have prevented this couldn't you?

No, Imetriarch replied. There's no way that we could have prevented this. Even if we didn't come to this world, sooner or later, your home would be involved in this universal conflict.

There is no such thing as sanctuary in this war. Kirin added. You either fight or die.

I can't accept that answer, I won't, Tidus stomped his foot on the ground in frustration. This could have all been prevented. This could have all been ignored.

It could have been and it probably should have. Kairi said. But it wasn't. You can only face facts, Tidus, war has come to our front door and there's nothing we can do about it now. The only thing we can do is to fight and defend the place we hold dear to our hearts.

Kairi does have a point. Selphie agreed. Like it or not, war has come and we can't change that. We'll just have to accept it.

Damn it, Tidus growled, as if things couldn't get any worse.

But no sooner had Tidus said that, the distant sound of booming could be heard. The allies perked up their ears to the sound of far off roaring and whistling that grew louder in pitch.

What is that sound? Wakka asked.

Just then, Kirin looked to the north to see balls of light plummeting towards them. He saw where they had originated, from the ship, and immediately he knew what they were.

Get down, all of you! he cried. He threw Kairi and Muli to the ground, just as the first shell of many, struck the ground. There was a large explosion, followed by a second, a third, and a fourth. Now, all the cannon shots were falling upon them and the allies threw themselves onto the ground for cover. Clouds of dust and debris uplifted into the dusky sky, houses and buildings, unfortunate to be hit, suddenly collapsed from their foundations, or took on a hideous form as their former beauty was riddled with projectiles and pieces of shrapnel. Explosions erupted everywhere, even in the middle of town.

What the heck is that? Tidus asked.

It's the Aryan ship, he replied. They're bombarding us!

Damn it. Imetriarch growled. We have to seek shelter right away! He looked at Kairi. Kairi, is there any place where you can shelter young Master Mulian?

There's a bomb shelter at the mayor's residence. Kairi replied.

See to it that he's brought there safely. -

Right, -

No, Mulian objected, I'm staying here, Imetriarch! I will not hide like some kind of animal! I'm going to stay here and help!

You will not! -

I will, -

You will do as you're told, young man! We can't afford to lose you! -

And yet you expect me to stand behind, sheltered in safety, while those men are dying?! Those are my men, Imetriarch, my men! They're only here because they believe in me, they believe in the Arakis name! Sure it would be easy for them to just defect against me and join the Aryan Faction, but they chose not to! They are here because they have faith in the Arakis family! Now how am I supposed to be a good leader, make an example of myself, and win their respect if I'm not there to support them?! Those are my men and they are dying for my sake! I will not abandon them in their time of need! -

Master Mulian & Crassus, for the first time in his life, was astounded by his master's rebellious outburst. He does have a point. Kairi said.

Well, I & Imetriarch knew he had to take care and watch out for Muli, but now he started to question his own motives. Was he being overprotective, or was he trying to maintain his own authority over the young boy? Crassus did not want to think himself as being selfish. He could only accept that his young master was no longer a boy. Crassus bowed respectfully, As you wish, master. I can no longer hold you back.

Thank you, Imetriarch. Mulian replied. The boy raised himself and stood before the bombardment, fearing not his own death. If we must face death, then we face it together!

Yeah, the others replied.

But that still doesn't change the fact that we're at a disadvantage. Kirin said. So long as that ship is bombarding us, we're left pinned down. We have to cease the bombardment before there's nothing left.

Imetriarch, Muli said, can you contact our ship and tell them to keep the Aryan carrier quiet?

I can, sir. Imetriarch used his scouter to contact the ship, but to his dismay the transmitter was undergoing static interference. Oh no,

What is it? -

There's static interference. -

No, -

It can only mean one thing then. Kirin said.

What does it mean? Selphie asked.

It means that the Aryan Faction has set up a transmission scrambler in this world. -

What does that mean? Tidus asked.

It means we can't communicate using transmitted messages. All communication airwaves have been nullified. -

And that's bad, ya? Wakka said.

So what do we do? Tidus wondered.

The only other option is to send a courier to make their way back to the ship and give them the information. Imetriarch said.

Then I think I can help with that. -

What do you mean? -

I have a motorcycle in my garage. I could use that to give the message. -

So does that mean you're volunteering? Kairi asked.

Don't get me wrong. I'd hate to miss all the fun, but I'm probably the only guy here who actually owns a motorcycle, let alone knows how to ride it. -

Very well, Imetriarch implied, Tidus, you shall be our courier.

You can count on me. -

Then, be off. Crassus took out a pen and paper and wrote down the orders. Take this with you and hand it to the captain.

Yes sir, Tidus saluted and withdrew.

The only thing we can do now is wait for his return.

The shells fell around them, inflicting immense damage on the town. The soldiers dug themselves into the ground, using the soil to protect them. Firing continued even as the sun set and only flashes from the distant artillery and the streaks of flying projectiles could be distinguished in the night sky. Civilians either scurried to the safety of the countryside, or were huddled in their homes, hoping for the worst to be over. But a projectile did not know the value or preciousness of a home and a few of the residential structures were demolished.

In the meantime, Tidus has managed to get back to his home, take out his motorcycle from the garage and sped off to the area where he saw the foundation carrier settle.

I hope I'm not too late. He thought to himself. Time is of the essence. Pressing down on the gear, Tidus made the motorcycle roar as it sped faster to the ship. Within five to ten minutes, he finally arrived at the ship's perimeter. The foundation guards saw him coming and shined a bright light on him. Tidus hit the brakes and stopped the bike from advancing any further. He was blinded by the bright searchlights.

Who goes there? one of the sentries cried. Identify yourself!

I'm Tidus from the settlement! Tidus replied. I bring a message to you from the prime minister! Tidus pulled out the message from his pocket and held it up. I have to give this to the captain.

Stay where you are! the sentry declared. He then addressed another soldier. Summon the captain! Tell him that a messenger has arrived from our ground forces!

Aye sir, a voice replied.

Tidus stood still for a good few minutes before captain finally made an appearance.

What is the meaning of this? he asked.

I bring a message to you from Prime Minister Crassus! Tidus replied.

Preposterous, if the prime minister wants to send a message, he can just transmit a message to us. -

But he can't. Those Aryan guys put up some kind of scrambling device. -

Is that true? -

Yes, -

Captain, one of the soldiers implied, he's right. The Aryans have set up an anti-transmission scrambler. That means we can't send any type of message that relies on radio waves.

Is that confirmed? the captain asked.

Aye sir, The captain turned to Tidus

Alright, young man, I'm listening. What does the prime minister say? -

He wishes to inform you, Tidus began, that the Aryan Faction carrier has landed on the north peninsula of the island and is now pummeling the ground troops and the town. He wants you to get your ship airborne and cripple, if not destroy that cruiser for good. -

Is that what he said? He then saw the message in Tidus' hand. He asked for the slip. Give me the written message, son. Tidus handed the slip of paper and the captain examined it. Yes, this is definitely the prime minister's handwriting. He then looked up at Tidus. I'm sorry young man, but I cannot fulfill the prime minister's request.

Why not? -

The Aryan cruiser inflicted a great deal of damage on us. Two of our generators have been destroyed, which means we won't be able to sustain ourselves in the air for an extensive amount of time. We'd as soon crash before even managing to lift off from this spot. -

But the town is being bombarded. -

I'm sorry young man. The captain handed him back the message. You will just have to tell the prime minister that we can't aid him at the present time. Indeed, I don't think we'll get this ship up off the ground again for another five days with the amount of damage that is in need of repair.

Well, isn't there something that you can do? -

Well, the captain pondered. You need some covering fire to counter the faction bombardment. Then we can transport the mobile artillery to assist you.

Alright then, Tidus started up his motorcycle, I'll tell the prime minister. Have them transported as quickly as you can.

Very well, Tidus thus pounded the motorcycle peddle and sped off. In the meantime, the captain gave order to his subordinates. Activate those mobile cannons and get them under way to the town, for the preservation of his Excellency's legacy!

Aye sir, the subordinate replied and scurried off.

At the same time, the soldiers had dug themselves deep behind boulders and fallen tree trunks, watched the night diligently for any attempted night raids. At the same time, they avoided the shelling from the Aryan ship. Kirin, entrenched with the soldiers, kept a sharp eye out at the front line with Selphie and Wakka beside him.

You know, Selphie said, after a while, you kinda get used to all this shelling.

Try saying that when one of them actually hits you. Kirin replied. I've seen it happen. People get too comfortable with the sound of shelling, they forget about the force of the impact. By that time, however, it's already a little late.

I hope that Kairi's alright. Selphie looked back to the town, watching some of the buildings and houses go ablaze and illuminating the night sky. The town has been struck hard.

Damn those Aryan bastards. Wakka growled. They just had to come here and stir a fight.

In the meantime, Kairi was still vigilant over Mulian who had taken a seat near an open fire behind a stone wall. He huddled like a ball while holding hands near the open flame. Imetriarch in the meantime observed the battlements with his scouter's night vision lens.

So far, Imetriarch said, the infantry hasn't tried to advance in an evening attack. But then again, that would be a risky venture. They would be putting their troops in the sight of friendly fire if they did.

I didn't realize it could get really chilly here on these islands. Muli said.
It does get a little nippy at night. Kairi said, Especially when it's nearing the late summer.
Prime Minister, a sentry from the rear shouted, Sir Tidus has returned with a message!
Has he? Imetriarch said. He watched as Tidus rode up on his motorcycle. What news do you bring?
Will the captain support us?

He's unable to support us, prime minister, Tidus replied, on account that the ship has lost the ability to fly due to the severe damage taken after today's assault on the Aryan carrier.

That is no excuse! We need to have support! -

Well, he said that he would have his mobile artillery sent down. -

Well, at least that's something to start on. We'll be able to use those artillery pieces to support us. But how we're going to protect them from counter-fire is another matter. Crassus pondered as the shelling continued. He then happened to look upon a clump of trees that grew high in a semi circle, providing natural cover in the line. A thought came to his mind and he snapped his fingers. I have it. He turned to one of his subordinates that were observing the northern peninsula. Major,

Sir, the officer stood at attention.

I want you to go to our reserve forces in the rear and get three companies over here. Crassus pointed at the grove of trees he eyed earlier. Have them dig up a deep pit where those trees are located. Tell them to dig deep enough to forge a battery position. The captain is sending us the mobile artillery, so tell the men to clear some of those trees so our pieces have a clear shot of the field and that Aryan carrier's barge cannons. Tell the men to collect as much loose debris from the town as possible to fortify that position.

Yes sir, -

I want the men to work swiftly and diligently. I want that cannon pit finished before the sun rises. -

Yes sir, -

Then move. -

Sir, the officer scampered away to give the news to the reserved units.

Tidus, Crassus said.

Yes, Tidus asked.

Get back to the rear and see to it that the mobile artillery gets here without delay. -

I understand, Tidus pounded on the motorcycle peddle and rode off at great neck speed.

You certainly are an expert when it comes to strategy. Kairi complimented.

That's what the Crassus family has been known for though. Muli implied.

They are? -

I come from a long line of superb strategists. Crassus said. My father and his father before him were elite strategists. You might say that the tactician's trait is my birthright.

I see. -

The night wore on and the Arakis Foundation quickly mobilized. Despite the flashing of cannons and the exploding of shells on the ground and overhead, Muli's dedicated military conducted themselves perfectly and without disorder. The three companies chosen to dig the cannon pits, hastened to the spot where they were to labor. They dug up the soil, making a pit fifty yards long, ten yards wide, and ten feet deep. They collected splintered wood from destroyed buildings and lay them on the ground as walkways in case of a storm. Trees were felled, narrow enough so the gun positions could still be camouflaged, yet wide enough for the barrels to protrude through and give an effective shot. Stones were used to make a small wall around the position.

The cannons, by the early morning, two hours before the sun would rise, had reached their destination. Going over a tedious and long procedure, five massive cannons were placed in their positions. There

barrels were smothered with tree branches to help conceal their presence. Due to the constant shelling, the activity of preparing for and maneuvering the artillery pieces had gone unnoticed by the Aryan Faction. Working only by the luminance of fires along the line, the men were able to work quickly in the night. And with no full moon out, further luck was driven towards the Arakis Foundation.

Crassus and the others watched as the cannons were firmly placed in their positions.

That's it, boys. Imetriarch would shout at times. Keep it steady.

I can't believe that you guys managed to set up this battery station in the course of a single night. Tidus uttered with awe.

It just goes to show how diligent these soldiers of the Arakis Foundation are in their duties. Crassus then pulled out his watch. The time was about five o'clock in the morning. We spared a good amount of time in this project.

Just then, Kirin, Wakka, and Selphie appeared from down the line. They were awe-struck as they watched the concealing canopy finally rise over the artillery pit.

Hey you guys. Kairi greeted.

I'm glad to see that you were able to join us. Imetriarch said.

We were wondering what the heck you guys were doing over here all night. Kirin said. Now I see.

You have been really busy, ya? Wakka added.

You set up this artillery pit in only one night. Man, that's fast. -

Time is of the essence, Prince Kirin. Imetriarch replied. These artillery pieces will work well in our defense and keeping those Aryan pieces over there quiet. Unfortunately, we only have enough energy cells to allow each cannon to fire off a hundred shots each. So we better be conservative with the ammunition when we fire the artillery. We have to make every shot count. Thus, these five pieces will be used only to knock out those guns at the Aryan carrier. And because of the lower range of firepower for these particular field pieces, we had to set them up here at the front line. Fortunately for us there is a natural barrier of trees to guard our batteries.

You think the enemy could have seen you guys move these things? Selphie asked.

Not with all the commotion they were stirring up all night. -

But just then, something strange happened that caught the attention of everyone on the field. Perking up their ears, they heard a strange sound. A sound that was rather eerie, yet comforting and familiar. It was the sound of complete silence. The shelling has ceased for the night.

They stopped firing. Kirin said.

Yes they have. Imetriarch added.

You think they've decided to give themselves a rest? Wakka asked.

Either that, or& Imetriarch feared the worst. He turned to his men. I want all positions on the front line held and observed! The soldiers immediately obeyed. And it was a good thing they did. From out of their trenches on the far side of the island, the forces of the Aryan faction emerged and charged into the open ground against the foundation fortifications.

What a way to start off the morning. Muli said.

All soldiers to your battle positions! -

Kirin and the others split up and took their places on the crucial areas of the line, laying next to the foundation soldiers.

Keep your wits about you men! Kirin shouted, arousing the soldiers, here they come again! The soldiers arose and immediately were on their guard. Sure enough, the Aryans were once again on top of them, charging head on against their entrenchments.

Fortinbras watched from afar as his hellish columns of soldiers advanced head on against the ever thinning lines of the Arakis Foundation.

Nothing like a good morning charge to wake up little Muli and his band of traitors. He chuckled. Shouldn't we use our artillery to help in the attack though, sir? the captain asked.

No, I don't want to have to risk killing much needed soldiers with our own cannons. That would be a waste of artillery and manpower.

Funny, you didn't seem so concerned with the lives of our soldiers the other day, sir. Fortinbras heard that tone of insolence from the captain. He turned and glared at the commander.

You seem to be in a very facetious mood today. Is there something you want to say to me? Your defiance against my orders has been constant and random. Why don't you just say what you want to say and not meander about the shrub? -

With all due respect, I don't believe you have conducted this campaign very well from the beginning, sir. First, we attack this world, getting the people involved in our conflict, without giving a fair declaration of terms for them to deny or accept. We then battle against our former brethren. And you act as if we had no ties connected with them from the start. Then we risk hitting upon our own troops with our bombardment on the beach, hoping to break up the enemy forces as well, so we could end this unnecessary battle quickly and with very little bloodshed. And yet now you want to prolong it for the sake of the lives of those same soldiers whom you dared to unleash friendly fire upon. -

That's the thing about life, commander. Fortinbras sat himself upon his seat and rested his head on his knuckle. It's always about trial and error. I might have made a few mistakes here and there, but there was no real impact on yesterday's actions.

Perhaps, sir if you were to take this battle more seriously, -

But wasn't it you that said it was unnecessary to engage here, yet you want to take the battle seriously now? -

That has nothing to do with& -

I am in command here, captain. If you want to give me suggestions, then go ahead. But I am the one who decides on whether to deploy our troops or not. -

Is this the same attitude you had at the Battle of Long Valley? No wonder we lost that fight. But that statement was indeed the straw that broke the camel's back. Fortinbras suddenly snapped at the captain.

That is enough, captain! He raised himself from his seat and stormed to face the captain face to face. You've made your point, now drop it! You think it's easy to see tens of thousands of men die?! I saw our finest soldiers killed by the score! That's more than what you will ever see in your entire damned lifetime! He suddenly grabbed the captain's throat. I have absolute power here and no one here will second-guess my motives&ever. Do you understand?!

Y&yes, sir& the captain strained. Fortinbras threw him down and threw himself back on his seat.

Now, continue the attack! -

Aye sir, the operatives replied.

The battle would rage on upon the Destiny Islands, with the home island of Riku, Sora, and Kairi as the focal point of the entire confrontation. The battle would continue on in the early morning with random charges, holding actions, and later bombardments, with numerous deaths on both sides. The inhabitants of the island would suffer as well as they would slowly watch their once peaceful island bellow in flames. Never again would the lives of the people be the same again.

But in the deep and isolated forests of Montroze, near the Gilgazion springs, it was just another simple passing day. The training of the key bearers commenced without any real disturbance. It was once again the early morning and Thundro had dressed himself in his finest uniform. He checked his watch.

The twenty-four hours are almost up. He said to himself. That means that Riku and Sora's regimen in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber is about to conclude, best to meet them as they walk out.

Thundro exited his quarters and made his way to the Northern Corridor. He thus presented himself before the door of the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. There he stood, feet apart and hands clutched behind his back, awaiting the emergence of the key bearers.

Sure enough, no more than ten minutes had passed before the door slowly opened. There was a bright light coming from the doorway, which caused the Death Lord to squint slightly. From that light, a shadowy figure emerged. It was Sora who first made his appearance. His uniform was tattered and frayed, inflicted by the incredible training he underwent while in the chamber. His bodily features had also changed. He seemed somewhat taller, his physique just as slender and muscular as ever. His hair had grown shoulder length, giving him an appearance identical to Cuchulain. He stood in the doorway, tall and proud of his achievements.

The next to emerge was Riku in the same tattered state as Sora. He too had grown taller and his physique was just as impressive. His hair had grown substantially as well, draping down to his lower back. Thundro was amazed at their appearance, but he was more amazed at the level of strength they gained, sensing their new power.

Sorry we're a little late. Sora said. Did we miss anything?

Not in the course of a single day. Thundro replied. You've changed a great deal though.

What can you expect for a full year of training? Riku remarked.

Your strengths have increased dramatically since the last time. So tell me, what have you gained in during your time in the chamber? -

The key bearers had gained a great deal and Thundro would soon find that out for himself as his harsh regimen continued.

13 - Improvements

Improvements

So, Thundro said, What have you gained in your time within the chamber?

It was definitely a new experience. Sora said. It was as you had said, that chamber is full of the unexpected.

At times we didn't know what to think. Riku added. The climate changed dramatically with the atmosphere in separate intervals. We encountered specters and illusions that weren't really faint apparitions.

At times, I thought we were gonna die in there. -

Did you have an urge to escape and end your training? Thundro asked.

Many times, there were those moments where I was on the brink of madness. -

And what stopped you from losing your mind? -

It was those thoughts of home and the people we left behind. Riku said. But most importantly, it was each other. Sora and I had no one else to comfort us, but ourselves.

So do you think your friendship has strengthened? Riku and Sora looked at each other and smiled.

I believe so. -

That's good then, because when it gets down to it, there are only two people you can trust, yourself and the man next to you. Thus, you must entrust even your faith and your life to your own mind and the mind of your companion. Thundro put his arms behind him. I'm sure that you have undergone a great deal and what you have encountered in there will remain confidential amongst yourselves. But for now, I would like to see how much you've progressed. I sense a great deal of improved strength from you. I would like to see how it favors in combat. Thundro turned towards the door leading to the gravity room.

Let us head towards the gravity chamber and give your new found strength a test.

The three entered the gravity chamber. Thundro inputted the data for the required gravity, five times the normal level. The effects of the pressure could now be felt. But unlike the day before, Riku and Sora weren't wavered by the sudden change. They no longer staggered. Thundro was impressed.

I see that you two can withstand five times the natural gravity. He remarked. Your stamina is certainly an improvement from the other day. Yesterday, you could barely even stand in five times the natural gravity.

We encountered those numerous changes in pressure while in the hyperbolic time chamber. Sora implied. It's not surprising that we can withstand the level.

The question is will you two be able to move swiftly in this type of gravity? Again, Riku and Sora looked at each other and gave that impetuous smirk. Thundro immediately knew that the task was a simple matter to them now. He said nothing though, allowing the key bearers to wallow in their achievements.

The Imperial drew out his double blades. Now, do you two still have those orbs I gave you?

The key bearers drew from their pockets, the orbs that were passed to them by Thundro the other day.

They tossed them up into the air and allowed them to freefall back down. Just then, they drew out their keyblades and extended them outward, catching the orbs without sounding a ring from the bell inside, or letting the surface clang. The orbs remained stationed on the area to which they landed.

Thundro was again impressed, but he showed no real outward enthusiasm.

You've improved well. He chuckled. But let me ask you this. How good are you at balancing the ball

upon the shaft of your weapon?

There s only one way to find out. Riku said.

Don t get too overconfident, boys. You ve only been battling each other for the passed year in the chamber. After a while, you become accustomed to the others tactics and movement. However, fighting against someone like me will be slightly different. -

We ll never know unless we try. Sora declared.

So be it, let s see what you ve got! Thundro attacked both key bearers head on. The key bearers in turn reacted, tossing their orbs into the air again. The battle began just as intensely as the first time they engaged. But Riku and Sora were able to maintain the balance between themselves and the atmosphere. Though their orbs jangled at times, they managed to keep them balanced upon their blades. The key blades were now no longer a weapon. They had become the extension of their arms, a part of their body. And Thundro could see it as he battled ferociously against Riku and Sora.

They ve vastly improved since the last time. He thought to himself. Riku and Sora have gained a new strength. They have learned to use the keyblades to the point that the weapons have become a part of their body. They can feel the slightest vibration in the air and know how to interpret the impact upon their weapons. Thus, allowing the orbs to fall gently upon their arms. They have leveled equally their mind, body, and spirit. Most excellent, Thundro smirked behind a stern glare. Not even Guentory had ever excelled this much his first time. He barely even managed to stay in the hyperbolic time chamber for even half a day. If there is anyone who can defeat him, it ll be Riku and Sora. Still& Thundro again pondered. This is but a simulation of a battle. A real battle, however, will have its tosses and turns. But I ll let that off for the time being and allow these young men to boast their gains.

After ten minutes of battle, the fighting suddenly ceased and the two sides were at a stand still. Riku and Sora posed their keyblades and caught the orbs, letting them land softly upon their weapons shafts. Thundro smiled and stuck his swords tips into the floor of the chamber, letting them stand without attendance.

So what did you think? Sora asked.

I have to admit, you two. Thundro applauded, clapping his hands. You have done exceedingly well. You have gained a great asset in your arsenal. I can see that your time in the hyperbolic time chamber was not spent of tomfoolery.

We underwent a great deal of hell while we were in there. Riku replied. The key bearers took their individual orbs and placed them in their pockets.

So, do you think we re strong enough to absorb those orbs of yours now? Sora asked. Thundro s look turned stern.

You ve improved a great deal, boys. He declared. But you haven t improved enough to take in the Immunity Orb. You still have a while longer.

But we ve gained so much. I think we re ready. -

Believe me, you re not ready yet. -

But you saw what we were capable of, Master Thundro. Riku remarked. We can balance the orbs on our blades and we can move swiftly without much trouble in five times the natural gravity level.

That may be so, Riku. Thundro assured. But you have become accustomed to those conditions because you had been exposed to them throughout your period in the time chamber. Real battles, as you should be aware by now, have different elements. The only thing you can rely on is the here and now. You have to think and predict. Strategy is only good for the commander. But it s up to the quick wit of the single warrior or soldier that determines how individual confrontations are decided. You should know this well since you have experienced those sensations for yourselves. Thundro picked up his swords. Allow me to give you a demonstration of what I mean. Thundro suddenly began to increase his energy. The key bearers readied their weapons.

This power, Sora said, I've never felt anything like this.

It's a strange power. Riku added. It has a distinctive nature to it. I wonder what it is that Thundro will show us.

Suddenly, Thundro's body split into two. The key bearers were stunned, not knowing what to make of what they were witnessing. Thundro emerged, separated into two separate entities.

You thought that fighting one Thundro was hard, let's see how good you are when fighting against two. -

There are two of them now? Sora uttered, sweat dripping down his temples.

Impossible, Riku uttered, He can't do that, can he?

Well, he did it. -

This time, boys, Thundro declared, I will not hold back! This time, you will be fighting for your lives!

This time around, I will battle you and I will kill you!

You can't be serious. -

Watch me. Thundro chuckled. The two separate Death Lords charged with incredible speed. Sora and Riku quickly reacted as best they could. Now, because they were fighting against two Thundros, the task had increased a great deal more. The Imperials slashed and spiked at the key bearers, hoping to impale them. At times Riku and Sora were cut across the face or on the shoulder, or on other part of their body. Their flesh drew blood and they realized that what Thundro had said was true.

He's not bluffing. Sora was apprehensive now. He really intends to kill us this time.

If you plan on winning, you better be ready in two ways. Thundro said. You had better be ready to pull out all the abilities you are capable of. And above all, you better be ready to kill me. Don't hesitate on account that I am teaching you. Consider me your enemy and fight whole heartedly.

Very well then, Riku charged head long against the second Thundro. But for some reason, his body suddenly felt heavier and he could barely move. What is this? I can't move.

Me either, Riku. Sora added. But why?

Now die! Thundro shouted as he split halves attacked the key bearers. Riku and Sora saw that their lives were in danger and quickly evaded to the best of their abilities. But they evaded only by a few inches. Had they delayed any longer, they might have lost a limb to Thundro's blade. Not bad, boys.

But why all of a sudden can't we move? -

Haven't you realized yet? Thundro thumbed to the gravity simulation. The reading gave out ten times the natural level. I made sure to put the gravity pressure on random from a scale of one to ten. In other words, the gravity will vary. This in turn will affect your reaction time just as it had a minute ago.

That's not fair though! -

In battle, there are no such things as being fair. The one who is well prepared the most is most likely to be the one who succeeds. You must expect the unexpected and take nothing for granted. They battled again. This time the two young warriors were at a complete disadvantage. They converged back to back as they saw the two Thundros approaching.

We have to get out of this. Sora said.

I know. Riku replied.

Do you have any ideas? -

There's only one way I know out of this, the Evasion Technique. -

Yeah, let's do it. -

Unleashing the attack, Riku and Sora used the technique, using light and shadow to evade, confuse and strike the two Thundros. But to their dismay, the conclusion was a reversal. It was they who were pummeled. The two Thundros landed without a scratch.

But how did he&? Riku uttered.

A tactic that didn't even work on the mighty Lu Bu, Thundro said. Did you really expect it to work on

me?

But that attack worked almost every time in the past. Sora gasped.

It just goes to show that if you rely too much on a specific tactic or technique, it becomes your greatest weakness and the enemy eventually catches on. Thundro eased himself and merged into one being again. He then sheathed his blades. The key bearers sat up. In this case, you have used that Evasion technique so many times that its reputation has spread even to the most isolated of regions. To add, you are talking to one of the legendary and infamous Death Lords. I am not as easy to fool as the rest. Most importantly, it is advisable never to show your best techniques unless necessary. This is a Shinobi method, never to display techniques and skills with such flamboyancy that your enemy will catch on to the secrets behind the ability and exploit its weaknesses for a countering measure. You must obtain a large plethora of abilities, one slightly altered than the other. This way, an enemy cannot guarantee a successful counter. -

That sounds like Triiken's Noctin Exmortin. Riku thought to himself. He's able to change his attack maneuvering each time so his enemy wouldn't be able to interpret the timing and technique.

Also, another lesson to learn is to not become accustomed to any one technique of your foes. If you do, you will start to think that that's all they are capable of. Ergo, when they pull something out that's completely different from what you usually expect, the outcome can be fatal. In other words, never assume that your enemy has limits. -

I see, Sora said.

Also, two very important factors are always to be considered, but in most cases are seldom practiced, even by me. -

What's that? -

The first is that you are not to become too overconfident in your own abilities. You yourself may think that you might not have limits, but in reality you do. Yet you're not fully aware of them. The second is not to prolong a battle for the sake of your own pleasure. -

What do you mean? -

In other words, do not extend a battle just for the sake of showing off your invincibility and expressing your overconfidence. It has happened numerous times. You yourselves have encountered this before, with both yourselves as well as your foe. Delaying a battle will only allow your opponent to find another opportunity to regain strength or discover a counter that would lead to your downfall. If you find the opportunity to end the battle, do it without delay. -

That's what I've always wondered. Riku said. Why is it that fighters prolong the battle?

It is because they want to take in that moment of weakness when their foe is powerless to stop them. They find that their dominance and superiority is an invigorating sensation and they want more of it. But such a sensation is not worth sacrificing your life or your cause over. Act quickly and end quickly, that is the number one priority of any confrontation. Thundro put his hands behind his back. He walked up the key bearers and healed their wounds by means of his energy. Now, enough of this regimen for one day. I will allow you two to rest for today, after your strenuous time in the hyperbolic time chamber. I'll give you boys a haircut and you will be free to do as you please. If you want to do a little more training, then so be it. If you want to have an extensive day of rest, then it is done. If you would like a nature walk in the forest beauty, be my guest. This will be the one day that I will allow you to gallivant. -

Thank you, Master Thundro. The key bearers stood up and bowed.

I have fresh uniforms in your room. You look disgraceful with those tattered rags. Riku and Sora looked down to see their outfits pocked with rips, tears, and holes.

I guess you're right. Sora replied with a sheepish grin.

Go on, boys. -

Right, the key bearers withdrew to their room, looking forward to a day of rest.

For the rest of their time in Thundro s domain, Riku and Sora would improve a great deal.

However, looking upon their distant home on the Destiny Islands, a different endurance was taking place. And it was one that was not as sheltered.

14 - A Continuing Siege

A Continuing Siege

It had become apparent that there was no stopping the Aryan Faction from their destructive path of chaos, which they rained upon Kairi's hometown. Fortinbras, determined to redeem his honor and reputation after the failed attempt during the Oceansburg campaign and the Battle of Long Valley, had closed his fist, vowing not to give in. He had complete superiority over the Mulian and the small military force of the former Arakis Foundation. Yet, despite his attempts to break their lines, his soldiers were driven back, forcing to give up all they had gained over the course of the second day's fighting. It was already the high peak of a noon time lull and both sides were at a stand still, with minor raids and skirmishes erupting up and down the line.

Inconceivable, Fortinbras growled, How is it that they're able to maintain their line even after a massive attack on their defenses.

You must understand, sir, the captain said, Many of the men under your command are former soldiers of the Arakis Foundation. It's not surprising that they would be slightly reluctant to fight their old comrades. Some of your soldiers might have brothers, fathers, close friends, and relatives wearing the other uniform.

That is no excuse. Those men facing us are nothing, but traitors to the Imperial cause! Our goal is to realize the dreams of the Three Excellencies and see to it that the ideals of the former Dark Empire reign absolute throughout all the worlds. -

But at what cost I wonder. The captain thought to himself, not willing to have another outburst from the general.

At the same time, Kirin, Imetriarch, and the rest of the Arakis Foundation had dug themselves deep, watching the results of the battle unveil before them. They looked on as more of their soldiers lay dead or dying upon the already formed no-man's-land between them and lines of Fortinbras. The cannons upon the ship were quiet and no sounds of bombardment had commenced just yet. Still, the soldiers were a little apprehensive, waiting for that second when the Aryan batteries would sound off and further death would fall upon them.

I wonder why they're not attacking again. Kirin said.

Most likely, the soldiers are regrouping. Imetriarch replied. As soon as they have reformed their ranks, they'll be rushing at us again.

We wouldn't stand a chance against another massive attack like that. After this morning's fight, our men are exhausted. -

You forget, young prince, their soldiers are just as weary after that morning engagement. They'll keep quiet for a while. -

Yeah, but until they regain their strength, that carrier of theirs is going to blow the hell out of us, depriving us of our sleep as well as resources and manpower. -

Look on the bright side. At least they can't get their ship airborne. Otherwise, we would stand no chance whatsoever. -

And if they do manage to get it airborne again? Kirin asked.

I've already taken that into consideration and am contemplating a way to keep that ship in a neutral position. Imetriarch replied. Until then, the only thing we can do is keep it quiet.

It was then that the two saw Kairi and Tidus approaching them. They walked in a crouching position, hoping not to be spotted by Aryan soldiers on the opposite side of the field.

How are things coming along? Kairi asked.

So far, all is quiet. Kirin replied. The Aryans haven't renewed their attack yet.

How is Muli doing? Imetriarch asked.

He's alright, Kairi assured him. Selphie is watching over him. Man, I never thought that such a young boy would be so active in this. -

He's going around helping with the moving of the supplies and ammunition. Tidus added. He's even helping to dig those bomb shelters you ordered. -

As should be expected, Imetriarch said. He is His late Excellency's son after all.

You say that so calmly. Aren't you going to detest that thought of your leader digging ditches and fox holes like a common soldier? -

Master Muli has matured significantly since he left his sheltered life back home. He has completely changed his attitude towards the rest of the universe and all worlds coinciding. He in turn had changed me and many loyal followers of the former foundation. He realizes that to win respect, he must make an example of himself, which is why he works alongside his men. Imetriarch sighed. I can't keep being a caretaker forever. Muli has grown stronger, stronger than even me.

It would be a shame for him to do all this work only to have it be in vain. -

So, Kirin inquired, What's the casualty figure from this last morning battle?

There was a role call. Kairi replied. At least three hundred and fifty have been killed, two hundred wounded, and fifty-seven are missing in action.

That's almost a third of our entire force out of commission so far. Imetriarch said. And it's only been the second day.

Suddenly, there came the sound of distant thunder. The group was fully aware of what it meant, the bombardment had commenced again. Following the distant booming of the batteries from the cannons, there pursued a high pitched whistling that accumulated from the incoming beams of light that drew closer upon the entrenched soldiers. The screaming grew louder and louder before making impact with the ground and causing incredible destruction upon the defenses.

Here they go again! Kirin said. Everyone get down!

Explosions bellowed around them and debris fell upon the team like a summer shower.

Send word to our battery! Imetriarch ordered one of the soldiers. Have them target those guns on the Aryan ship! Make every round count.

Yes sir, the soldier replied and scurried down the line, passing the word to the battery.

No sooner had the soldier left; the little group saw one of the beams heading straight for them.

Incoming, Tidus shouted.

Get out of the way! Imetriarch cried, telling his comrades to scatter. All got out of the way, except for Kairi, who, unaccustomed to such extreme danger, was suddenly frozen in her tracks. Her legs suddenly went stiff and she couldn't move.

Kairi, get out of there! Tidus shouted.

Miss Kairi! Imetriarch added. But their words did not seem to reach her. She was petrified. The sight of her demise came in the form of an enemy projectile. She could only cover her head with her arms and scream.

Sister, Kirin shouted. He threw himself at Kairi, grabbing her and pulling her out of the shell's path. There was a massive impact and the two were blown away, blasted with falling debris and dirt. In the aftermath, both Kairi and Kirin raised their heads. Are you alright, Kairi?

Yeah, Kairi replied, I guess so.

The front line is too dangerous, Kairi. Get back to the rear now. -

But, brother, -

Do as I say! Kirin's tone had become hard and stern, like a strict disciplinarian. His eyes, however, expressed a different emotion, not at all firm as the rest of his body language. Kairi could see that his anger was only based off his concern for her safety. Not wanting to burden her brother anymore, she withdrew without another word.

Kairi can be rather stubborn at times. Tidus said. You have to be firm with her.

I'm not surprised though. Kirin explained. I have that same kind of attitude.

Gentlemen, Imetriarch said, Keep down and stay close to the matter at hand!

Sir, the two young men replied. They dug themselves deep and stayed close to the earthworks, avoiding the effects of the barrage.

In the meantime, the hidden battery was coordinating its guns to aim and hit the Aryan Faction artillery.

The degrees were set, the power levels increased to their maximum for maximum effect.

We're ready to fire, sir! One of the officers declared.

Then prepare to open with full battery fire on my signal! The battery commander confirmed. Aim well for the cannons themselves.

Yes sir, the cannons were carefully positioned to hit their intended target. Standing by for your orders, sir, we're locked onto the target! -

Fire, the commander bellowed. There was a series of loud booms and five beams emerged from the grove of trees. They sped off towards the open hatches of the Fortinbras battery.

We have detected incoming energy sources! an operative of the Aryan faction shouted.

What was that?! Fortinbras said.

Where from? the captain asked.

It came from the foundation entrenchments! the operative replied. But the damage had been done and the blasts struck the side of the ship, shaking the entire carrier violently. The commander, the general, and all on board held on for dear life. Others fell to the floor and tumbled about.

I want a status report! Where did they hit us?! -

Sir, our port battery had been hit. At least thirty-seven percent had been rendered out of commission. -

What&? -

Damn it, that's what they were aiming for. Fortinbras growled. They're hoping to knock out our batteries to prevent further bombardment.

This is a definite drawback, sir. The captain declared. We won't be able to fire at will anymore without the threat of incoming counter-barrages hoping to deprive us of our heavy artillery.

We'll just have to find a way to resolve this. Fortinbras looked at the screen. Detect where the source of this counter fire is coming from and blow it to hell!

Yes sir. The captain turned to his operatives. Prepare countermeasure, aim towards the foundation barracks!

But sir, we can't do that. One of the operatives said. If we open fire, no doubt we'll get struck by another counter-barrage.

At least we'll be able to see where the source of that fire power is coming from. I know it's a risk, but we have to take it. Instruct those who are ready to fire to commence with their operations. -

Aye, sir. The operative contacted the battery row. All artillery ready commence firing for aftereffect. Close your hatches as soon as your projectiles are deployed.

Confirmed, one of the gunners replied. There was another blast from the side of the ship and all cannons, still in operation, fired away.

They watched carefully for any possible counter. Sure enough, there came the booming of distant guns, followed by the emerging of bright glowing beams that against struck the ship. This time, however, the guns still in operation were able to close their hatches just before the impact. Some of the guns did not have their hatches closed in time and were struck and crippled. But they were not entirely out of commission.

So, Fortinbras demanded to know. Where did those blasts come from?

We picked up a signal of origin. One of the attendants replied.

Where at? the captain asked.

The blasts originated from that grove of trees just at the outskirts of town. -

I see, then that means Master Muli's troops have entrenched their guns behind that protective shield of trees. -

I will not have you calling that traitor Master! Fortinbras scolded when overhearing the captain's statement. The captain backed down.

I apologize for that, sir. -

So the foundation has their cannons behind those trees, eh? Fortinbras chuckled to himself. Very clever & Very clever indeed, but not clever enough, I want all batteries to concentrate on that grove of trees and blow that position to hell!

Aye sir, the orders were transferred and the cannons began firing at the grove of trees where the foundation cannons resided. Blast after blast struck the wooded barrier, tearing away at the trees and shrubs that grew around the area.

Those bastards are targeting our battery positions. Kirin growled.

It was bound to happen sooner or later. Imetriarch replied. But even if they were to shell twenty-four hours a day for the next fortnight, they wouldn't be able to penetrate through that thick barrier of debris and mud as well as those high canopies.

The artillery returned fire, pummeling the sides of the ship, destroying more of the batteries that had remained open.

Two more of our guns have been severely damaged, sir. The operative said.

Damage to the enemy battery is unconfirmed, sir. Another added.

Damn it. Fortinbras growled.

There's no way that we'll be able to deploy covering fire so long as that battery is in place. The captain replied. And it's well fortified behind enemy lines.

We have to destroy that battery somehow. Otherwise, there will be no hope in prying those idiots out of their trenches. -

How would you suggest we handle this, sir? -

There's only one other option I can think of, we'll just have to use the random fire method. -

The random fire method? -

We pre-calculate the elevation and level of power needed for each shot and deploy the projectiles at the intended target. And we do this while maintaining a continuous rotation of the turret and temporarily opening the hatches while firing!

But, sir, with that tactic, there's no way we can guarantee a successful hit if the battery turret is still in motion. We'd be firing at random, chancing our attempts to hit our mark. -

It's either that, or halt the turret, taking time to aim, thus allowing the foundation to concentrate their fire power on our own guns. If the turret is still in motion, their chances of maiming our cannons have been reduced to less than half of what would be expected if we remain stationary. -

General, -

Right now, our remaining guns are the backbone of our assault and our only counter measure to repel a

possible attack from the foundation. If our guns go, that gives the foundation complete advantage over us by means of fire power. Superior numbers alone will not be enough. -

I see, -

We cannot afford to lose this fight. We are the only force left that stands between The Arakis Foundation and their hopes of forming an alliance with Sneer. Mulian Arakis is still a threat. The Aryan Faction is already experiencing rising tensions and rifts between its followers. Many citizens are still loyal to the former foundation and the Arakis family. Should Mulian form a pact with the Universal Alliance, he will have the means to rally those still loyal within the Aryan Faction and topple the government. Then it'll be we, the loyalists of Lord Marcus Montague, who shall be regarded as the traitors.

I understand, -

That is why we cannot afford to lose this fight. Lord Montague may not be of the Arakis family, but at least he is still willing to obtain the ideas of the former Imperial Regime. -

It had become apparent of the strategy deployed by Fortinbras. He had continued his barrage upon the defenses of the foundation, but this time, the aiming of his cannons was not as precise.

What the heck are they doing up there? Kirin wondered. Now, all of a sudden, they're just aiming randomly at us.

I'm not surprised, Imetriarch replied. Take a look at this. He handed Kirin his scouter. Kirin placed the device on his left ear and looked through the red lens. Sure enough, he saw the reason why the aim was now not as accurate. The faction is getting desperate now. They realize that their own superiority is not as absolute as before. Otherwise, they wouldn't be taking this action.

I see, they're keeping the battery turret in continuous motion so our own cannons won't effectively hit and cripple the cannons they have left. -

That's right, -

Still, even if they don't hit our battery, they still have the capability of hitting someplace else. So that ship is still a menace. And to top it all off, we have no means of making any contact with the outside world for any reinforcements. We got to take that carrier out for good. Perhaps there is some way that we'll be able to penetrate their line. -

That's impossible right now. We can't afford to storm the ship. Even if we were to initiate a night raid, that's out of the question. From what my scouts have observed, the Aryan Faction has set up a perimeter of skirmish lines, each one intersecting in separate intervals with the other, so no gaps are present. They also have entrenched themselves deep on the northern outskirts, that way even a task unit wouldn't be able to make it through without getting caught in a crossfire. And right now I cannot afford to lose any men in a mission that has no guaranteed success. -

There is one way. Tidus suddenly uttered from behind. The two former Imperials looked at him.

Do you know how to defeat them? Kirin asked.

There might be a way for you to get passed their lines without having to confront their pickets. -

How's that, Tidus? Tell us? -

There's an old underground waterway that leads from this area to that peninsula. The entry way can be found at the base of the mountain at the center of the island. It's no more than a half a mile out of town. It leads directly to the cliffs of the northern peninsula, just behind where the ship is. With a handful of men, you'd be able to sabotage the Aryan carrier and they won't even know about it until it's too late. -

Excellent insight, young Tidus, Imetriarch praised. This information will work to our advantage. We'll bring the Aryans to their knees in no time.

So what should we do? Kirin asked.

Kirin, would you be willing to take the lead of the raiding party? -

Of course, -

And I'm sure Tidus wouldn't have any objections to helping? -

The sooner we get rid of these guys, Tidus remarked, The sooner my town is spared.

Well then, assemble twenty of my best men and have them gather at the town square. Wait until nightfall, when the enemy is off guard and exhausted from today's action. Then take that passage way and initiate the plan. Crassus ordered. And be careful.

Right,

And Kirin, I leave you to do the planning. -

I understand. Kirin replied. He turned to Tidus. Let's go.

Gotcha, The two young men quickly withdrew, preparing for their night raid. Imetriarch Crassus in the meantime, maintained his visual at the front lines. He called forth one of his subordinates.

Captain, captain, he shouted. A captain crawled over to him, keeping his head ducked behind the barricades.

Yes sir? he asked.

We've planned a night raid. Go to our battery and tell them to unleash a barrage of ten shots per cannon on my signal. Tell them to aim for the enemy carrier's cannons.

Yes sir. -

Crassus looked on, eagerly awaiting for the operation to begin.

As shells flew from Aryan cannons onto the foundation trenches and the town itself, Kirin had assembled twenty of Mulian's elites. Each one was a battle-hardened veteran. One by one, Kirin went over the background of each soldier, where they were qualified and if they were willing to take on such a dangerous task. Kirin was especially amazed at how the soldiers remained standing in steadfast attention without flinching, despite the fact that shells and projectiles exploded around them. Their sturdy action alone was enough to convince him of their expertise in soldiering. After brief interviews with the twenty hand-picked men, Kirin addressed the entire company.

My brave men, he said, You have been chosen for your dedication to your cause, your expertise, your strength and skill upon the battlefield, and your cunning. There is a chance, however, that many of you will not make it back. This is a tough mission we're facing. We twenty will be penetrating deep behind enemy lines and attacking the very stronghold of the Aryan Faction, their carrier. Now before I begin the briefing of the mission, is there anyone here who wishes to decline in helping with this mission? Remember, this will be a dangerous operation and your lives will be put at risk. So if there is any man among you who does not wish to participate in this, please step forward. There was no movement. Not a man came before him. Again Kirin assured them. I ask you again, is there any man here who wishes to back down from this mission? There is no turning back after your decision has been made. I cannot afford to have the faint of heart on this operation. I'm offering you this one last chance. Anyone wish to second-guess their decision?

No sir, the twenty men replied. Kirin smiled.

Wow, Tidus said in awe.

Very well then, Kirin replied. Then let me explain what it is we are aiming for in this operation. Kirin took out a hologram image of the ship and pointed to the different areas targeted and pointed at each part as he explained. Our main objective is to sabotage the enemy ship in ways which will give us the complete upper hand. It will be a night raid, so save your energy as best you can for the upcoming battle. First, we must sever the communication links between the carrier and any reinforcements that might come to aid them. Therefore, to isolate the Aryans here, we will have to cut off all communication. Hit the exterior communication facilities. Then, to open up our own communication, we have to bring down the communication scrambler system. And our final objective is to destroy the remaining batteries on the ship's exterior, so our forces won't fear about being bombarded. Kirin retracted the hologram.

That is the mission, men. You know your duties. This is for the good of our cause. Is that clear?

Yes sir?! the soldiers replied.

Get some rest. Tonight, we head out to finish this confrontation with the Imperial Axis once and for all. Troops dismissed. The soldiers saluted and withdrew to rest up before their nocturnal operation. As the troops departed, Selphie had arrived at the scene. Seeing the ending stages of assembly, she was curious and approached Tidus, who had been present at the assembly from the start.

What s going on here? she asked him.

We re planning a night attack on that faction ship. Tidus replied.

Are you guys planning on going through that open ground when there are enemies everywhere? -

We re not going to go across the field. We re planning on using the underground water way. -

Oh, that one, but don t you think it ll be a little risky? -

Our lives will be in danger, but our sacrifice will be worth the salvation of our home. -

Will you be taking charge then, Tidus? Selphie asked.

No, the young man replied. I ll be leading them through the waterway. Kirin will be the one in charge.

I see, -

Well, I better go take some time to sleep if I can. It s gonna be a long night. -

You be careful alright. -

Give my regrets to Wakka and Kairi when you see them. This may be the last time I see them. -

I will, -

Tidus only smiled and walked away.

You re planning on dying aren t you? -

If it comes down to it, I am prepared to give my life. -

Fortinbras on the other hand, watched from his position in the ship. So far, his barrage seldom struck the entrenched battery behind foundation lines.

Intolerable, the general growled, That entire barrage and we didn t even put a dent in their defense!

I told you, sir. The captain replied. We re firing at a random chance. We re predicting the aim. And even when we aim well, our continuous rotating throws that coordination off.

Then if I can t blast them out, I ll overwhelm them! Fortinbras stood up. I want the next wave to concentrate their attacks on that battery! Break the line and send the foundation crashing! -

But sir, -

Our overwhelming numbers will destroy them! If we attack without hesitation, then we will be victorious! Send out the next to waves to attack that one point! We will take that battery, even if every last soldier has to be sacrificed! -

Sir, -

Those are my orders! Send them out now! The captain could only lower his head, fearing the fate of the faction s finest. But he had no other choice, but to concur.

I understand sir. He turned to the bridge. Send in the next wave. Concentrate all our efforts on that grove of trees where the enemy battery is located.

Yes sir, the bridge replied.

Sure enough, within minutes, the order was given and five thousand men were sent out into the field. Charging like screaming banshees, the Aryans assaulted the sector of the line where the battery was closest.

They re concentrating all of their men on our battery! one of the lieutenants cried.

Reinforce the trenches around the battery position! Crassus shouted. Send out skirmishers to slow them down! Fight to the last man if necessary!

Yes sir, -

Soldiers were rallied to defend the position at all costs. Like hornets, they were prepared to aggressively fight off their attackers. A line of skirmishers came over the trenches and lined themselves up. They took cover behind rocks, bushes, and trenches and began firing at the mass of enemy troops. The soldiers kept attacking. Though slowed for a time, they pushed on until they reached the skirmish line. Then they started a counter fire, killing a quarter of the skirmishers. The skirmishers withdrew back to the trenches. As soon as the skirmishers reached their own lines, their comrades began their own intense barrage. By the score, Aryan soldiers were killed and the line stagnated. The intensity of the foundation fire was so great, it was said the enemy seemed to hit an invisible wall and could not advance any further as death rained upon them.

Keep up you fire! the officers cried. Keep them at bay! Pour it onto them, boys!

It came to the point that both sides were so close, they started firing point blank into each other. There was hand to hand combat on some parts of the line and men fell with ghastly wounds and hideous gashes upon them. The bodies piled in hills along a few parts of the line. It was death s carnival that afternoon as both sides gave all they had to achieve their goal.

The confrontation continued up and down the lines, even as night began to fall with both sides taking on heavy casualties. However, the toll was far too great for the already limited number of foundation soldiers. Each soldier lost was one step closer to a lost cause. Though still holding, the troops in the trenches were losing morale due to exhaustion, the loss of comrades, and the continuous swelling of the enemy ranks. Even though only the course of an afternoon had elapsed, it seemed like an eternity to live through, not knowing if death was mingling about the corner waiting to strike down its next victim. However, as the sun set over the horizon, the battle ceased with its final outcome. The Arakis Foundation held and the Aryans were again forced to withdraw.

Damn it, Fortinbras scowled, They held again?! -

These are the elites of the Arakis Foundation, sir. The captain replied. The majority of them are the personal bodyguards of the Arakis family and they are willing to give their lives for their leader.

And what about our troops, are they not former Arakis Foundation soldiers? -

They re not really willing to go against Mulian Arakis. They fight because they have no other choice. They have a choice! But these soldiers must get it through their heads that they must find a cause greater than the sake of a leader who has dishonored their Imperial cause! It is the cause that matters, nothing else! Prepare to unleash another barrage! -

Yes sir, -

This time, however, Crassus battery was ready. He watched as the turret once again began to rotate. They re ready to initiate another barrage. He said. Prepare to fire on my signal!

Yes sir, the battery commander replied. The cannons were aimed at the turret on the ship. Artillery is ready to fire.

Fire ten shots for each battery piece in a five second interval! -

Yes, sir, -

The command was given and the artillery began to fire away at the ship. Explosions erupted on the carrier s surface, inflicting terrible damage.

Kairi, back in the rear, watched over young Mulian Arakis, who kept his head covered behind the barracks set up.

There they go again. Muli said. Hand to hand combat by day, bombardment by night, a typical strategy of the Imperial Regime.

It s been two days already. Kairi said. And there hasn t been a single peaceful moment. Everyone has

been driven from their homes and the people are hiding in the hills on the outskirts. Kairi curled up in a ball. I never would have thought that war and chaos would have come to our home. Her mind wandered on the people she cared for. I hope that Riku and Sora are alright. If only they were here, at least I wouldn't have to feel so alone.

But what about your brother, Kirin? He's here for you. -

I know, but it's only been two days and we haven't seen each other since we were children. I know that he's my brother and all, but he's more like a total stranger to me. I have no idea what he's been through and I'm sure he has no idea what I've been through. In these past couple of days, we've seldom seen each other. -

Does it really matter though? He's your brother and he's here. The only reason why he's not always around is because he is a soldier. And as a soldier, you have two objectives. You must follow orders and you must give your heart and soul completely to the cause in which you battle. In this case, he fights to protect you. You may not know much about your brother, but to him, you might be all that he's got. You may be the only other person who might accept him, the only other living family member. You might just be the only world Kirin has left and he's willing to fight and die for you. -

Despite Muli's tender age, his words had such passion and meaning. It struck Kairi to the very core of her soul.

Am I really that important to him? she thought to herself.

It was then that Selphie came along to join them in their slight rest. She gave a positive sigh as she sat and put her hands close to the fire.

Well, she said with perk, I can guarantee you guys that this battle with the Aryan Faction will hopefully be over by morning.

What was that? Kairi asked.

Where did you hear that? Muli added.

Well, apparently Tidus is gonna guide a whole bunch of soldiers through that old water way that leads to that northern peninsula. Selphie replied.

But that's insane. They'd be going right into the thick behind enemy lines. -

Well, from what I understand, they are going to emerge just behind where the defenses are concentrated and our guys will tear them up when they least expect it. -

But even so, even if they did go unnoticed, they're would be immense casualties. -

That's why I fear for Tidus and Kirin. -

What did you say? Kairi uttered. Selphie saw that disturbed look upon her friend's face.

What is it, Kairi? -

Are you saying that Kirin is going with them? -

He's the one that's leading the company. He's assembling his men at the town square. -

Oh my God& Muli whispered.

Why do you ask? -

But Kairi did not respond. She quickly got up and hastened to find her brother.

What did I say? Selphie asked.

You said Kirin was involved. There may be a chance that he might not survive. -

Oh dear& Selphie realized that her words had caused mixed emotions within Kairi.

Kairi quickly scurried to the town square, despite the bombardment of shells that randomly struck the town and defenses from the carrier afar. Sure enough, as she came within sight of the town square, she beheld the twenty and some odd soldiers standing at attention, with Kirin and Tidus standing at their front. Kairi overheard the speech given from Kirin.

Gentlemen, she heard him say, The time has come for us to end this fiasco with the Aryan Faction. Now remember to maintain your vigilance. This is the eye of the storm we will be entering. There will be

no one to help us from here on out. No one is to reveal the whereabouts of the waterway, no one is to retreat. There will be a slim chance that we will survive, but you should know that already. I had made it clear this afternoon. There is no turning back from this point on. So fight well, stay safe, and if you must die with honor!

Yes sir, the soldiers replied.

Tidus rally them to the access point and make sure to cover your tracks. We don't want scouts spotting our activity. -

I gotcha, Tidus replied. He turned to the soldiers. Alright, you men, let's go!

The soldiers began their march to the outskirts at a double-quick. Kirin stayed behind to make sure there were no stragglers. As the last soldier passed him, he heard the distant cry of his sister calling him.

Kirin, Kirin, the young prince looked to see Kairi running towards him. Kairi panted and looked up at her brother.

Kairi, -

It is true, are you really going to attack the enemy from behind with so very few? -

It's the only way to end this battle. Attacking head on would only be suicide for us. This tactic is the only other measure I know to attack the Aryan lines without being observed. We could end this and spare a great deal of lives in the process. -

But, -

I have to go now, little sister. -

But it's been so long since I've seen you. Now, we've only been reunited for two days and yet you have to go again? -

And look at what the faction has done to your home in two days. Your people have suffered a great deal because of our irresponsibility. Therefore, we have to end this with the faction once and for all. -

But Kirin, -

It'll be alright, I will come back to you. -

But what if you don't?! Kairi's eyes were filled with tears. What if you die?!

I will not die. Kirin replied.

But what if you do?! You're my brother after all, don't you care about me?! -

I do and that is why I must go. -

But, -

Kirin put his hand on his sister's shoulder.

All my life I have been trying to find you, knowing that you were the only real kin I had left, the only flesh and blood remaining. You are the only reason for my existence. -

Kirin, -

You are all the world to me, Kairi. And I am prepared to give my life for you. -

Kairi, overcome with grief, put herself in her brother's arms and cried. Kirin wrapped his arms around her and tightly embraced her. Kairi was comfortable in her brother's arms. She felt the warmth of his breast, the beating of his heart.

Thank you for accepting me, little sister. Kirin said softly. I'll come back to you. I promise. With that, he released his sister and ran off into the dark.

It's a promise, Kairi cried, still sobbing, You will come back to me!

15 - Operation Destiny's Freedom

Operation Destiny's Freedom

As the bombardment continued in the north, Tidus led Kirin and the twenty volunteers to the secret passage way leading to the old waterway. The company came before a locked gate that descended into the underground.

This is it. Tidus said. This is the maintenance entry to the old water way. This will lead us to the northern peninsula.

Excellent, Kirin replied, Alright Tidus, lead the way. I'll take up the rear to make sure there aren't any stragglers.

Gotcha, He turned to the soldiers. Alright guys, follow me. And be quiet. Unlocking the gate, he quickly entered, turning on a flashlight as soon as the visual became more limited. The last of the soldiers went in with Kirin at the rear. He slowly closed the door behind him and looked about to make sure that no one was following them.

The party navigated deeper and deeper until they came to the old waterway's main flow, which at the present state was a mere trickle, due to the lack of rain for the past couple of days.

Stay close, you men, Kirin advised. Keep your visual on Tidus. But be aware, there might be a chance that the faction might have already discovered the other side of this passage.

The soldiers scurried along the sides of the waterway, so as not to be an open target for anything or anyone that might be lurking in the darkness. The sound of exploding shells could be heard above. Some of them came so close, the impact caused the passage to shake and rattle a bit. But the soldiers were not fazed by the low booming and sudden tremors and carried on with their mission.

In the meantime, the Arakis Foundation battery continued to fire at the carrier in the far north, pummeling the sides and the hatches of the enemy artillery. Unleashing the cannon fire was not a random moment, however, as the ammunition was at a limit. Therefore, only a series of ten rounds per cannon could be used. And each shot had to be accurate, so as not to needlessly waste shells and power.

The leading officer of the battery looked on with his scouter as he saw the shells of his cannons striking the side of the Aryan carrier. At the same time, he kept his head from view in case the worst would happen. Alongside him, Prime Minister Crassus looked on with the scouter.

So far, we've used up twenty-five shots altogether, sir. He said. That's already five shots per cannon. - It's not exactly a five second interval is it? Imetriarch replied.

That was not an option open for us, sir. We're low on ammunition as we speak, so we had to make sure that each shot counted for something. -

It's no matter. We just need to use those shots to keep those cannons on that carrier quiet for the time being. That's the only thing that counts. Keep them concentrating their firepower on us. -

I beg your pardon, sir. The officer implied, But do you really think that only twenty men could possibly storm a carrier of at least twenty thousand personnel or so?

Those are the best of the best, commander. Imetriarch assured him. It would be easier to move about enemy territory with only a handful of men. If there is anyone who can pull off this mission, it is Kirin, Tidus, and our top elite fighters.

But what should we do if the Aryans try to attack us again? -

We just have to hold them off as best as we can. But they won't try a night raid, not after this afternoon's assault. They'll rest up a good full night before trying to attack again.

Still, -

There is nothing to worry about. Kirin will succeed. He is after all the infamous wielder of the Flaming Blades. -

Kairi, in the meantime, worried about her brother. Only two days, they had been reunited, yet he seemed a stranger to her. At the same time, his touch, his warmth, they all seemed familiar to her, nostalgic in a way. She could only think of him and feared for him.

Brother, she uttered.

Kirin is a powerful warrior. Muli said. He'll be alright. I know it.

How do you know? -

I know, they don't call him Kirin of the Flaming Blades for nothing. The reason for his reputation was because of his ability to escape any sticky situation and how he is always able to survive no matter how great the odds are against him. You just have to believe in him, Kairi, just like you do with Riku and Sora. If you believe, things will turn out alright. -

Thanks for the advice. Kairi smiled, but her heart seemed to tell her otherwise. Inwardly, she feared the worst for her brother. But what if he doesn't come back? I want to believe that everything will be alright, but what is this feeling of doubt that plagues me? Why is it that there is this pain in my heart? Kairi silently looked up into the sky, staring at the stars that twinkled in the night, despite the hissing and bursting of shells. To think that despite this carnage, there is still a little comfort in this world. Riku, Sora, I hope you two are doing okay too.

Thirty minutes had passed and the booming on the surface began to fade. Sure enough, there was only silence, with the occasional muffled murmuring every now and then. This indicated that they were deep behind enemy lines and the murmuring they heard was the chattering of Aryan soldiers on leave.

Are we almost there? Kirin asked.

Yeah, Tidus replied, But we gotta keep quiet. I can hear the enemy above us.

The party made it to their destination without any trouble. They eventually reached the end, seeing a hint of night light, though not very much. The sound of the waves crashing against the cliff could be heard.

Tidus immediately turned off his flashlight.

There it is. He said with a loud whisper. There's the other end.

Excellent work, Tidus. Kirin said.

The party emerged onto a small ledge. There was a rocky outcrop above the opening, concealing the movements from the Aryan sentries who walked about the area.

Alright, men, Kirin whispered, Now whatever you do, keep quiet. We don't want these guys to hear us. We have to penetrate into the ship and take out the targets necessary. Make sure to eliminate the sentries one at a time and do it quietly. Kill them silently and quickly. Avoid all lighted areas alright? The soldiers nodded their heads. Kirin took the lead, climbing silently up the rocks to the cliff edge.

Sentries marched up and down without care, perhaps raw recruits who detested the thought of guard duty. As the task unit reached the cliff edge, they overheard two sentries talking.

I hate guard duty. The first sentry said. It's just a lot of mindless pacing. I'd much rather prefer to be in the midst of battle like the rest of our comrades.

I don't think you'd want that, friend. The second sentry said. From what I understand, our guys haven't put a dent in the foundation's defenses. So far those guys have managed to push our soldiers back every time that General Fortinbras gives the order to attack.

Fortinbras? Kirin thought in his mind. So that explains the crude strategies the Aryan Faction is

using.

Fortinbras is such an egotistical son of a gun. He'd pounce at the chance to achieve glory. And after that blunder he had in the Oceansburg Campaign, -

Can you blame the general? the first sentry said. If I was in his shoes and I was bested by a bunch of freaks, I'd do all in my power to redeem myself.

I wonder though. The second sentry continued. Is all this fighting really worth it, battling against the very person who made us who we are?

Don't start having second thoughts now. Everyone knows that Mulian Arakis is a traitor to his father's name and the foundation we once stood for. Marcus Montague is our new commander. -

But I still have that sentiment and loyalty to the Arakis family. -

You better watch out, friend. That might be considered treason to the officers. -

Never mind, let's just keep our guard up. -

Right, -

The two sentries continued on their way.

So that's it. Kirin said.

What's it? Tidus asked. The other soldiers were curious too.

It appears that the Aryan Faction is starting to waver. Marcus Montague rose to power so quickly, the people and the military of the former foundation were not given enough time to choose what side was best. So it wasn't exactly majority rules. No doubt that the officers used their military influence to persuade the populous. However, they didn't realize that there is still strong sentiment for the Arakis family amongst the soldiers themselves. This could work to our advantage.

In what way&? -

We can lower the resistance by exploiting the number of loyalists to Mulian Arakis and the Arakis family. If we can cause a rift in the enemy ranks, we'll be able to achieve victory a lot easier. He turned to the twenty soldiers. You men, this is what you will do aside from fulfilling your mission. You will eliminate the sentries and take their uniforms. You will then start spreading rumors of a possible defection. This will allow the loyalists to come out of hiding and try to mutiny against Fortinbras and the Aryan separatists. Do you understand what I'm saying? The soldiers nodded. Then get going.

The soldiers quickly spread out to their separate areas. As the sound of the cannons continued, the foundation elites snuck up and ambushed the weary sentries. Attacking them from behind, the foundation elites had to regress to smothering, strangling, and breaking the necks of each of the sentries so as not to stain or soil the uniforms that were needed. Every once in a while, there would be the sounds of gasping, rustling debris and roughage from kicking legs, and muffled cries as a young sentry would be attacked from behind and smothered to death. Or perhaps there would be the sudden crack of bone as their heads were severed from the rest of their bodies. The uniforms were quickly exchanged and the task units quickly made their way into the ship.

Talk about a stroke of luck for us. Tidus said.

This'll work to our advantage alright. Kirin said. If there is one general who is most despised out of all the faction commanders, it would be Hector Fortinbras. With his reputation, no doubt his men will be persuaded quite easily. He turned to Tidus. Tidus get back to our lines and tell them to send in a full company. I don't think the Aryans will try another attack until dawn. This'll give us the opportunity to attack when they least expect it.

I gotcha, Tidus replied and quickly scurried back to the foundation lines.

In the meantime, Kirin drew out one of his blades, I have a reputation to uphold.

While the contemplation of the foundation was commencing, the bombardment by Imetriarch's battery had ceased its final rounds as the tenth of each cannon had gone off. Fortinbras only chuckled as he

witnessed the end of the bombardment.

So that s it then. He said. I guess the Arakis Foundation can t keep up a steady fire like we can. How much damage did we suffer?

We only had two battery pieces crippled by that bombardment, sir. The captain replied.

Too bad, and just when it was starting to get interesting, but then again their limits are too obvious now. Aim our cannons and return fire. The foundation can t keep up their bombardment, but we can. Fire away! -

Yes sir, -

But no sooner had the order been relayed, another important message came to the bridge.

General, one of the operatives said, We have an urgent message from our guards in the primary transmission room.

Put them on screen. The general advised.

Yes sir, The operative initiated the on screen image, revealing a rather panicked looking soldier. There were the sounds of guns and battle going on. Immediately, the general knew that something was wrong.

Sir, the soldier cried, We have a crisis on our hands!

What is going on there? Fortinbras asked.

A handful of our soldiers have defected against us and are starting to kill our personnel and are sabotaging our equipment! -

What&?! The general s eyes grew big with shock. What do you mean our soldiers have defected?

I don t know, they just started attacking our men, crying out long live the Arakis Foundation. -

Damn it, it seems we have some loyalists amongst our ranks. -

What should we do, sir? -

They could prove to be very monotonous indeed unless we do something. Deal with them with the utmost severity. Kill them all! -

Sir, another transmitted message reached the bridge, There is another defection against us, this time amongst our batteries!

What was that? Soon after, another message was transmitted.

General, sir, General, sir, there has been an uprising in the main barracks. The soldiers are fighting amongst themselves! -

But that can t be? Fortinbras uttered. Are you sure you checked the sources?

See for yourself! The screen turned to a scene of devastation and death as the Aryans suddenly turned on one another. Those rebelling kept crying in an endless chorus Long Live Lord Mulian Arakis! Long live the Arakis Foundation! and Glory to the Arakis Family! Fortinbras could only look on in disbelief.

How can this be happening? I did not realize that there were that many loyalists of Mulian Arakis amongst our ranks. -

At this rate, The captain said, we ll never be able to stop them all. -

Oh yes we will. Fortinbras stood from his chair, his fists clenched tightly. I will not have mutineers causing disorder amongst our ranks! I will cut them all down myself! He turned to the captain. Keep command here and do not surrender under any circumstance, understood?! You keep this bridge sealed from those ruffians out there!

What will you do, sir? -

I will go out there and deal with this problem myself. It has been a while since my sword has tasted blood. I will weed out the defectors and kill them one at a time! -

But how will you determine the defectors from our troops? -

Anyone who shows the least bit of suspicion will be executed without question! So it is up to the men to not act suspicious! Otherwise, it s instant death for them! -

Aye, sir, Fortinbras clenched his sword and stormed out of the bridge, the lust for blood in his eye. The

captain only sighed. We have a duty ladies and gentlemen. We must maintain control over the bridge. But sir, wouldn't it be best for us to side with Master Mulian? one subordinate whispered. We must wait and see what the tide will bring. If the defection fails, then all who rebelled will be considered traitors. -

But sir, that man is siding with the commander that defied the rule of the Arakis family. - Fate cares not for lineage or power. It decides who is worthy to rule. We will wait for a sign.

The turret had ceased its revolving and things once again seemed quiet. Imetriarch was baffled, yet at the same time he was relieved knowing that the operations were going well.

I wonder if this is Kirin's doing? he thought to himself.

So what's going on? Kairi asked, as she and Mulian came to the battery.

Apparently, there has been a cease-fire with the Aryan carrier. Kirin's operation seems to be working. - Hey, Imetriarch, a voice shouted from the rear. The three turned to find none other than Tidus rushing at them. He stopped and caught his breath.

Hey, Tidus, Kairi said, What are you doing here?

Kirin sent me back to give you a message. Tidus replied.

What is it? Imetriarch asked.

He says that the way is open and he'd like reinforcements to back up in the attack. He also says that he and his men are widening the rift within the Aryan forces, finding those still loyal to the Arakis family. - Tidus' speech was short-lived as the sound of battle echoed from the Aryan carrier.

Is that so? Imetriarch smiled. Then so be it. He turned to his subordinates. Assemble a hundred men to aid in the advance! -

Yes sir. The subordinates replied. They scurried to rally their best men.

What a grand opportunity this is for us. He turned to Tidus. You go ahead and lead our troops through the waterway, Tidus. Give my compliments to Prince Kirin when you see him.

Yes sir, Tidus replied and ran off to do his duty.

I want to go too. Kairi said. I have to help my brother.

That is out of the question, Miss Kairi. Imetriarch said. I need you here to watch over Master Mulian.

But, -

There is no need for that, Imetriarch. Muli replied. I'll be alright for now. Let Kairi help her brother. That is the least I could do to repay them for helping me.

But master, Imetriarch uttered,

I'm a member of the Arakis family am I not? It's time for me to start acting like one and not have to worry others about my safety! Your job is to lead our troops and my job is to motivate them! He turned to Kairi. Thank you, Kairi for what you've done for me. Now you go and find your brother. -

Thank you, Muli. Kairi bowed and withdrew. I will come back.

I know you will. Muli smiled. His smile quickly diminished and he turned to his men. Now, battle positions all of you! We bring order to the universe here and now! It all ends tonight!

Aye, the soldiers replied and quickly rallied.

Alright, men, Imetriarch concurred. There's no holding back this time! Reload the cannons and aim for the front lines of the Aryan faction!

Aye, sir, -

Imetriarch looked at young Mulian who stood tall and proud. It was strange, but to Crassus, his young master seemed more like his father in stature.

He has done it. The Prime Minister thought to himself. He has gained his father's strength and charisma.

The cannons once again to echo as their projectiles were launched upon the Aryan lines.

Within the transmission room, the Aryans did all in their power to maintain control. The transmission room was vital to their ship and the only thing that prevented their enemies from contacting reinforcements from the outside.

Hold your ground men! the lieutenant in charge shouted. We can't afford to lose this room to the enemy!

But we don't know who the enemy is! a subordinate added. We have to surrender!

And let the traitors of the Imperial cause have their way?! Are you one of them?! -

No sir, I& But before any explanation could be made, the man was cut down by his superior without a second thought.

There is no room for traitors! You are either with us or against us! -

In that case, you will never know who the real enemy is. A voice said from amidst the opposing ranks. From behind the defectors, Kirin appeared to confront the commander. The Aryans were shocked. It doesn't have to end like this.

Kirin of the Flaming Blades, one soldier uttered.

What's he doing here? another added.

I thought you were executed for attempted mutiny. The lieutenant said.

I never mutinied. Kirin replied. I just came to the realization that my life was worth nothing to the higher-ups. They could care less about what happened to me as they could care less about you.

No, you're wrong! The Imperial cause is all that matters! Our lives are but miniscule particles of dust! But each grain will add to the rise of a mountain in the end! -

So your purpose in this life really doesn't matter more than my own. -

I will fight all who stand in the way of the Three Excellencies and their ambitions! The lieutenant drew out his sword and charged. There is no room for traitors like you!

But Kirin cut the man down within seconds. Kirin stood up and wiped the blood away from his blade.

I wonder who the real traitor is. Kirin looked at the other resisters. Do all of you think the same as he and wish to throw your lives away for a cause that is already lost? Will you be willing to spit upon the graves your fathers and grandfathers by turning against what they stood for? The remaining Aryans lowered their heads. Slowly, but surely, each man who had once fought in the name of Lord Marcus Montague now dropped their weapons and raised their arms in surrender. You've made the right decision. Kirin approached the activation platform to the transmission scrambler and deactivated it. The system fell silent. Mission accomplished.

Back at the foundation battery, a transmitted message reached Imetriarch Crassus by means of his scouter.

Sir, sir, a sudden voice sounded. Crassus lifted his ear. He could hear the voice was loud and clear from the transmission system. It was the captain of the foundation carrier. Prime Minister, can you hear me?

I can hear you loud and clear. Imetriarch replied.

Our transmission is back up, sir. -

That means that they've taken down the transmission scrambler. The Prime Minister smirked. It's working, we're winning.

Your orders, sir? -

Contact the Universal Alliance. Tell them that we need immediate assistance here on the Destiny Islands and to send reinforcements right away! -

Yes sir, -

Crassus, Muli said.

What is it, my lord? Imetriarch asked.

Tell the captain to prepare a link to the Aryan carrier. Also prepare an escort to accompany back to our carrier. I want to make an open declaration to the enemy. -

But my lord, -

The Aryan Faction may have fought against us, but they are still fellow Oceanarians. I do not wish to hold any grudge against them. Perhaps if they realize my capabilities and my intentions, they will surrender. -

My lord, -

That is an order, Imetriarch. Crassus looked into the eyes of his young master, seeing the intensity of the late Drako Arakis.

As you wish, my lord, Crassus contacted the captain. Captain, Master Mulian will be returning to the ship. Set up a link to the Aryan carrier.

The Aryans, the captain asked, but why?

His Excellency orders it. -

Aye, sir, Crassus then turned to one of his subordinates.

Lieutenant, he said.

Sir? the lieutenant replied.

Have a convoy for ten elite troops to escort Master Mulian back to our carrier. -

Yes sir, Imetriarch turned to Mulian.

It s all set, my lord. -

Thank you, Imetriarch. Muli replied. He accompanied the lieutenant rearward. Crassus only watched as his master disappeared into the darkness of the early morning hours.

I just hope this plan of yours works. -

Kairi accompanied Tidus and the rest of the reinforcements through the waterway and up the cliff to the rear of the Aryan lines. Already, there was bedlam as civil brawl came before the Aryans.

I have to find my brother. Kairi said. Armed with her win swords, she quickly rushed into the fray of the chaos.

Kairi wait, Tidus shouted.

Sir, what shall we do? a soldier asked.

Spread out and help the resistance! -

Sir, -

The company spread out to help their comrades.

Kairi entered the ship without a second thought, fearing only for her brother s safety. When entering, she came before a chaotic sight. There were slain soldiers here and there and the words *Van car Un isk Concorte Irakisin* written upon the wall. The sounds of battle could be heard in muffled chattering.

My God, she thought to herself, what has been going on here? Running alongside the wall to avoid detection, Kairi made her way deeper into the interior again seeing the same type of carnage as she had when first entering. A voice boomed over the loud speaker.

My fellow loyalists, it was the voice of none other than Kirin.

Brother, Kairi said.

The time has come to take back what was unjustly stolen from you! The pride of your families has rested upon the shoulders of the Arakis Foundation! The Arakis Family is the true path! Do not throw away the oaths that your ancestors had vowed in protection of the Arakis family! Their way is the true Imperial way! -

As the message ended, from out of nowhere, a platoon of Aryan soldiers appeared, possibly to quell an uprising somewhere else. It was then that they happened to spot Kairi.

An outsider, the leader shouted.

It's a girl. A soldier added.

She must be a foundation sympathizer. Kill her now! The soldiers drew out their weapons and began to fire a hail of bullets into the corridor. Kairi quickly threw herself into one of the rooms just as the bullets passed and ricocheted by. The room was empty and dark and Kairi hid amongst the shadows. She heard the company draw closer and closer to the room. They suddenly stopped at the doorway, not daring to advance. Kairi could hear her own heartbeat.

Then, there was the sound of a dropping pin and a clicking metal mechanism, followed by the sound of a thrown object into the room, clanking on the ground. Kairi feared the worst, knowing what it might be. Her intuition was correct. The Aryans had thrown a hand grenade into the room.

Take cover! the commander shouted. But Kairi jumped out of the room unexpectedly just as the grenade detonated. Kairi jumped off the wall, off the ceiling and plummeted towards the soldiers. She slashed at four of them with one strike, maiming them and depriving them of their weapons. The soldiers were baffled, at the same time terrified.

How can this be? one soldier said.

Don't stand there, the leader shouted, Kill her! The soldiers took aim and began to shoot at Kairi, but the girl managed to evade them at close range and cut down two more. She then used one of her twin swords and impaled one of the other troopers at the shoulder.

Damn you, another trooper growled and aimed well, but Kairi cut his weapon in half and struck the young man in the shoulder.

You little strumpet! the leader bellowed, You will die! He drew out his pistol and shot at her, but Kairi managed to cut his pistol in half as well. The last soldier took aim to shoot the girl in the back. But Kairi sensed his presence and slashed upwards from behind. She cut the gun in two, as she did some of the others, then pummel kicked the young soldier in the gut, knocking him off his feet. The young soldier riled in agony from the pain.

You mustn't underestimate me because I'm a girl. Kairi said. I might be just a civilian, but I've learned from the best.

Damn you, the leader growled.

As you can see, I detest the thought of killing, which is why I only maimed your men. None of them will die and they're too caught up in the pain to actually pick up their weapons and fight again. Besides, there aren't any more weapons to fight with.

You think so? The leader quickly reached for the sword that Kairi impaled into one of his men. He plucked it out of the recruit's shoulder who screamed in agony as the blade left his flesh. Then let's see how you favor against someone like me!

The leader attacked and struck with great ferocity. Kairi was calm though, not wavering at her opponent's movements. By her standards, the man was an amateur. She evaded and blocked like the efforts of the leader were mere trifles.

Is this the best you can do? she asked.

Don't you dare mock me! the leader shouted, attacking on blind rage alone.

You're getting emotional. That's not a good thing in this type of contest. -

Shut your mouth! The leader lunged at Kairi. This proved to be a fatal mistake. Kairi evaded the thrust, spun around and elbowed the man at the side of the head. The leader struck the wall and slumped unconscious to the ground. When all was quiet, Kairi picked up her other sword.

You were good, but not good enough. -

Is that so? a voice said from further down the corridor. You think that you're quite a skilled swordsman, girl? Kairi turned to see a tall man dressed in a black frock, covered with a grey overcoat. His garments were far more elaborate than the other soldiers and he bore a general's black helmet with gold spire

atop it. Then why don't we see how well you favor against the likes of me.

Who are you? -

I am the leader of this entire operation, girl. I am Lieutenant General Hector Fortinbras. He drew out his officer's saber.

A top rank proves nothing. -

Does it not? -

The general suddenly attacked with incredible swiftness. He struck and lunged with incredible accuracy and skill. Kairi now saw that his words were more than just big talk. Unlike the miniscule leader of the platoon she battled earlier, Fortinbras proved to be a skilled combatant in the way of the blade. His timing and his evasion were just as deadly and accurate as Kairi's, if not a little greater. The young woman now faced a determined warrior who was ready to kill and had the means and the skill to do so. The battle only lasted for two minutes before a fatal blow was given. Fortinbras slashed upward then to the side, knocking both swords out of Kairi's hands. Kairi fell to the ground. Deprived of her weapons, she didn't know what to do now.

This can't be. She thought to herself. How could I lose so easily?

I guess you're nothing, but cheap talk when it comes to fighting a real warrior. Fortinbras mocked. This type of battle isn't for feeble and fragile females such as you. The only conclusion that you will always encounter in the end is death! Fortinbras lifted up his sword and prepared to smite her.

But at the last minute, a shadowy figure appeared, throwing its presence between the general's descending sword and Kairi. Kairi closed her eyes, fearing the strike of the blade. But as she came to realize she was still alive, Kairi opened her eyes. She gazed up to see none other than her brother. His long-handled blades crossed at the hilts blocking the sharpened steel of Fortinbras.

You leave my little sister alone, you filth. He uttered.

Kirin of the Flaming Blades, Fortinbras was stunned, What are you doing here?!

Just passing by, Using his strength, he pushed back the general. His blades caught the spark from the grind and began to bellow flames. Kirin stood between the enemy and his sister.

Kirin, Kairi uttered, You're here.

Are you alright? -

Yes, -

What are you doing here anyway? -

I came to find you. -

That was a stupid thing you did. Kirin seemed to scold his little sister.

But, -

This is a dangerous place deep behind enemy lines. You knew of the danger and yet you came here anyway. That was a very stupid thing for you to do, Kairi. Kairi lowered her head.

I just& she uttered, her voice wavering. I just thought that&

Well, whatever you thought, you were wrong. There was a sudden silence. But then again, I am glad that you came to find me. It just goes to show that I have proven myself to you.

Brother, Kairi looked up with a half smile and tears in her eyes.

Now, go and help the others. This guy is mine. -

But Kirin, -

I'll be alright. You just make sure that we win this thing. -

Right, Kairi didn't want to argue and quickly withdrew, leaving Kirin and Fortinbras in their stand-off. Kirin's piercing gaze was fixed on the general. Fortinbras had this smirk upon his face.

I see, he said. I see now why you're here. That little strumpet is your sister.

Watch your tongue. Kirin replied.

What fortuitous circumstance is this, to find Kirin of the Flaming Blades and his sibling here as well? -

I wouldn't be cocky if I were you, Fortinbras. So far your lack of strategic skill has cost you dearly. Now, there is an uprising within your own ranks. -

And I take it that you are the one who was responsible for that. -

I know of the hasty coup against the Arakis Foundation. I also know that amongst the Aryan Faction officers, not one is truly fit to serve as a commander, even Lord Marcus Montague himself. And of all of his officers, you General Fortinbras are the most incompetent and the most despised. -

That's awfully bold statement, traitor! -

Is it not true? The only reason why you probably took on this job was because you wanted to redeem yourself for the disgraceful performance you displayed in the Oceansburg Campaign. But let's face it, you suck at strategy and leadership, which is the reason why your men hate you. It's always about you and your ego and no one else. If something's your fault, you point the finger at others to take the blame for your mistakes. Of course this lecture was wearing on the general's mind. Though he did not outwardly show it, he was boiling from within. His fists clutched tightly, but relaxed after relieving his conscience of his past mistakes.

I have to admit, Fortinbras stated, I have made some mistakes in the past. I may not be a great strategist and I may be despised by the very men who serve me, but at least I had the decency to remain loyal to the Imperial cause. Unlike you, a once faithful and trusted officer of the Midnight Faction, now you're an outcast, a rebel, a traitor to your comrades, your lord, and to the Imperial cause. -

I followed the Imperial cause only for the sake of fulfilling my own goals. -

And what goals might that be? -

That's not open for discussion now is it? Kirin growled.

I see, it must be that strumpet sister of yours. You threw all of your efforts with the faction away just because of her, didn't you? Why else would you defect? Kirin clutched his fists. So it is true, you cared little for the Imperial cause. You only cared about your sister.

There's no use hiding anything from you is there? Kirin chuckled. I guess you do have a brain to match your ego.

Mark my words, Kirin. Fortinbras threw his sword before the young man. Once I dispense with you, I will then kill your sister. Then both of you can walk side by side in the afterlife.

That's not going to happen. You're dealing with Kirin of the Flaming Blades. -

Should I waver? Fortinbras took a defensive stance. The reason why I seldom excel in strategy and tactics is because that was not my main focus. My main focus was based on combat. If I didn't have to stand behind and observe our men from the rear during the Oceansburg Campaign as a good general should, I can assure you that the outcome would have been completely different. -

I know why you were standing in the rear, so you'd be furthest from the danger. -

Stupid boy, you will soon realize the extent of your folly. I am not as weak in combat as I am in tactics. -

Then let's just see. -

Kirin was the first one to attack. He struck with incredible precision and speed. He thrust, knowing that Fortinbras would dodge. Like Saito's Gatotsu, Kirin twisted the blade to its side and used a side sweep. But again, Fortinbras evaded, moving out of reach of the attack. He then swerved to strike Kirin at the back of the neck. But Kirin used his other blade and blocked the attack. He swerved around again, hoping to slice the general from the side, but again the general evaded. Like two coordinated dance partners, Kirin and Fortinbras struck and counter-struck, dodged and parried, slashed and thrust, but with no clear winner.

However, it was within the period of five minutes that Kirin realized Fortinbras was not bluffing. He was indeed a formidable fighter.

16 - Peace Restored

Peace Restored

The two now stood face to face, their gaze stern as rock. Kirin, however, came to realize that Fortinbras was a more formidable soldier to contend with than originally thought.

His strength is incredible. Kirin thought to himself. I have to admit, I was wrong about his abilities earlier.

So what do you think? Fortinbras asked with a smirk. Do you find that I am not so easy to combat with as before? It just goes to show that appearances can be deceiving.

I'll admit, you have some skill, but don't let it go to your head. -

Just wait and see. -

Fortinbras attacked again, slashing and thrusting with incredible speed. Kirin had found himself at a loss for words. Suddenly, with an upward slash, Fortinbras managed to cut the front of Kirin's shirt. Not close enough to cut flesh, but near enough for Kirin to maintain his guard.

It appears that the high and mighty Kirin of the Flaming Blades is not as top notch as he thought himself to be. Fortinbras attacked again. You'll never be able to stand a chance against me in a one on one fight. In my entire career, there has been no opponent who could best me. And you are no different from any of those preceding you. -

You forget though, Fortinbras, Kirin said with a smirk, You're not dealing with your average opponent.

Enough talk, The general charged again. Die,

Fortinbras attacked with all his might, the two battled down the hallway without giving in.

In the meantime, Kairi was rushing in and out of different corridors gazing into rooms and seeing battles erupt all around her. She had not gone noticed the batteries of the Aryan carrier were lashed into a frenzy of skirmishes. In the midst of the inward chaos, it was hard to distinguish the difference between the loyalists and the allies.

Suddenly, Kairi found herself confronted by another large force of Aryan soldiers. This time, it was an entire company that stood before her. Kairi had nowhere to go and the Aryans were already on top of her. She drew out her swords and prepared to battle. But before a confrontation could take place, someone amidst the mass called her name.

Miss Kairi? it cried. Kairi lowered her weapons. One of the supposed Aryan soldiers stepped forward. But it was actually one of the enlisted men who accompanied Kirin in the first party. He approached her. It's not safe to wander about the ship alone, Miss Kairi.

Are you a friend, or an enemy? -

A comrade of the Arakis Foundation, Miss. I was with your brother when we first engaged. Kairi, then remembered seeing the young soldier amongst the other troops in Kirin's outfit.

Oh yes, I remember you. You're a corporal right? -

That's correct, ma'am. Kairi observed the soldier from head to toe.

But why is it that you're dressed like an Aryan soldier? -

It was the only way to cause confusion amongst the enemy ranks. But you can distinguish us from the enemy by means of the white bands we wear on our arms. He pointed to the cloth wrapped around his upper right arm. Kairi then observed the other soldiers. They too were wearing similar bands.

I see, -

So anyone wearing a white ban is a friend. -

Thank you for telling me that. -

Hey, Kairi, a voice cried out. Kairi turned to see Tidus running towards them. What are you doing here? It's dangerous.

I wanted to find my brother. -

And did you find him? -

Well, yes, but he didn't want me around. -

I'm not surprised. He doesn't want you to wear on his mind in the midst of battle. You just stick with us for the time being until this thing is over. -

Alright, Tidus then looked at the soldier beside Kairi.

Is everything secured so far, corporal? -

Yes sir, the trooper replied. We have managed to take over the communication and transmission facilities. The rift between loyalist and Aryans has reached its peak. Now, we're on our way to attack the resistance at the batteries.

Very well, then we'll join you. -

Sir, but we have to move out of here as quickly as possible, our comrades at the batteries need assistance in their overthrow. -

Understood, Tidus looked at Kairi. I hope you're ready for this, Kairi.

I'm right behind you, Tidus. Kairi replied.

With the hundred or so men, most of them defectors, the party moved their way to the battery turret, hoping to eliminate what remained of the resistance.

Kirin's strength was found equally matched against the might of Fortinbras. For ten minutes up and down the corridors they fought. Slashing and thrusting, jabbing and striking, both combatants did all in their power to outdo the other. Neither seemed to be gaining the upper hand, but for some reason Fortinbras seemed more submissive, using a strong defense rather than offense. He seemed to taunt Kirin as a cat would with a mouse before devouring the prey. They eventually found themselves fighting in one of the isolated chambers. But both were too caught up in their fight to notice, or so it seemed.

You're starting to stress. Fortinbras said, as he and Kirin continued to fight. I can feel it.

You don't know what you're talking about. -

You believe that? The reason for your aggressive offensive is because you can't fathom my taunts. You want to end this battle with me as soon as possible. But then again, I won't allow such a thing. To be a true warrior is to find the weaknesses of your opponent, mentally and physically. I am helping to wear your body down by allowing you to continue your offensive. This takes up more energy than a defensive stance. Also, I stun your mental abilities by taunting you and forcing you to drag on, thus making you flustered. -

Why don't you stop being a coward and fight me right?! But again, Fortinbras evaded another swing from the young man.

Is that what you think? That I'm a coward? There is a difference between being clever and being a coward, young Kirin. A coward will always find ways to avoid a confrontation altogether. A clever opponent, however, will use all in their power to win the fight by any means necessary. They can faint a retreat and then suddenly turn on you with incredible strength just like this. -

The Aryan general suddenly attacked and struck at Kirin. This time, Fortinbras put himself on the offensive. Kirin was overwhelmed by the sudden burst of energy and power. Left and right the general jabbed and sliced. Only by a narrow margin did Kirin manage to evade being cut. He managed to break off from the skirmish. Scraping his blades on the ground, he caused a spark and his swords caught fire,

illuminating the chamber to which they combated.

I'd be aware this time around, Fortinbras. Kirin declared.

It is you who should be careful, boy. Fortinbras replied. Not unless you want to blow us all to hell. Fortinbras pointed to the chamber around them. Kirin looked and realized that they had been fighting in one of the ammunition storage chambers. Too much heat or one significant impact could cause every ammunition crate in here to detonate. To add, Fortinbras pointed above Kirin's head. Kirin eyed above and saw a gas vein which traveled along the chamber ceiling. One careless move involving that pipe and it's death for us both.

Damn it, Kirin glared at Fortinbras, a sweat of apprehension on his brow. You did this on purpose. You drew us in here didn't you?!

You see, it's not always the strongest warrior that wins. In most cases, it's the smartest that wins the battle because they know how to manipulate the environment around them. In this case, if you try to pull off your fancy flame attacks in here; you endanger half of the ship. And who knows, your beloved sister might be on that endangered side. Kirin suddenly felt helpless before his foe. He extinguished the flames before any devastation reaction could occur. The thing about truly skilled warriors is that they know how to probe for their enemies weaknesses and use it to their advantage. In this case, you are a warrior who wishes for a swift victory with an opponent who attacks head on. But simply attacking head on does not always determine victory. In this case, I am one who likes to prolong the battle for as long as possible. I will do whatever it takes to keep my opponent on his feet and moving about. Only when they are at the point of weariness do I go in for the kill. And it looks to me that you've met your limit. You can't use any of your signature techniques within this chamber. Therefore, you must regress to using more simple tactics. And I know that you're not willing to take any action that might involve the death of your comrades and especially your younger sibling. -

Kirin, seeming to be weary and mentally exhausted, backed off from the fight to regain his strength and think of a solution. He heaved in every breath with heavy gasps and fell to one knee, using one sword as a crutch. Sweat dropped down the side of his face. The general stood before him with that arrogant smirk of his.

I bet this is the first time you've ever faced someone like me for this long, eh boy. Fortinbras said. This is the first time in your life that you've ever confronted a foe this powerful and yet so masterfully skilled and clever. So the mighty Kirin of the Flaming Blades knows his utmost limits and he acknowledges that I am more than a match for his own mediocre abilities. Oh how the mighty have fallen. As you know, trying to fight me on sheer strength alone is futile. It seemed that Kirin had finally confronted a foe that had the upper hand over him in every way. But for some reason, his scared and exhausted look vanished.

You talk too much, Fortinbras. Kirin suddenly said, his lip curving up in a clever smile. Fortinbras heard that comment and immediately his own smirk faded.

I beg your pardon? -

I said you talk too much. -

Is that so? -

You say that you excel in combat more than you excel in strategy. Well, if you want my opinion, you're just as lacking in skill of combat like you are in battlefield tactics. Certainly, those blows of yours were strong and I have to admit that you have some ability, but you never took into consideration of knowing your enemy first. I've already had a thorough analysis of your combat style. -

Is that so? Well, please enlighten me of my flaws. -

For one thing, you talk bigger than you fight. You expect your big words to intimidate your opponent. Then, when that fails, you use strong aggressive blows and extreme swiftness to gain a quick upper hand over your opponent. However, when that doesn't work, you regress to a more defensive way of

fighting, maintaining your distance and not engaging too much, so as to preserve your energy, while allowing an enemy to lose theirs. At the same time, you use your taunts and big words to break them up mentally. Then, when it seems that the opponent has no strength of will left to fight, that's when you go for the throat. However, you yourself have a major flaw, and one which plagues every warrior, no matter how experienced. And that is underestimating your opponent. You've made pretty large assumptions about me, but assuming is a dangerous thing. You said that I couldn't fathom prolonged fights. That was wrong. I may be one to enjoy swift victories, but I have trained myself to endure prolonged battles with my enemies if they come up. -

If what you say is true, Fortinbras inquired, Then why is it that you don't seem to have the strength to stand up anymore?

That's the thing, Kirin's weariness suddenly vanished, To truly be a clever warrior is to deceive your opponent. You failed to exhibit that. You thought that you already had the upper hand in this fight. But how could you make such an assumption without once ever battling against me yourself until now? If you want my opinion, you just say things to boost up your ego. But the reality is that you have nothing to show for it.

You forget though, boy, we're still in this chamber. Any false move might prove to be your last. -

I've already taken that into consideration. Kirin flipped his blades to the under hand position and then struck the floor. He then released his swords, letting them stand erect, hilt towards the ceiling. My swords will catch fire very easily. Therefore, I will have to find some other way to battle you.

And how do you plan on doing that? You plan on fighting me with your bear hands? -

If that's what it takes. -

Foolish boy, fighting me without a weapon has only guaranteed one thing. Fortinbras charged head on.

Your death is not only assured, it's absolute!

But suddenly, as Fortinbras drew nearer, Kirin drew out his last resort weapons. Raising his right arm, he deployed his infamous grappling hook, which was used again Riku and Sora back at Monsters Inc. Fortinbras was caught off guard. There was no time to react as he was too close to dodge dagger. The hook struck the general directly into his gut, piercing almost straight through his back. Fortinbras flew rearward from the force and skidded along the ground, mortally wounded.

Almost immediately, the blood began to drip from his mouth and he began to cough up a great deal of phlegm.

You tricked me& the general uttered with a sneer.

It just goes to show that you are all talk and no action. Kirin said. An experienced warrior would have known that there was some other scheme behind my action than just disarmament. The young man picked up his swords, So much for excelling in the art of combat.

With that Kirin began to walk out of the ammunition storage. But no sooner had he passed where Fortinbras fell, he heard the general suddenly guffaw in a sinister chuckle.

I have to admit, my ability to fight was rather far fetched, he strained. But that doesn't mean that I'm not willing to go to the extreme. The general pulled from under his frock a grenade. He flicked the pin out with a loud ping. As I said, the smartest warrior will always win, using whatever means necessary to emerge victorious. If I am not allowed to win, then no one does.

You idiot, Kirin shouted.

It's too late for that! You'll never get far enough to avoid the explosion! With that Fortinbras threw the grenade into the thick of the ammunition crates without a second thought. Seeing the danger, Kirin quickly withdrew, running as fast as he could from the ammunition shack. He could still hear the general's crude laughing, even as his time was about to end. The grenade detonated and its shrapnel pieces struck each box. There was second explosion. Then another and another and another until a mighty eruption bellowed out. The corridors filled with fire and the walls imploded. Kirin looked behind

him and saw a wall of fire and speeding debris behind him. Unable to outrun the blast, he was overwhelmed by the explosion, caught in a frenzy of death.

What occurred next could only be described as utter chaos. Within the ship, the opposite side of where the explosion originated, Kairi and her comrades were thrown off their feet by the violent jerking of the hull. Fighting within the battery area halted for a moment as both sides felt the surge.

What was that? Tidus asked.

It must've been an explosion from within the ship. The corporal replied.

Brother, Kairi thought to herself, fearing for her brother's safety. However, a sudden piercing of dread came over her, striking deep into both heart and soul. Kairi fell to her knees. Seeing her collapse, Tidus rushed to her side.

Kairi, he said, aiding her, Kairi are you alright?

This feeling, tears were in her eyes. Something's wrong. Kirin is in trouble. -

How do you know? -

This dread, it just came over me. -

It's all a figment of your imagination. Tidus tried his best to comfort her. I'm sure that your brother is alright.

I hope so. Dear God, I hope so. -

From Prime Minister Crassus' position, he saw a bellowing flame burst from the hull of the Aryan ship.

What the devil happened? he said.

There was a massive explosion. One of the subordinates replied.

It must've been a detonated ammunition stock. Another officer added. What I know most about these Aryan ships, they run heavily armed.

Well, Imetriarch thought to himself, this guarantees one thing. The Aryans won't be able to resist for much longer. He then turned to another officer. Is there any news about Master Muli? Has he made back it to our ship yet?

Not yet, Prime Minister, a third officer declared.

I certainly hope that his strategy works. -

Back on the bridge of the Aryan carrier, the captain and the rest of the crew present felt the sudden violent tremble caused by the explosion. The emergency lights began to blink.

What in God's name was that?! the captain asked.

It was an explosion within the ship. One of the operatives replied.

Give me a status report. -

One of our ammunition storage facilities on the port side was detonated. The explosion has managed to pierce through deck levels four through seventeen. The damage percentage exceeds over 84% on the port bow. -

That means that we are permanently crippled. We won't be able to make sufficient repairs with that kind of damage. -

Sir, another operative cried. The defectors have managed to take over our batteries.

Sir, another shouted, We've detected large objects descending towards the region.

What was that? the captain asked. An onscreen visual was made. To the horror of the bridge and the Aryans on board, what they saw only proved that their inevitable end had come. Three large A class carriers of the Universal Alliance had appeared and were now hovering off shore. The captain lowered his head. There's no doubt about it, this is the end for us.

Well, well, Crassus said with a grin as he saw the three grand ships of the Universal Alliance appear offshore in the early morning light. It appears that the message got through after all.

Reinforcements have arrived, sir. One of his subordinates cheered.

Yes, victory has been handed to us with extraordinary grandeur. But Imetriarch's joy soon gave way to dread as he thought of the fate which awaited his fellow Oceanarians of the Aryan faction. But sometimes, I wish there could be some kind of middle ground where all can benefit.

The forces of the Aryan faction feared the worst.

So this is the end. The captain whispered to himself.

There is a message from the Universal Alliance, sir. An operative said.

Put it through. The operative opened the line from the Universal Alliance.

This is a declaration to the Aryan Carrier. The Alliance stated. You have violated the rules of sanctuary to the Arakis Foundation and its leading representatives. By order of the president, no one is to hinder those who have been officially guaranteed sanctuary by the Universal Alliance. Anyone who dares to defy this right will be eliminated unless otherwise objected by members of the alliance or those hindered.

What now, sir? the captain's subordinate asked.

There's nothing we can do. The captain replied. In accordance with the Universal Alliance's policy on sanctuary, the assailants are thus charged as guilty and will be swiftly executed unless an order is given by a high ranking official of the Universal Alliance or by a leading official of the party sanctioned. In other words, unless someone from the Arakis Foundation or the Universal Alliance comes forth in our defense, we are held accountable for execution.

If that's the case, sir, then let us fight to the end! -

For how long though? Continuing to fight would only be futile for us. Our batteries have been seized by the defectors and we've sustained a great deal of damage. To add, those are class A battle carriers with heavy guns. We wouldn't stand a chance. -

Then what should we do? -

The only thing we can do is wait for a response to be given. But if we take action before that, we'll be accounted for hostilities and execution is guaranteed. -

But a small flame of hope came to the forces of the Aryan faction. Another transmitted message was coming through.

There's another message, sir. The operative said.

Where from? the captain asked.

It's coming from the Arakis Foundation. -

This might be our only hope. The captain thought to himself. He openly declared Put it through. And link the message to the entire ship. I want everyone to hear it.

Aye, sir, The message was accepted and the voice of the young Mulian Arakis was heard throughout the ship.

This is a declaration to the forces of the Aryan Faction. Muli began. I am Lord Mulian Nidarach Arakis, son and heir of His late Excellency, Lord Drako Arakis, former member of the Dark Empire. I know of why you have turned against me and why you have fought against me. You do not find my decision of joining and integrating with the Universal Alliance an acceptable one and that is understandable. Many of you have been part of the former Imperial Regime and have wished to see the Dark Empire in its former grandeur. You despise the thought of even joining along with an enemy you have fought against for so many years. But the time has come for us to lay down our arms and begin a new world, a new world where universal conflict does not reign. My father and the Three Excellencies did all in their power to maintain the old Imperial ideals. But look at what has happened. If our ideals were meant to be, then

the Dark Empire would not have fallen and former Imperials would not be battling amongst themselves. Even now, the current Three Excellencies do not have any intension of forming a pact with one another. Even now, this new Imperial Axis is faltering. One man wishes to rule over the others, but all want this. This will only lead to more suffering and that is the last thing I want. There was a pause in Mulian's statement, but it was enough time for those of the Aryan faction to realize what his hopes were and allowed them to question their own cause.

Rather for what we are fighting for, the question is what should we be fighting against? I have every right to declare you my enemies and see each an every one of you executed for the wrong you have inflicted upon me and my men. But I will do no such thing. You are after all, not only fellow Oceanarians, but fellow intellectual beings who have found purposes in their lives. We detest the thought of change, abandoning the values that we held so dear. However, the times will not allow things to return as they were. We must accept a new change, a new way, to make friends out of old enemies. But at the same time, we must not abandon that Imperial pride. Though it may not express itself as a dominant power, it shall forever remain a part of our hearts. And that in itself is something that no one can take away. I therefore offer clemency and forgiveness to all members of the Aryan Faction who have engaged against us today. You will be allowed to return to your homes, unmolested and with safe conduct without fear of retaliation. All defectors, past or present will be forgiven. So is my declaration and I shall stand by it.

The Aryans were left stunned and spellbound. Never before have they been given such conditions of compassion, and by the enemy commander whom they had tried to assassinate and kill all that time.

Perhaps Master Mulian is more of a leader than what we took him for. One soldier present said.

Perhaps his decision was not for himself and his family, but for all of us. Another added.

Why would he be giving us this chance when he knows we did all in our power to kill him? an officer said.

What shall we do? the captain's subordinate asked.

It is an offer that benefits us all. The captain replied. And it is one that I refuse to let go. Open up the line.

But what about General Fortinbras? -

I fear that he might already be dead. But I will not allow this ship's company and its fighting men to perish for the sake of that man's selfish pride. -

Aye, sir, -

It's over for us, my men. Some of the men cried tears of joy. Others wept tears of shame. We have finally been beaten. He lowered his head, though the expression was vague. We fully accept the terms of surrender.

As the sun rose in the sky, greeting the morning, the sounds of battle had ceased. For the first time in going on two days, there was a peaceful lull. From their barracks, the Aryans soldiers appeared. They threw down their arms and trickled towards the foundation trenches. The Foundation soldiers gladly embraced them. With their leader dead and the battle over, there was no need to continue fighting. These were after all former comrades. As the two sides integrated, there were some happy reunions. Brothers came together, fathers and sons were reunited, cousins and cousins, nephews and uncles, and best friends came together. For a while, it seemed as if there were no enemies at all, but rather two sides that reconciled after a night of brawling. There were, however, tragic reunions as well as some had found their friends and loved ones either mortally wounded, or dead on the field. Thus, not only was the atmosphere filled with joyful cheers, but the wailing of sorrowful mourns. Tidus looked over the field to see this act of compassion. And even amongst the men near him, foundation and Aryan soldiers gave up all former hatred to embrace in brotherhood.

I gotta admit one thing about these Oceanarians. He said to himself. They know not to bear a grudge. Though they have been fighting against each other, sir. The corporal implied, They never really had an excuse to hate each other absolutely. They could hate each other for having lost comrades and loved ones at the hands of the enemy, but then again there s not a man here who hasn t experienced that sensation.

Just then, Kairi appeared from the mass of men. Tidus spotted her from a distance, being the only other person amidst the crowd that was not wearing black. Kairi looked about as if looking for someone.

Hey Kairi, Tidus cried as he waved, Over here! Kairi saw him and waved back. They approached each other. I was wondering where you wandered off to.

Tidus, Kairi asked with a timid waver in her voice. Have you seen my brother anywhere? -

Kirin, no I haven t seen him. -

I ve looked everywhere. No one has seen him. I really hope that he s alright. -

I m sure he is. -

But what if he isn t? What if he s been wounded, or worse? What if he was&? Kairi couldn t speak anymore. Tidus put his arms around her and tried to comfort her.

It ll be okay, Kairi. Kirin is a tough guy. He d never die knowing that he has you to protect. If you just believe in him, he ll come back safe and sound.

You think so, Tidus? -

I know so. Tidus released her and smiled. Kairi returned the gesture with a sad smile.

Yeah, you re right. I just have to believe in him. -

That s the spirit. Tidus gave a sigh. Well, since the fighting is over, I m gonna go back down to town and see if my house is still standing.

Okay, With that Tidus scurried off back to town.

In the meantime, the three sides converged at the center of the field. The first was the captain of the Aryan faction and his subordinate. The second party representing the Arakis Foundation was young Mulian Nidarach Arakis and Prime Minister Imetriarch Crassus. And the third party in league with the Universal Alliance was none other than the infamous General Arinario Triiken, accompanied by the commander in charge of the western defense during the Oceansburg Campaign, Madam General Gala Devardios.

The three parties converged at the center of the field where the fighting was most intense. They greeted each other, all former followers of the old Imperial regime and the great cause of the Dark Empire.

So here we stand again. Triiken began. Former Imperials reunited.

I am the captain of the Aryan carrier. The captain declared. I have come to give a former surrender to you and your men. He pulled out his sword and handed it to Mulian. I bestow this sword to you whom we have wronged.

Mulian smiled and turned the sword away.

There is no need for that. The young boy replied. I will not act as a dominant force to deprive you of your dignity.

Then I bestow this surrender to the forces of the Universal Alliance. The captain turned his sword to Triiken. But Triiken too refused.

By order of the president, he declared, When this conflict is over, no side will achieve dominance over the other. Therefore, though tempted by tradition, I will refuse this symbol of honor. You have the right to continue bearing your arms, captain.

The captain nodded and sheathed his sword.

My men are in need of rations, sir. -

As are mine. Mulian replied.

By the grace of the president, Triiken said, He has stocked these carriers with provisions for both sides. He turned to Madam General Devardios. Have the supplies transferred to both parties.

Yes sir, The Madam General replied.

Compliments of the Universal Alliance, -

You are too generous, sir. The captain said. If only our higher-ups of the Aryan faction could show just as much compassion. -

Tidus reached the center of the field to see the three sides adjourning their converse. The minute that he laid eyes of Triiken, his eyes swelled up.

It s you&! The young man roared running towards the former Gatler General.

Do you know that young man? Madam General Devardios asked.

He s merely an annoying little nuisance. Triiken replied. Perhaps he s the raving village idiot.

Who are you calling an idiot, you six foot tall git?! Tidus bellowed. My arm has been sore because of you! It hasn t fully recovered!

You re rather facetious today, aren t you boy. -

I m not a boy anymore, you ditz! -

An imbecile who was bested by a simple thrust attack is no more than a mere boy. -

Why you& Tidus regained his composure. So what the heck is a guy like you doing here?

I m looking for Riku and Sora s young lady friend. -

You mean Kairi? -

I believe that s the one. -

But what do you want with her anyway? -

I have come to give her a message about her comrades. -

Riku and Sora, Tidus was anxious. Well, are they alright?! Tell me! -

Hey you, Madam General Devardios shouted, Be more respectful to the inspector!

No need to raise your voice, Madam General. Triiken said. The boy is just a little anxious about his friends that s all.

Will you stop calling me a boy?! Tidus roared.

Would you prefer to be called a girl? -

That s not what I meant! -

Then quit your pointless billowing, you weed. Now where is she? -

Well, the last time I saw her, she was up there near the Aryan ship, looking for her brother. -

What s that? Triiken was stunned. I was unaware that she even had a brother.

Yeah, this guy named Kirin. Immediately after hearing the name, Triiken and Devardios reacted.

Kirin, Devardios asked, You re not referring to Kirin of the Flaming Blades are you?

Oh yeah, do you know him? -

That young man has gained a notorious reputation as a ruthless fighter. Triiken thought. He was also one of the top commanders of the former Midnight Faction until his declared defection against the Imperial Axis, but to think him as Kairi s brother, what a strange twist of fate. Triiken then pondered at Kirin s face and compared it with the memory of Kairi s face. But then again, they are almost identical. Triiken said nothing further, inwardly or outwardly, and began his ascent towards the ship.

In the meantime, Kairi now stood alone, gazing out to sea. For some reason, she had halted her search for the moment to gaze out at the beautiful blue ocean with its calm surface and crashing waves on the cliff base. She looked to the sky, thinking of her friends and family who had been affected by this conflict in a way. She then pictured Riku and Sora in her mind.

You guys, she thought to herself, I wish you were here with us.

Her nostalgia, however, was interrupted when the sound of someone approaching from behind was

heard. Kairi quickly turned. And to her amazement, she gazed upon a familiar face that rekindled her joy. Kirin had finally returned. He walked slowly, his swords attached to each other as his bow. He walked with a proud stride, a slight smile on his face. He seemed not to have received any damage because his uniform was still in tact, say for a few marks and cuts in the cloth. Kairi ran to him and smiled.

Brother, she said, You made it back alive!

Kairi, Kirin uttered. But his voice did not seem joyful, but rather a sigh of relief. Kairi looked at him funny.

Are you alright, brother? -

But before further word could be said, Kirin suddenly dropped his weapon. A stream of blood appeared on his lips and trickled down his chin. Kirin then collapsed into his sister's arms.

Kirin, Kairi cried, wrapping her arms around him to catch him. But as she felt his back, she felt something sharp protruding from his flesh, followed by a warm, wet substance. Kairi raised her hand and looked in terror. Her hand was covered in her brother's blood. Kirin had in face received a mortal wound. His back had been riddled with shrapnel, striking his vital organs. He did not evade the explosion after all. Kirin went limp in his sister's arms, no longer having the strength to go on.

Kirin, Kairi cried again. She nestled her brother close to her, embracing him. Why are you so hurt? I was caught in that explosion. Kirin whispered. I thought I was dead for sure, but I had to keep my promise to you. I said that I'd come back alive. And so I did.

But why did you put so much stress on your body, you goof? You could have died. -

I had to make myself look presentable. Kirin shuddered, his breathing suddenly giving way to a gasp. The pain in his back was unbearable.

Hang on in there, Kirin. Kairi held on. Keep looking at me, keep looking at me. Kirin looked up at his sister, seeing only a blur of her face. He only smiled.

I did it, -

You did what? -

I did it, Kairi. I protected what was the whole world to me successfully. Now, I can die in peace. -

No, Kirin, you can't die! Kairi held her brother against her bosom and cried. Please, brother, you can't die! Kairi called out to anyone in ear shot. Someone, please help my brother! Please help him! Don't let him die! Don't let him die!

It's okay, Kairi. Kirin's eyes were dimmed. I'm glad to have been reunited with you, even if it was for only a brief period.

Kirin & -

Kairi, a voice cried. She turned to see Tidus and a handful of soldiers running towards her. Along with them were General Triiken and Madam General Devardios. Tidus reached the scene. What's happened &?!

It's Kirin, Kairi replied, he's dying, Tidus. Please help him.

Right, Tidus turned to the soldiers. Get a medic over here now!

Yes sir! a soldier replied and temporarily withdrew.

How is he? -

He's been severely wounded in the back. Kairi replied.

Kairi, Kirin uttered.

Don't say anything, brother. Save your strength! She tenderly embraced her brother and rocked him back and forth, doing her best to ease the pain.

I'm so cold, -

I'll keep you warm, brother. -

The medic's here. Tidus said.

We'll take it from here, ma'am. Two Alliance medics appeared on the scene.

Stay back, Kairi. Tidus kept her at bay as the medics took her brother from her arms.

No, Kirin, she cried.

I'll be alright. Kirin replied with confidence. You just have to believe.

Kirin, -

Ease up, boys. The leading medic said as they hoisted the dying warrior on a canvas stretcher. In unison they hoisted him off and carried him away.

Kirin, -

It'll be alright. Tidus said, hugging Kairi, comforting her. Your brother will be alright. Kairi, unable to speak, only cried. Triiken and Devardios looked on.

Aren't you going to tell her? the madam general asked.

Kairi has enough on her mind. Triiken replied. God forbid I burden her with more worries.

17 - Brother

Brother

The day reached its waning stage to mid-afternoon as it always had and things were peaceful amongst old enemies. But that same period of time seemed an eternity now as Kairi awaited the fate of her brother. She was not permitted to go into the medical hall where her brother had been sent. She had no word of his condition. She feared for his life as she watched helplessly from the doors looking inward to the vast hall of medics.

Kirin, Kairi thought to herself, Please be okay.

Her edginess was heightened though, as she heard the cries of so many young men who were still waiting to be helped. They lay along the corridor upon blood soaked canvas stretchers, moaning in a symphony of agony and pain. One by one, the screaming youths were brought into the facility one after the other to see the medics. She looked upon them, some with mortal wounds on their bodies. Others with severe burns covered with field bandages, blackening the white cotton.

It was then that Kairi saw a young soldier, no older than eighteen. He had received a deep shrapnel wound in his gut which had been bandaged to keep the blood from spilling. He seemed to reach for a canteen not too far away, but his weary body could not summon the strength. Feeling sorry for the young man, Kairi came to him and knelt by his side. She took the canteen.

Do you want water? she asked.

Yes& the young man replied. Kairi slowly lifted his head and let the cool water fall upon his lips. The young man smiled after his sipping. Thank you&mother& His head then went limp to the side. Kairi looked at his face. His eyes were suddenly semi-closed, his lips half apart. Kairi backed off, not knowing what to make of it, though she feared the worst.

Medic, she uttered. One of the attendants came to her.

What s the problem, Miss? he asked.

There s something wrong with that young man. The medic went to the side of the young man. Kairi watched as he put his fingers to the boy s throat. She then saw him shake his head then signal another medic to assist him. They suddenly lifted the still body of the soldier up.

Another that could have made it. The first medic said.

Too bad that they have to die so young. The second medic added.

Kairi began to cry as the thought of the young soldier s weary face still plagued her mind. She suddenly found the face of her brother pop into her head. She then looked about to see that each soldier wounded had that same face. Her daze was broken by the sounding of a deep voice.

Miss Kairi, it declared. Kairi looked to see General Triiken approaching her, You have been wandering about this corridor since they took your brother in.

I still worry about him. -

There is nothing that you can do for him right now. The medics are doing all in their power to help him. -
But it s been over nine hours already. I m worried about him. I have to see him, I have to see him. -

This is not a civilian hospital. You can t just go in and see him. There are to be no visitors allowed whatsoever. Kairi could only cry. Triiken sighed. However, I ll see what I can do. Triiken accompanied Kairi and both went to the guard at the door.

I m sorry, sir. The guard said. I can t allow any unauthorized personnel into the medical hall.

It s alright, Triiken said, I grant permission for this young lady to enter.

But sir, I& -

The doctors can say what they will, but they will have to explain to a higher-up such as I why they would not let a young lady go to her brother s bedside in his time of need. I m sure you ll know what happens next. The young guard hesitated.

Very well, Inspector. The guard replied. I ll give you clearance.

Thank you. -

Both were allowed into the medical hall. They were guided to a room where many of the other soldiers were put in rehabilitation. There, at the far end of the hall lay Kirin. His body had been dressed in clean bandages and he had been attached to a breathing apparatus. He also went through a blood transfusion to maintain his blood circulation. A doctor had finished her analysis on the warrior s condition. Upon seeing Triiken and Kairi, she clapped her board and came to meet them.

I m sorry, she said, There are to be no unauthorized personnel here. I m afraid I m gonna have to ask you to leave.

But my brother, Kairi uttered, Kirin, -

I m sorry, you can t see him. -

But, -

I have superiority over this ship and all the personnel, Doctor. Triiken declared. I will decide who will be permitted.

But Chief Inspector, the doctor replied.

This may be the last time Kairi and her brother might see each other. You wouldn t want to be responsible for denying a younger sibling access to her brother when she fears he may die do you? -

Very well then, but I can only allow ten minutes.

I see. Triiken turned to Kairi. You have ten minutes, Kairi.

Thank you. Kairi replied. She walked to Kirin s bedside.

How is his condition anyway? Triiken asked.

He s lost a great deal of blood and has suffered severe internal injuries and a punctured. The doctor replied. I don t believe he s going to make it. Having him here only prolongs the inevitable. -

Do you not have rejuvenation tanks in this facility? -

Those are meant to be used to heal Alliance officers only. -

With this one exception, I will authorize it. -

But sir, -

I will take full responsibility. Triiken watched as Kairi approached Kirin s side. Besides, that young man will be worth more to us alive rather than dead.

You intend to use him for something? -

I can t allow such fine talent to be wasted in such a way. If he dies, however, then I ll hold you responsible for it. Do you understand? The young lady knew of Triiken s notorious reputation. She was not willing to chance it.

I ll authorize your order now, sir. -

That s a good doctor. The young doctor scurried out without a second thought.

In the meantime, Kairi sat next to her brother s bed. His eyes were closed in a deep sleep. Kairi smiled with her eyes moist with tears. She shifted a few strands of his hair from his forehead. She then grasped his hand. It was cold as ice.

Brother, she uttered quietly. Suddenly, Kirin s eyes opened slightly and looked about. He then turned his head, and looked to find his sister.

K&Kairi& he whispered, What are you doing here?

I came to visit you, you goof. -

But I thought no visitors could come in. -

Not even the Universal Alliance can keep me away from you. So how are you feeling? -

I've had worse. Kirin tried to crack a smile, but his ailments were just too painful. I'm glad to see you smile though.

I'm just happy to see that you're alright. Kairi clutched tighter to her brother's hand. I was so worried about you. I thought that you were gonna die. -

The thing is, Kairi & Kirin suddenly paused. I thought I was gonna die too. For a moment, when I was shuffling about in the debris after the explosion, I could have easily slipped away. I thought that maybe this is a perfect way for me to repent for my sins, a way to seek atonement for all the wrongs I've done to people in the past. You don't realize this, Kairi, but I have done many dark things in the past. I've taken lives of soldiers and civilians alike. Kairi was stunned. All that time, I've been doing everything that the Midnight faction and Sirius Viicous had been telling me just so I can find your whereabouts. Kirin, Kairi uttered.

All this time, I've been trying to find you. But I never knew your name or what you looked like. I only knew that you were there. The feeling in my heart and the pendant we shared was my only link. It was not until recently that I remembered and my memories came back to me. But in the process, I have undergone a hideous transformation. I have become a heartless monster. With every innocent life I took, I lost more of my soul. I lost more of who I was. -

Why are you telling me all of this? -

I have born a lot of sins, Kairi, and I can't hold them back anymore. Kairi then came to realize that her brother was crying. Tears rolled down his face, wetting his pillow. I've done so many horrible things in the past and I can't possibly be forgiven for them. I don't know if I can repent for them. I didn't want to tell you because I feared you might have some negative aspects about me. But I can't hide it anymore. I've lost many a good night's sleep because of those deeds. And I'm tired of having to shut myself away from others because of those secrets. I just wish that I could be forgiven for it, but I know I never will. - Again, there was a dead silence and Kirin feared a rising tension between him and his sister. But Kairi only put her forehead upon his hand.

Are you truly sorry for what you've done? Kairi asked. Have you not beaten yourself up from the inside? Kirin looked at his sister. You could not have seen this coming. You couldn't have seen this outcome. If you had, you would not have taken such severe measures. But pressure and desperation does that to people and we do stupid things that may end in one person's suffering. But we never think of those things until the time comes before us. If you are truly sorry or if you have remorse, that's good enough for me. -

But Kairi, Kirin said.

You are my brother and you have finally found your way back home. You have been on your own for so many years. Now you can rest. You might have caused a great deal of pain towards others and may think that forgiveness is out of your reach. But you are still young like me and you can make up for all the bad things you've done in the past. No one is out of hope's reach. You can still repent by fulfilling obligations to others. Kirin smiled, despite the pain.

You're right, Kairi. I realize now that I still have obligations that need to be carried out. I still have many things I need to take care of. He gazed deeply into his sister's blue eyes, seeing his own reflection upon her pupils. At least there is one thing that I have done that was worth while.

And what's that? -

Seeing you smile. -

Really? Kairi began to cry again.

When I was on the verge of death, I came to the conclusion that I'm not gonna let these things lick me.

I'll beat these wounds and keep on living. If I had not taken those sentiments into consideration, I would have died early this morning. -

Kirin, -

You and I have been reunited for only a short period. I'd hate to have to cut it so short now of all times. I'd hate to let you lose your smile. And I'd hate to keep so many tasks unfinished before my demise. -

Brother, Kairi held his hand, tears falling down her cheeks. She watched her brother shutter a bit from his ailments.

Miss Kairi, Triiken said, We have to go. The ten minutes are up. Kairi continued to look into her brother's eyes, taking in all the features of his pupils to the last detail.

I have to go now, brother. -

I'll be back again, Kairi. I'll get better. Kairi sniffled and slowly released his hand before withdrawing from his bedside. But from the point of leaving his side to exiting the room, they never once broke eye contact. Triiken had to escort Kairi out, fearing she might bump into something.

The doors closed behind them and the doctors began their rounds soon after.

General, Kairi uttered, Will Kirin make it?

I've arranged to have him placed in one of the rejuvenation tanks. Triiken replied. Hopefully, he'll be alive and well within an hour or so, depending on how serious his internal and external ailments are.

So there's hope for him? -

So long as he doesn't die in the process, Triiken looked down upon Kairi. As for you, I need to discuss something with you.

About what&? -

This is an inappropriate place to talk, Miss Kairi. Let us converse someplace not as monotonous.

Triiken and Kairi walked out of the hall, back to his quarters.

He boiled a pot of tea and set it before the two of them. They had an excellent view of the island.

This tea was handpicked from my garden. Triiken declared, sipping the hot contents from his cup. I find it to have quite a zing in flavor with age.

So what is it that you wanted to talk to me about? Kairi asked.

It's regarding your comrades, Riku and Sora. -

The minute on hearing their names announced, Kairi stood up, thirsting for more information.

Riku and Sora how are they? Are they alright? Did something happen to them? -

From what I understand, they've been doing quite well in their missions. So far, they have not encountered a snag they couldn't handle. That is&except for one obstacle. -

What obstacle is that? -

I don't know if you recall, but your friends, aside from preventing the former Imperial regime from resurfacing, are trying to save King Mickey of the Disney Kingdom. -

Yeah, I remember that somewhat. -

Well, what they didn't realize is that in order to free him, they had to fulfill a task. They have to collect five separate puzzle pieces that unlocks the prison to which the king is being held in, as well as obtaining the information that leads to his location. But to do that, they must defeat the infamous Blade Generals. -

Blade Generals&? -

Yes, so far they've managed to defeat four of them. However, the fifth is far stronger and much more elusive. Riku and Sora have already fought him at least three times or so and each time the battle was either indecisive, or ended in defeat. -

Riku, Sora, are they okay though? -

They managed to survive every fight. Triiken took another sip from his cup. However, it seems that their opponent is always one step ahead of them.

Who is this person? Kairi asked.

His name is Guentory Finnele. But he's widely known by his alias, General Saber. He's the former leader and last living member of the Cavendish Shinobis. -

The Cavendish Shinobis, you mean the guys Riku and Sora had to fight the first time? -

That's correct. He is unlike any the key bearers have fought before in the past. Being a shinobi, Saber is elusive and cunning. His strength is so preposterous; your friends have gone off to do special training to improve their strength against him. -

Special training&? -

I won't tell who from though. It's top secret at the moment. -

I see. -

But while they are undergoing this training, Triiken continued, Saber goes on with his rampage for the Midnight Faction. We fear that even the key bearers won't be able to stop him. He's the one man who has managed to slip in without notice. At this present moment, no one knows where he is, which makes the situation all the more precarious for us. I fear that even if your friends do complete their training, they still won't have enough to go head to head with Saber. -

There was a sudden pause within the conversation. But Kairi placed down her cup and stood from her seat. Her eyes suddenly turned stern.

Take me to them. She declared. I want you to take me to see Riku and Sora.

That is out of the question, Miss Kairi. Triiken replied, sipping his tea.

Why is that? -

For one thing, the trek is far too dangerous for you. -

You think I'm helpless because I happen to be a girl? Or is it because I always seem to be left in the rear for others to take care of? Well, let me tell you something. I have fought alongside those guys more times than I could remember. I've learned from the best and I can take care of myself in the midst of battle. -

Miss Kairi, -

I've been left in the dark all this time, not knowing what those two have been up to for the past month. The tension of not knowing what's happening to them is far beyond what I can bear and I am sick to death of it. I don't want to be left behind anymore! I will fight beside Riku and Sora, even if it costs me my own life! -

Triiken set down his cup and smiled.

You are quite the determined young lady, Miss Kairi. Triiken said. I can see why Sora fell in love with you. Kairi slightly blushed. I had a feeling that this might turn up, so I'll make it short. Triiken pulled out a long mahogany box and presented it before Kairi. He opened it. Kairi's eyes were glittered with awe. Before her was a custom made keyblade, well curved to match that of a feminine warrior. The hilt was heart shaped, guarding an intricate shaft of flashy design, ending with another heart as the head of the blade itself.

This keyblade was custom made for you, Miss Kairi. Triiken continued, Compliments of President Sneer and the Universal Alliance. Triiken then closed the lid. I have been given orders to proceed with this. If your heart is strong enough, then the keyblade will come to you, proving your worth to the cause. Thus, you will be taken to Traverse Town where the rest of the KH team is waiting. However, if you cannot grasp the keyblade from out of this box, then you are not worthy enough to join the fight. Are you ready, Miss Kairi?

For Riku and Sora, Kairi drew up her hand, I will fight to the bitter end alongside them! Almost as if commanded, the keyblade appeared in Kairi's hand. She beheld the glimmer of this grand weapon, its taint of red and white, with a touch of feminine pink and dash of gold. The weight was light in Kairi's grasp. She smiled.

Our cruiser leaves within the next three hours, Miss Kairi. Triiken implied. Best you take that time to say farewell to your other friends.

I will, Kairi retracted the keyblade. I take my leave then. She thus withdrew without uttering another word. Triiken picked up his cup and sipped his tea. He then smirked.

It s almost time. He thought to himself. Soon a great battle will emerge. And all those whom the keyblades have chosen must rally to end this era of chaos.

Kairi came to meet with her friends. They themselves were helping with the clean up and the assisting of the wounded and burying of the dead. Selphie and Tidus were aiding soldiers, dressing their wounds, and Wakka was helping to move the debris from the field when they saw Kairi approaching them.

Hey, hey, Wakka said to Tidus and Selphie, Look whose coming.

Hey Kairi, Selphie cried, signaling her.

Hey you guys. Kairi replied.

So what s the news? Wakka wondered.

So how is your brother doing? Tidus asked.

Kirin is doing alright. Kairi had a rather solemn look on her face and her friends were curious.

Is there something wrong? Selphie asked. You look like you have something on your mind.

Is there something that you want to tell us? Tidus added.

Guys, Kairi stalled for a moment, but continued with her declaration, I m going to go find Riku and Sora.

What, her three friends were stunned.

You re gonna look for Riku and Sora? Tidus asked.

But that s crazy. Selphie protested.

It s dangerous, ya? Wakka added.

I know, Kairi replied. But I can t wait any longer. I worry about them and I need to be with them. I ve been here always worrying every day, not knowing. If I m going to do anything, I m going to help them fight. -

But Kairi, there may be a chance that you won t come back either, ya? -

That s a risk that I am willing to take. As long as I am with Riku and Sora, that s all that matters to me. -

If that s the case, Tidus declared. Then why don t you let us go with you?

No, this is something that I must do myself. I can t afford to let you guys get involved. -

But, -

You guys have a responsibility as well. After this fight, there is no doubt that the Aryan Faction and their allies might come back to take revenge. If you guys go with me, who s gonna be left to defend our home. -

I guess you re right. Selphie said.

Don t worry, I ll come back safely with Riku and Sora. -

Then, Wakka uttered, If this is the decision you ve made, then we won t stop you.

Thanks you guys. -

How long will it be before you go though? Tidus wondered. I leave in about three hours. -

You should take that time to rest up then. You have a long journey ahead of you. -

Good idea. -

We ll be seeing you then. Selphie said. She ran up and gave Kairi a big hug. The two embraced each other tightly. You take care of yourself alright, Kairi? Bring Riku and Sora back safely.

I will, The two released each other and gazed into each other s eyes. Kairi then looked at Tidus and Wakka.

Keep us in your heart, Kairi. Tidus said. We ll be waiting here for you guys.

Her eyes, teary, Kairi waved farewell to her close friends. As she vanished further into the distance, the three went about their business to restore order to their home.

Kairi came on board the Alliance carrier. There, she saw Mulian Arakis and Imetriarch Crassus conversing with General Triiken.

We will depart from here soon enough, Your Excellency. She heard Triiken say.

When will we be ready? Mulian asked.

Within the next four to six hours. As soon as we have secured all the needs necessary and have this world placed in a descent state where the people will be able to rebuild their home. We also have the countless dead and wounded that are need of attention. By order of the president, he wants to make sure to maintain equal share amongst everyone involved, aggressor and victim alike. -

I never would have thought I d see the day when the mighty General Arinario Triiken would take command of the Alliance forces so thoroughly. Crassus stated.

With the Alliance as the new lone super power, I will do all in my ability to make sure that it maintains its word as well as its honor, doing as much for it as I had done for the form Dark Empire as an Imperial. -

Then we will do the same. Mulian replied. The General saluted and his guest did the same before withdrawing. It was only then that they saw Kairi. Mulian ran to her. Hey Kairi,

What are you two doing here? Kairi asked.

We ve made arrangements to leave this place. Imetriarch said. Triiken has provided escort for us to Oceansburg. It seems that this pact between the Arakis Foundation and the Universal Alliance will become possible after all.

And what about you, Miss Kairi? Mulian asked.

Well, Kairi replied, I ll be going out to find Riku and Sora.

Ah, the key bearers, Imetriarch said.

Those two are going to need my help this time around. This is a task they alone can t go head to head against.

Well, I wish you the best of luck, Miss Kairi. I hope for a safe journey home for you and your friends. -

Thank you. -

Actually, it is us who should be thanking you. You helped to save young Master Mulian. Had it not been for you, the foundation might have met its downfall two days ago. -

Thanks, Miss Kairi. Mulian said.

It was the least I could do, kiddo. Kairi patted the young man on the head and ruffled his hair a little. I hope that you grow up to be a strong and righteous leader.

Like my father? -

Y&yeah, like your father. -

We take our leave, Miss Kairi. The two bowed respectfully and withdrew. Kairi watched as they walked away.

Miss Kairi, Triiken said, Prepare yourself, you ll be departing within the next couple of hours.

Coming, Kairi replied and went to join the general.

Three hours had passed and gone quicker than expected. Triiken and Kairi in the meantime had another cup of tea in the waiting room near the launching pad. Kairi gazed down at a series of Alliance cruisers. The cruisers looked similar to that of the gummi ships except for their black and white hulls. Kairi watched as one of the cruisers was being moved to the launch pad.

Is that it? Kairi asked. Is that the one we re going to board?

That s correct. Triiken replied. We just have to wait for them to prepare the boosters. Then we ll be prepared to depart.

It takes three hours to get it ready though? -

Space flight should never be taken lightly, Miss Kairi. It would be a shame to encounter a problem, especially in a high speed flight. -

I guess you're right. She took another sip of tea. So by the way, will Riku and Sora be there at Traverse Town?

Unfortunately, they will not be there. -

No? But why? -

They are still undergoing their training regimen. It was guaranteed that they would be able to train for three weeks. As far as I know, only one half of a fortnight has elapsed. Instead you will be meeting up with Colonel Ophelia Billiard, the present leader of the KH team. That is until your friends return. -

Ophelia Billiard? -

That's right. She was a former member of the Midnight Faction before turning in favor of the KH team. Now, she's one of the most dedicated warriors in the group. -

But how did she come to join the team in the first place? -

From what I understand, it's not only from a disgruntled past and dealings with the former Organization XIII, the Heartless, and the former Imperial regime, etc, but she seems to have developed sentimental and emotional feelings for your friend, Riku. -

Riku, really? -

Yes? -

My God, Kairi thought to herself. Could it be possible that Riku has found another love? Or could it be that another love has found him. I never thought Riku would ever look at another girl after Namine passed away, if she passed away at all. Kairi made a sudden random ponder in her mind. I always thought Namine was part of me that could never be separated. But I guess Nobodies do have wills of their own.

Miss Kairi, Triiken said, standing up. Let us proceed to the launch pad. They're waiting for us.

Oh, Kairi replied, alright.

The two made their way down to the launch pad. The mechanics were making last minute repairs and the pilots were readying their coordinates. Triiken stopped just a few feet away from the opened hatch. He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time.

Where are they? Triiken mumbled to himself.

Where are who? Kairi asked.

Well, I knew that you might have some trouble in the later campaigns against the Imperial Axis. As a precaution I've asked Madam General Devardios to send and transfer warrior to accompany us. Besides you, he will be a new addition to the KH team and he will be a strong asset. His strength is equal to Riku and Sora's. -

A new addition? -

That's right. -

Who is this guy then? -

But Kairi, Triiken seemed to give a wink, You should know him well.

Inspector Kuroda, a voice shouted out. Triiken looked to see the Madam General and the warrior approaching.

Speak of the devil, here they come. -

Kairi turned to see. When she did, her heart began to pound as her eyes seemed to betray her senses. Low and behold, she saw standing next to the Madam General was her beloved brother Kirin. Healed and replenished, given new garments, which maintained the old Imperial look, he came before his sister. It can't be, Kairi uttered to herself.

I'm sorry that we're a little tardy, Chief Inspector. Devardios said. The two saluted the chief inspector, Madam General Gala Devardios reporting, sir.

Prince Kirin reporting, sir, Kirin added.

Better late than never. Triiken returned the gesture.

Kirin is that really you? Kairi asked.

Hi, Kairi, Kirin replied. Kairi walked up to him and looked at Kirin from all over. She rubbed her hand around his arms, his chest, and his back.

Are you for real? Are you really here, brother? -

I wouldn't be standing here if I wasn't. -

But how? You were riddled and bloodied this morning and you could barely move too. How can you be here like this all of a sudden? -

I took the liberty of permitting your brother to be placed in one of the rejuvenation tanks, which is strictly used for Alliance officers only. Triiken explained. With the use of that device, one is able to heal from severe wounds in less than an hour. By the looks of it, Kirin has made a full recovery.

I'm good as new, Kairi. Kirin said with a smile. Kairi was so overcome with joy, tears began to fall. She hugged her brother tightly and cried. Kirin was somewhat startled at first. Kairi, -

Brother, I thought you were going to die! I was afraid you weren't going to make it, but here you are! This is real! This is real! -

Sister, Kirin put his arms around her. The two embraced so tenderly. I have you to thank, Kairi. You gave me a reason to live on.

Brother, -

Thank you, -

Isn't that cute, Madam General Devardios whispered, nearly tearing up in the eye as well.

We'll fight together, Kairi. They pulled each other away. I'll be there at your side, another friend, another brother in arms.

Kirin, -

Kirin, Kairi, Triiken declared, We have a task to fulfill. You can reminisce and embrace later.

Yeah, Kirin said, you do have a point. Sorry sir& He looked at Kairi. Shall we go?

Yes, Kairi replied.

General Devardios, Triiken said, I leave you take care of things here.

You can count on me, sir. Devardios replied.

Let us be off then. Triiken entered the cruiser. We're taking off! Prepare for ignition!

Aye, aye, sir, the pilot replied. The three boarded and the hatch closed behind them. The rockets blasted and the cruiser lifted up out of the hanger and into the pure blue sky. It then bursts off in a loud sonic boom and vanished from sight.

Riku and Sora had already undergone severe training under Thundro. The Imperial was ruthless and unwavering, not allowing his pupils to gallivant about needlessly. It was on this particular day, however, that a transmitted message had reached his quarters. The key bearers in the meantime were still straining their bodies to the point of exhaustion. It had already been nine days, going on ten since their training began.

A message on the secret line, Thundro said to himself. He activated the message. A holographic image appeared from the icon of the transmitter, followed by a hard copy on a piece of paper. Thundro read the message on the printed piece and sighed. Riku and Sora may not take it well, but it's better than hiding it from them. This might change agenda a little.

The Imperial returned to the gravity chamber where the two key bearers were undergoing their training regimen at ten times the natural gravity. They were still lumbering about in the gravity like slugs and were at the present moment taking a short break.

This is too much. Sora huffed. Ten times the natural gravity is out of the question.

You're telling me. Riku added. I feel like I have a ton of armor on me. It's so difficult to move. I'm surprised I didn't bust a gut through all the strain. -

That's enough blubbering, you two. Thundro declared as he walked in. It's easy for you to say. You've been accustomed to this kind of atmosphere for a long time. We only have three weeks. -

Less than three, Riku said.

That's all the more reason for you two to stop sitting around on your backsides and get back to your training. Thundro said.

We're just taking a short break. -

By the way, Sora asked, Where did you go?

I just received a message on the secured line. Apparently, the message was sent from an anonymous source, though I have a feeling I know who it was that sent it. -

What is it, another coup or something? -

Whatever it is, it certainly has nothing to do with us. Riku sighed.

On the contrary, boys, it does. Thundro said. The key bearers lifted their heads.

It concerns us? Sora asked.

Yes, Thundro paused for a moment. This eerie lull in silence disturbed the key bearers. Though they knew not what the message was, they could see on the face of the Imperial that the news born was not good in nature. The Destiny Islands have been attacked.

What&?! The key bearers jumped to their feet, forgetting their own pains in concern for their home.

What do you mean the Destiny Islands were attacked?! Sora said.

Who attacked them?! Riku added.

Why don't you read it for yourself? Thundro said, handing them the printed paper. Sora snatched the message and began to read it. Read it aloud, Sora.

I bear bad news for the key bearers. Sora began. Three days ago, the forces of the Arakis Foundation arrived at the Destiny Islands, landing on the major settlement on the big island.

That's our hometown. Riku uttered.

Read on, Thundro said.

Mulian Arakis had hoped to seek temporary shelter while he and those men still loyal to him and the Arakis family continued on their trek to the Alliance capital. Sora continued, However, a large force of the Aryan Faction, under the command of Lieutenant General Hector Fortinbras, had managed to catch up with the foundation's remnants. Fortinbras, in his determination to redeem his reputation after the disastrous engagement in the Oceansburg Campaign, sought to destroy Mulian Arakis and all traces of the former foundation. Thus, without giving any formal declaration to the citizens of Destiny Island, he engaged in highly aggressive hostilities towards both the foundation and the inhabitants of the main settlement. -

The bastards& Riku growled.

Mulian Arakis, believing himself to owe a significant debt to the people of the Destiny Islands, decided to stay and defend the town to the best of his abilities. But two days of bombardment had proven chaotic to the town itself, which suffered a great amount of damage to many of the structures. -

Damn it&

But what about everyone else&? Sora asked, temporarily leaving his dictation of the letter.

Continue, Thundro said. Sora commenced with the reading.

Fortunately, it has been recorded that there were no civilian casualties during the confrontation. -

That's good to hear. Riku sighed.

All local residence picked up their belongings and moved to the far side of the Island where the battle did not reach. Only a handful of civilians stayed behind to help in the confrontation. No deaths occurred

amongst them. Sora stopped his reading again. You think Kairi was amongst those who helped?

Read on, Sora. Thundro declared.

However, the Arakis Foundation had suffered a significant amount of casualties. Of the twenty-two hundred men who served under the banner of the Arakis Foundation, almost eleven hundred were killed, wounded, or missing. -

Man, Riku said.

However, this is a significant and miraculous victory on account of the foundation. The forces of the Aryan Faction had numbered over ten times the number of Mulian's troops, yet they lost a full third of their force, an estimated seventy-five hundred troops, killed, wounded, or missing. -

Man that is a miracle. -

Just a force of twenty-two hundred defeating a force ten times their number, wow. -

Read on, Sora. Thundro said.

Adding to the fall of the Aryan forces, Sora continued, Over a half of the men serving were still sympathetic to the Arakis family and three-fourths of the men still alive despised General Fortinbras for his brash and arrogant attitude. Thus, a coup de tat commenced and the higher up of the Aryan Faction was overthrown. As chaos came over their forces, the Arakis Foundation managed to contact reinforcements from the Universal Alliance. The arrival of three Alliance carriers brought an end to the fighting.

So our home was saved after all. Riku sighed relief.

The Foundation has thus made safe passage to Alliance territory and shall commence with peace agreements between the Arakis family and the Universal Alliance within the next three weeks or so. Because of the efforts of the people of the Destiny Islands, the Foundation and the Alliance have guaranteed safe haven to its people and will donate funds for the immediate reconstruction of the town. The Alliance has also granted clemency to one Prince Kirin of the Flaming Blades who arrived at the start of the battle and took responsibility for penetrating the factional lines to bringing a downfall to the Aryan ranks. -

Kirin made it to Destiny Island? -

Apparently, he is after all Kairi's long lost brother. But to think that he would battle against the Aryan Faction, they're a member of the Imperial Axis. So does this mean that Kirin's on our side now? -

Since you've been moving about constantly, Thundro inquired, You might not have caught wind of the news within the Midnight Faction. Kirin has been openly marked as a renegade and is wanted dead or alive by Lord Sirius Viicous.

But I thought that Kirin was one of the most trusted officers within the faction. Riku said. How is it that he suddenly decided to swing in the other direction?

Was I correct in hearing that he is your friend, Kairi's brother? -

That's right. Sora replied. We found that out back in Monsteropolis.

Then perhaps the reason for his defection was for the sake of his sister. He only fought for the sake of gaining something in return. In this case, it was Kairi, perhaps the only family that he has left. -

Just like Ophelia and Cunla. -

That's how Sirius Viicous operates. He promises rewarding loyal followers by filling their heads with his propaganda about helping them fulfill their own goals in exchange for their absolute loyalty. -

But can people be so stupid as to fall for such lies? -

You would be surprised how desperate people can become. They would be willing to trade their souls to the devil in order to get what they so long desired. There again was a silence between the three. This gave Thundro the opportunity to drop the subject entirely. Now enough of this chattering, we still have training to do. I need to get you boys strong enough to battle against Saber. We have less than six days to complete the training. -

Six days? Riku asked. But we've only been here for a little over a week. I thought we were here for three weeks? -

The last week I am keeping something open. That is why I expect you two to master ten times normal gravity before the end of the week. I also expect you boys to stay one full day in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. That should increase your stamina even further. -

Well, that'll certainly boost our strength. -

So are there any other concerns before we continue? -

One, Sora uttered. I've been meaning to ask you lately, Master Thundro. I know you'll object, but it's something that's been wearing on my mind for a while now. What exactly is behind that jade door on the second floor?

Sora was expecting his instructor to blast out with a sudden lecture about how he would not show them until the end of the third week as he had declared before. The key bearers might have expected him to ramp and rave about it. But instead, Thundro was silent. For ten seconds, they expected something to come out of his mouth. Finally, the Imperial uttered a few words.

I know I said that I'd show you that final door on the last week that you were here. But I can't afford to let you reminisce about what's behind it. Today's just as good as the final. But I suddenly find it more beneficial to show you now rather than later. -

You mean we get to see what's behind the door? -

Don't get too excited, Sora. Being in a good mood is the last thing that you want when entering that room. Thundro deactivated the gravity sequence. Follow me boys.

The key bearers pursued Thundro up the stairs to the jade door. The key bearers were awed by its magnificence. Never before had they seen such a well-detailed door of jade and gems.

So what is this room called? Riku asked.

This is what I call the Mandate Chamber. Thundro replied.

Mandate chamber? -

There is only one like this around, and it resides here. -

So what's so special about this room? Sora inquired.

Before I explain, do you remember, if you were told at all, about how His late Excellency, Lord Vischerz von Cavendish controlled the Universal Mandate? -

I do. Riku replied. Sneer told us about it. He said that anyone who possessed the mandate is invincible and is able to bend history, time, and the will of the universe in his favor absolutely.

Then let me ask you this. Exactly how many times do you think His Excellency used the Mandate when the motive was needed? -

I don't know, a hundred times maybe? -

I'd say about a thousand. Sora said.

In all the millenniums preceding the rise of the Dark Empire, Thundro said, Master Cavendish only used the power of the mandate once.

Once? the key bearers were dumbfounded.

Only once? Sora uttered.

That's correct. Despite His Excellency's thirst for power, he knew not to rely on the Universal Mandate, even in the most desperate of situations. The reason why is because he knew the extent of the Mandate's power and knew the outcomes of what might occur. The use of the mandate can change a historical lineage completely. What should have been would never come to pass. That is how potent the mandate is. It has permanent effects. Things that were supposed to be the hope of people became their doom. Where life was supposed to flourish would die. And where life was never meant to be would sprout. -

That's very interesting, Master Thundro. Riku said. But what does this have to do with the chamber.

This Mandate Chamber is the only place in the whole of the Universe where one is able to experience first hand how things might have been had the Mandate not been used. This chamber somehow maintains the original historical line unaffected by the mandate's power. It is believed this is where the sacred flames once resided, the flames that counter the mandate's potency. Thundro walked up to the door. Once you enter this facility, you will arrive in a time and place coinciding with your own history, but was never able to occur due to the effects of the Universal Mandate. He placed his hand on the handle. Are there any other questions before you enter?

I do. Sora replied. Have you ever been in there before?

I have, Sora. And let me tell you this. Had things remained as they were, it would have been I that had a notorious reputation for ruthlessness and thirst in torture and not the late General Ameba. Who knows, had things been tweaked a step further, it would have been you, Sora, and not Riku that would have felt the lash at the hands of not Ameba, but I. Sora's spine stiffened. You will spend the next six hours in there. Once you emerge, you tell me what you saw of the past which was supposed to be.

Sora, Riku uttered.

I'm ready, Sora replied.

Then be off and good luck. Thundro opened the door and the key bearers went in. Thundro then sealed the door. He turned away and returned to his quarters. I wonder what it is they will see&

Six hours had passed and gone faster than expected. In that time, Thundro spent two hours in the scenario chamber, two hours in the gravity chamber, and the equivalence of two hours in the hyperbolic time chamber until finally, the time had come for the key bearers to emerge.

It's time, Thundro said as he looked at his watch. He exited the hyperbolic time chamber and made his way to the second level to the jade door. He stood and waited for ten minutes.

Suddenly, the door opened slowly and Riku and Sora emerged. But the looks on their faces were a somewhat frightened gaze. They were tattered and beaten, tired and exhausted. They did not utter a single word, still overcome by what they had witnessed. Riku then suddenly began to cry as if some deep emotional scar had afflicted him.

So tell me, Thundro asked, What is it that you saw? Riku looked up at him.

I can't tell, he uttered before collapsing to the ground. I don't have a right to.

Is that so? Thundro then turned to Sora. What is it that you saw, Sora? Sora faltered and fell to the ground as well. But he uttered only two words that described the epic confrontation that they had witnessed, but were denied as an effect by the mandate.

Keyblade&War& -

I see, Thundro sighed. We'll leave it at that then. Quite a significant change for both you and I.

18 - Traverse Town

Traverse Town

Ophelia sat at the local tavern, helping herself to another cup of coffee. This is the first time since she had joined the KH team that group had rested. Though a long needed rest, it was not one that was spent in relaxation. The team was always weary. Ophelia herself feared for Riku and Sora, not knowing if the two young key bearers could survive the harsh training from Lord Thundro. Thundro was known for his ruthlessness and mercilessness with his students. Though his training day was average, a full twelve hours, he did not let up on his regimen unless necessary.

But it was not only the training of the key bearers that concerned Ophelia. It was also to fact that General Saber, the last of the Blade Generals remained at large. Though there had been no news of any recent activity he was involved in, the mere thought of him helping the Imperial Axis to gain more was unfathomable. It was this type of doubt that made the former colonel apprehensive.

Another miserable night for me, Ophelia thought to herself. I don't think I can stand another two weeks here, waiting for those two. Her thoughts turned to her silver-haired prince. She remembered that moment in Twilight Town where she and Riku touched lips for the first time. She could still feel the warmth and the comfort in the young man's embrace. Riku, come back to me.

Miss Billiard, a voice said. Ophelia turned to see Olette standing near her.

Miss Olette, Ophelia replied. What are you doing here?

I just wanted to see how things were going out here. -

Everything's alright, how are the children doing? -

Goofy and Donald are watching over Hayden and the others. The children are a little bored though. This is the first time that they've been so far away from home. Then again, this is the first time that I've been so far away from home. She then looked at the seat next to the colonel. You mind if I sit down?

By all means, Ophelia offered the seat and the two young women sat together. Would you care for some coffee?

Oh yes, that would be great. A cup was handed to her and the two began to drink the bitter liquid. So how long do you think we'll be here?

Until things blow over with the Imperial Axis, Ophelia said. I don't know how long that might be though. I worry about Riku and Sora though. They right now are undergoing the hardest and most strenuous form of training regimen ever known.

Olette only looked down at her cup. For some reason she began to sniffle a little. A tear formed in her eye Ophelia noticed this and had a feeling of what motivated Olette's tears.

Are you thinking about Pence and Hayner? she asked.

Yes, Olette replied. Why did they have to die? Why did my town have to be attacked? All those people, why&?

It is what the Imperial Axis defies as judgment against those who oppose them. -

But what kind of logic is that? We did nothing to deserve getting attacked. We had nothing to do with this confrontation. We didn't desire to have this happen to us. So why&? -

You did not want to be part of the conflict, but the Imperials didn't care. All they know is that one world gained is more power achieved. That's all they know and that's all they care about. The axis will not stop

until they have every single world in their grasp. That is the goal they wish to achieve. Ophelia cringed. And to think that I was stupid enough to actually follow their philosophies for a time, and all for the sake of a promise that could never be kept.

What was it that motivated you to join the KH team? -

You might say it was due to a change in logic and philosophy, a change of heart, a realization of my worth within that organization, which of course amounted to nothing according to them, perhaps destiny found a better purpose for me than acting as a pawn of the Midnight Faction. Her thoughts once again sent to the face of young Riku. Then again, it might be love&

Love&? -

Love& -

Love for whom? -

Well&uh& Ophelia started to blush a little, she saw Olette s anxious eyes, wanting to know who it was that she admired.

Miss Olette, a voice said. The two women turned to find Goofy coming towards them, We need your help.

What is it? Olette asked.

One of the kids wet the bed. -

Oh boy, Olette stood up. I better go take care of this. Sorry to have to run so soon, Miss Billiard.

That s quite alright, Olette. -

You can t take care of one spill?! Olette said, scolding Goofy.

Sorry, I m not really accustomed to doing this kind of thing, you know. Goofy replied.

Once again the night was quiet. Ophelia continued to sip her coffee, keeping her hands warm around the cup.

Meanwhile, Kairi, Kirin, and Triiken finally arrived. The cruiser touched down and the three exited as the hatch opened up.

So this is Traverse Town? Kirin asked.

This is the place. Kairi replied. I remember coming here years ago.

So it has a history then. -

Yeah, -

But as they stopped a while to stretch their legs, there seemed to be some debated discussion about the cargo that was brought along with them. Triiken wanted to keep trek of all the equipment listed.

Prince Kirin, he called. Kairi s brother walked up to him and the pilot.

What s the problem? Kirin asked.

You re experienced with cargo listings aren t you? -

Yes, -

Do you mind giving us a hand? -

Sure, Kirin turned to Kairi. Kairi, you go on in. I ll be with you shortly. I have to take care of this thing. There was probably a miscount with the cargo.

Alright, Kairi replied and strolled to the gates. She looked about the first district square. It had remained the same, just as she envisioned it. The night was a little nippy and Kairi had no means to keep her warm. I could go for a nice cup of coffee. She went into the open air tavern, which was bare of people, and looked at the hot beverages. Unfortunately for her though, she did not have any money on her at the moment. Aw man, I don t have anything to spend.

Excuse me, Miss. A voice implied. Kairi looked to see none other than the venerable Colonel Ophelia Billiard sitting not too far away. You care for some coffee?

That would be great. -

Ophelia signaled the innkeeper and the he brought out a fresh brewed cup.

Care to join me? -

Thank you. Kairi replied. The two sat together and sipped from their cups, still oblivious to each other. You re a new face around here. Ophelia said. However, you seem somewhat familiar. Have we met before?

I don t think so. I might just have one of those faces. -

I see. Ophelia sipped her coffee again. So tell me, what brings you to Traverse Town?

I have to meet with my friends. -

I see, -

And what about you&? Kairi asked. What brings you here?

I m here awaiting the return of my friends. They ve gone off to fulfill a training regimen. -

For what&? -

For the next upcoming battle against the Imperial Axis, Ophelia openly declared with such passion.

So you re a soldier? -

That s right. -

But, Kairi looked at Ophelia s uniform, Why is it that you re wearing that black and red outfit. It looks more like an Imperial uniform.

It s my form of distinction on the battlefield. I promised myself that this uniform will always see its fare share of Imperial blood until this fight with the factions is over. -

I see, -

Why do you ask? Ophelia wondered.

I was just saying because my brother, Kirin, also wears that same kind of uniform. -

Kirin, It was the uttering of that name that Ophelia realized who it was she was talking to. Are you referring to Kirin of the Flaming Blades?

That s what a lot of people call him. I guess it s because of those weapons he carries with him. -

You must be her then. You must be his long lost little sister, right? You must also be the other best friend that Riku and Sora were talking about. Your name is Kairi. And that means you must be& Ophelia s heart began to pound as she recalled that conversation she and Riku had one month before when they were originally enemies. Inwardly, Ophelia sobbed, her heart seemed to open. That means that this girl, she is Namine s other half. Kairi was stunned and a little freaked out.

How do you know that? How do you know about Riku and Sora? Who are you? -

I m& But before Ophelia could utter a word, another voice rang out.

Kairi, is that you? it said. Kairi looked to see Olette coming towards her. It s been a while hasn t it.

Olette&? -

That s right. -

Oh my God, it s great to see you. The two embraced. It s been so long.

Over eight years I think. She then looked at Ophelia. I see you ve already gotten in touch with Ophelia.

Ophelia&? Kairi looked at the colonel who now arose from her seat.

I didn t properly introduce myself. The colonel exclaimed. I am Colonel Ophelia Billiard. Kairi was again stunned.

You mean you re Ophelia Billiard? -

That s correct. -

No wonder you re wearing that uniform. Triiken told me all about you. You re the one then. You re the one that Riku likes aren t you. -

Uh, well&um& -

Riku&? Olette said. Oh, so that s who you re in love with.

Well&I& Ophelia was a little flustered. Well&yes&it s true. I ve fallen in love with Riku.

It s nothing to be ashamed of. Kairi said. I m just glad that Riku found another girl.

Oh&? -

He hasn t really been the same since my other half passed away, if she passed away at all, though I d like to think she s become a part of me again. It sounds a little crazy, but it s true. -

I know&You are the original half of Namine&? Kairi was shocked again.

Namine&? she uttered. How do you know about Namine?

She was my step-sister. We took her in, my father and I, before the organization took her away. Riku told me all about it back in the Deep Jungle. -

I&I don t know what to say. -

Immediately, Ophelia s heart began to pound as the name of her adopted step sister reverberated again and again in her ears. Upon her face came this sad smile.

Miss Billiard&? Olette asked as she saw the glint of a tear appear amidst the lashes.

Are you alright&? Kairi asked.

It s been so long. Ophelia said. She suddenly embraced Kairi and took in all those lost memories which Namine and her shared. Kairi was at first a little surprised, not knowing this young woman who hugged her. But for some reason, there was this feeling that surged through her, as if there was a bond there between them all along, like they had known each other for a long time. Kairi put her arms around the colonel, this sad feeling coming over her. Ophelia began to whisper in a wavered voice. My sister&you have returned to me.

Sister&? Kairi said nothing, not wanting to break the heart of the young woman, and only smiled. It s alright, Miss Billiard. The colonel released her and wiped the tears from her eyes.

I m sorry, Ophelia said with a slight snuffle. My conduct was inappropriate. We did just meet after all. I was just too overcome with joy, knowing that you and my sister were and still are part of each other.

We re all friends, right? Kairi asked.

Yes, -

Well, Olette said, wrapping her arms around them both, I m glad to see that you two managed to get on the right foot at least.

So where are Riku and Sora? Kairi asked.

They are at the present moment undergoing a severe training regimen under Lord Thundro to increase their strength. Ophelia said.

They said that they d be back in three weeks. Olette added. Or so I ve been told.

How long has it been now? Kairi asked.

It s been at least a week or so, maybe a little over. -

We ve been assigned to wait here until they return. Ophelia said.

Three whole weeks&? Kairi sighed. It seems so long though.

That it does. But you might as well enjoy it while you can. This has been the first time in a little over a month that we ve been allowed anytime to rest. Besides, if rumors are true about Lord Thundro, he may say that he ll train them until they die, but he won t let anything remotely dangerous happen to our boys. -

I guess you re right. -

Kairi, a voice suddenly called. The three girls looked to see Triiken and Kirin coming towards them.

There you are. Everything has been straightened out.

That s good to know. It was then that Kirin laid eyes on the venerable Colonel Billiard.

Colonel Billiard, he said.

Kirin, Ophelia replied. It s been a while hasn t it.

That it has, colonel. And so here we both stand, two former allies, to enemies, and back to allies again

for the opposite cause. -

Is that so? So you re fighting alongside us now? -

Yes, -

Who is that? Olette asked. He s really handsome.

That s my brother. Kairi said. My long lost, older brother, Kirin.

I see. -

How is it that you know him, Ophelia? -

We were both former and loyal officers of the Midnight Faction. Ophelia said. So how is it that you have decided to join us? -

I came to the same conclusion as you did, colonel. Kirin replied. I now realize the extent of my life s value within the Imperial regime. And it matters very little to them. Besides, Kirin then looked at Kairi, I had bigger matters to attend to than the faulty ideals of a corrupted government. I had my family to look after.

Ophelia smiled. She placed her hand upon his shoulder. Secretly, she searched his heart and soul, looking for any flaws. But it was true. Kirin had turned against his former overseer.

I see, -

Do you have faith in me now? Ophelia then grasped his hand in a hardy handshake.

Welcome to the KH team, Kirin. -

So where are the rest of your comrades? Triiken asked.

They are all at the hotel in the second district. Olette said. Goofy and Donald are watching the children.

And Goten and Leon, where are they? -

They were summoned away again. They had to take care of some unfinished business. -

As is expected, Triiken pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. I must return to Oceansburg and finish my tasks there. -

You never seem to stand still, don t you Triiken? Kairi said.

It s what a man in my position is required to do. There is no time for mischief and rest in my line of work. -

I m so glad that I don t have your job then. -

Farewell then. Triiken said. He thus scurried back to the cruiser.

So now what do we do&? Olette asked.

The only thing we can do for the next few days. Ophelia replied. We have to wait for Riku and Sora to come back.

I hope they ll be alright. Kairi said.

They will. -

The team thus, withdrew to the hotel to get a good night s rest. It would be the first time in a long time that the team would sleep so well. But then again, there was still that apprehension regarding the safety of the key bearers. More likely, if something were to happen in the course of the next week and a half, would they be able to deal with the situation despite the absence of Riku and Sora?

19 - Endurance of the Orbs

Endurance of the Orbs

As the rest of the KH team underwent an extensive period of rest and relaxation, the same could not be said for the key bearers, who now underwent the most heinous stages of their regimen. Thundro's training had excelled ten fold. Suddenly, in the second week, Riku and Sora found themselves not withdrawing to their room at all because Thundro would not allow it. They had undergone such severe training, staying out until the wee hours of the morning, taking one hour naps every so often. Thundro's attitude had changed drastically from the first week. In the Scenario Chamber he forced Riku and Sora into extreme battles, from fighting shinobis, to engaging against old opponents of the Z team, and going so far as to be involved into epic confrontations at such famous Three Kingdoms battles such as Chi Bi, He Fei, and Yi Ling. Imperial battles were not excluded as Riku and Sora experienced the horror of the Siege of Gombria and the Battle of Vandor.

In the Gravity Chamber, Thundro increased the level to ten times the natural level and had the key bearers move about until their bones were used to the weight. To add, he gave new uniforms to the key bearers, heavier than the previous. He drilled them hour after hour of every day. Despite the strain, the suffering, and the near death experiences, Riku and Sora did not falter. They took the challenges head on, repeating them continuously if they had to. Thundro was impressed.

I have to say one thing about these boys. He thought to himself. They don't give up. They remind me more of Goten. He had that same stubborn streak to continue. I guess he gets that from his father. Finally, the end of the second week had come and the key bearers were once again confined to the treacherous and torrential atmosphere of the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. For another full year-within-a-day, the young key bearers would endure the harshest elements they have ever encountered. There was no doubt that the trial would put them over the edge and perhaps delve them into a state of unimaginable chaos and insanity. But low and behold, as another twenty-four hours past in the fifteenth day of training, the key bearers emerged from the chamber.

Once again Thundro met them at the door and once again they came from the room changed young men. Sora had now grown a little taller, reaching almost equal height to Riku. Their hair was once again flowing down, long locks tide behind their neck. Sora again looked like Cuchulain, while Riku regained that flowing image of Sephiroth. Their clothes tattered and their bodies weary and bloodied, they came before the Imperial. This time, Sora, having used up a great deal of energy, was slumped over Riku's shoulder.

I see that you two managed to survive another full year's course in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber, Thundro declared. Your bodies have again undergone a change.

I just hope that you're right about that chamber. Riku said. I hope we didn't just waste two years of our lives in only two days.

Unlike some other access points, this way guarantees the halting of age. Thundro looked into the weary eyes of the key bearers, sensing their new found strength. I can tell that you have reached a new level of strength. There is certainly a boost in your power signatures. The only other person who has excelled this much was Goten. But then again, he has been undergoing this kind of training all of his life. However, I must say you've certainly gone beyond what Guentory Finnele ever achieved though, in all

his years under me. He could barely spend two months, let alone a full year in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber.

We've encountered a great deal of those ten times normal gravity spots. -

Hence the increase, Thundro used his power to heal the key bearers then turned to the Gravity Chamber door. You know the routine, boys.

We know, -

But don't we get at least a few minutes to cool off though? Sora asked. Thundro was silent. Riku sighed.

It's no use, Sora. You know perfectly well that requesting a rest period no longer fits in our schedule. Besides, Master Thundro would never allow it.

Yeah, you're right. -

The key bearers huffed themselves up and accompanied Thundro to the gravity chamber. Once entering, Thundro calculated the gravity to ten times the natural gravity. He gazed at the young men to see if they had undergone any strain in the process. So far, he witnessed no wavering. Once reaching the programmed level, the three took their positions, Thundro on one side, Riku and Sora on the other. The key bearers unleashed their keyblades. They then took from their pockets the gold and glass orbs, with which they practiced balance for the whole session they were in the time chamber. As before, they tossed their orbs into the air and delicately caught them on the steel shafts of their weapons.

Alright, boys, Thundro said, Let's see how much you have improved. Thundro drew out orbs as well, another two both glass and gold. He tossed them mid air. At the same time, he drew out his twin swords and both spheres landed delicately upon the sharpened steel.

Two orbs? Sora thought.

He's gonna fight us with two orbs again? Riku wondered.

The first one to drop an orb loses. Thundro declared.

Is that so? Then you better watch yourself. You have two orbs to worry about. -

Don't worry about me, boys. The only ones you have to worry about are yourselves. This is a straight forward duel. There will be no change in gravity and no use of elementals. This will be a strict blade to blade battle. -

This should be easy enough then. Sora said.

Then let us begin. -

Thundro suddenly attacked, the orbs still balanced upon his blades. The key bearers lunged as well, their orbs still balanced. The three engaged in intense combat at the same time. Back and forth they battled, keeping an eye on each other at the same time watching the ascension and descent of the orbs. Intertwined in a barrage of swings, thrusts, lunges, blocks, counters, and evasions, it seemed as if the warriors had choreographed their movements ahead of time in a series of practiced sessions. The reality was that the engagement was all in earnest. The reason for their precision was because of their heightened senses. For the key bearers, their senses had been heightened to such a level; they'd be able to sense a feather dropping from a mile away.

Impressive, Thundro said within, It seems that the Riku and Sora have evolved in their skills far more than what I had earlier perceived. It seems that they really take their training seriously. If they had been exposed to this regimen as children and continued on to this age, their skills would have been just as formidable as Goten's. And that in itself is a large compliment. The three dispersed for a while, after ten full minutes of intense fighting, to regain composure. Thundro looked into the eyes of his pupils. Even as we stop, their senses have not diminished. They are waiting for me to make the next move. They are so focused, always on guard. Their eyes do not linger from me.

Have you had enough yet? Sora declared.

You've certainly impressed me. Thundro openly replied with a smirk. I can tell that you haven't been

slacking off in there.

We wanted to impress you. That was our goal. -

And so you have. Thundro gripped his blades. However, just because your strength has increased a great deal doesn't mean that you have improved enough to defeat me.

We'll just see about that. Riku shouted.

Then come at me and let's see what you can really do. -

Alright, you asked for it. Riku looked at Sora. Are you ready for this? -

Let's get him. Sora replied.

The two suddenly attacked with precise coordination and speed, attacking Thundro from two sides.

Thundro watched them approach him.

You're good, I'll give you that. Thundro suddenly lifted himself into the air. The key bearers watched as he lifted over their heads. But you're not good enough.

You can't elude us that easily! Riku shouted. The two leaped into the air ready to make a critical blow.

But then, Thundro swung his twin swords and unleashed two blue energy waves that went streaking through the air towards the key bearers. Caught off guard by the attack, Riku and Sora were struck and pummeled to the ground. Losing consciousness for a while, their orbs dropped to the ground. Riku's golden orb was dented and Sora's glass orb had shattered across the ground. Thundro on the other hand landed just as gracefully as ever, catching both of his orbs upon his blades with little difficulty.

Well, well, Thundro said. He threw up the orbs and threw up his swords. He caught the orbs first and his twin blades sheathed themselves, falling perfectly into the slots of their scabbards. Thundro observed his two orbs and then looked at the damaged spheres of his students. It seems to me that I've won this little match.

That was not fair! Sora protested, standing to his feet. You cheated!

And how is that? -

You said that this would be a strict blade-to-blade duel and there was to be no use of elementals of any kind! -

Explain yourself, Thundro. Riku added.

Well, I believe I was strict to the rules. However, the use of energy waves is not considered an elemental attack. It was neither a light nor a force element. That is the form that energy takes on, if it's strong and condensed enough. So you were not confined from using energy waves in this duel. To add, I accumulated that energy through my swords. So technically, it was still a blade-to-blade battle. -

Then why didn't you explain that to us before?! Sora shouted.

I was under the impression that you were already aware of that fact. But apparently you were not. Unfortunately, the use of energy waves uses up a great deal of your own inner strength. You are not accustomed to the use of such power. Had you used enough chakra and increased its mass to a large enough magnitude to use against me, then your strength would have been cut in half or perhaps a little more. Therefore, you would never be able to recover beyond that point. And in my experience, one must not allow him or herself to overindulge in their strength reserves. Thus, the use of energy waves should be limited to the moment where it is absolutely necessary. -

If that's the case, Riku implied, Then your strength would diminish every time you deployed an energy blast like that.

In most cases, you'd be right, Riku. However, I have been conditioned to launch multiple energy wave attacks without having to show the slightest sign of fatigue. Had you been exposed to the battles here in the Z realm, you would have discovered that your own tactics are miniscule, even with the power of the keyblade in your favor. I'm sure you have seen what Nappa and Vegeta were capable of in that simulation on the first week. -

The key bearers remembered that moment and recalled how frightened they were. Sora had

experienced such a fight in his own lifetime, going head to head with Lord Cavendish himself.

In this realm, a single one-on-one battle between two powerful foes can cover an area from as small as a region to as vast as a galactic quadrant. For example, Sora, that little scuffle that you get yourself into with His late Excellency Master Cavendish. I m sure you remember. -

Yes& Sora replied, sweat rolling down his brow.

Had His Excellency taken that battle seriously, you would have been dead after the first punch. And I m sure you remember the original Ultima keyblade you had, which you used to fight against the Heartless of Xehenort and his Nobody counterpart, Xemnas and Organization XIII. In most cases, the keyblade cannot be destroyed by anything. But even the keyblade has its limits. Its power is confined to the strength of one s heart and one s destiny. So the strength of the keyblade depends upon the inner strength of the key bearer. However, for a force that had wielded the power of the Universal Mandate, and is capable of eradicating entire galactic systems by use of resonating energy in their eyes alone, the keyblades can be shattered just as easily as that glass orb you bore. That is why the first keyblade shattered, both you and your weapon were overcome by the force. -

My God, -

Compared to that, what you have encountered so far against the Imperial Axis would be considered an irritation not worth observing by elite Imperial standards. Thundro approached the key bearers.

However, what I have sensed this day has convinced me that you are more than ready to endure the final test.

The final test&? Riku asked.

Why do you act so surprised, Riku? You have been training all this time for this one moment. The key bearers eyes began to sparkle, realizing that they have achieved their goal. You should congratulate yourselves. You have gained enough strength to take in the Immunity Orb.

Alright, Sora cheered.

That s enough of that. Thundro said with a stern voice. This is something that one cannot cheer over, Sora. Unless you have forgotten that pain I put Riku through when giving a sample of the orb s power. Sora silenced himself, remembering that moment. This is what you have been conditioning your mind, body, and spirit for, to endure the pain of the Immunity Orb. Thundro held out his hands and accumulated a great energy source on his palms. From his hands, two glowing white orbs appeared, the same Thundro had presented to them before. It will take an estimated five days for the orb to integrate itself into your system. But for those five days, you will rive in unimaginable agony. For five days you must bear the pain. For five days your bodies will contort and twist about from the sudden surges. Your mind will begin to fluctuate and you may become delusional, broken to the point of madness and beyond. If you give up, if you have the slightest doubt that the cause is not worth the pain, you will be overwhelmed by the orb and will die. A seldom few have ever survived this trial process, succumbing to their ailment after one or two days. However, if you manage to survive after five days, you would have gained a strong asset in your arsenal. So the question you have to ask yourselves is this. Are you ready?

Yes, Riku said.

Once you have absorbed the orb, there is no extracting it. There will be no way out. The only thing left for you is the pain and suffering you must endure. So I ll ask you again. Are you ready? -

For our friends and our home, Sora said, We re ready.

Then so be it, boys. Good luck. Thundro suddenly thrust both of his hands into the torsos of the key bearers. The thud of the body was loud and the key bearers were overwhelmed by a sudden surge as the orbs were taken into their bodies. They fell to the ground in sudden pain. Thundro looked at them. After a few seconds, silence suddenly lulled. Riku and Sora looked at each other then looked at Thundro. The sensation of pain had been brief.

Was that it? Riku asked. Was that the process?

It wasn't so bad. Sora added.

So says you. Thundro uttered.

No sooner had he said that, then the first symptoms of the suffering began. There was a sudden burning surge and aching throb that reverberated within the key bearers a hundred fold. They became so overcome by the pain that they again fell to the ground and wriggled around like earthworms exposed in the air. They struggled and thrashed, kicking their legs violently as their bodies twisted and contorted in riles of agonizing pain and suffering. Riku and Sora began to scream in such blood curdling pitches, the sound was enough to haunt the mind of even the most battle hardened of warriors.

The pain, the pain, Riku strained.

My God, it hurts, Sora screamed, It hurts so badly!

And this is only the tip of the iceberg, boys. Thundro said. You will have to endure this suffering for the next five days. Thundro turned away and left without saying another word. He closed the doors to the gravity room tightly behind him. But even so, the sealed door did not absorb the screams of the key bearers entirely. The sound of their cries could still be heard, muffled behind the sealed chamber.

Thundro sighed and retired to his room. It's going to be a long five days. But sleep deprivation for me is nothing compared to what those two will have to endure.

Five days would pass, but it would be a period in which no rest would come for the key bearers. Almost twenty four hours a day, they would not be able to stand, at times pounding onto the floor until their fists were bloody. That was the extent to the orb's power.

The first day was by far the worst since the pangs and contortions were a sensation Riku and Sora were not familiar with. They could feel their innards move about as the energy flowed into their veins. Their arteries seemed to burn and each thump of their heart caused agony to reverberate from head to toe.

The pain, Sora would roar out continuously. The pain, it hurts!

Damn it! Riku would bellow into the late hours of the night as he slammed his hand upon the floor. For the full day, the muffled cries of the young men could be heard. Thundro stayed up for a good long while now as the shouting of the key bearers burdened his ears.

To think, he said to himself, This is only the first day. It's painful for them, and to me rather irritating, having to hear their wailing into the wee hours of the morning. But at least I know that they're still alive. The second day passed with the same results, pounding and screaming. Thundro bore the noise, believing that the cries from his two students were at least a sign that they had not succumbed to the suffering. The hours ticked by slowly, as if it extended for an eternity.

The third day passed, just as unbearable as the first couple of days. Riku and Sora, though not as frequently, continued to cry out. Their bodies had been able to fathom the intense pain, adapting to the sensation. But there was still that deep, inner gut wrenching that twisted at their very core, a sharp pain that tingled down the spine like so many impaling iron spikes penetrating their bodies all from multiple directions.

The pain, Sora would cry out. I can't take it! Take it out! Take it out!

No more, Riku would wail. His voice as if in tears, God, Master Thundro, please take it out of us! Take the orb out!

There is nothing I can do, boys. Thundro would utter, continuing with his meditations and other activities and whatnot about the facility. The process can not be reversed. You have only two options from this point on. You will either live or die in the end. There is no alternative.

The third day had come and gone just as the other days did before it. Now, the fourth day lay before them, another horrendous twenty-four hours screaming and shouting. It was on this day that Thundro finally went in to see how his two students were doing. As he entered the chamber, he beheld a grotesque sight. There was blood splattered in droplets all over the floor. And there, sitting up against

the central pillar, where the control panel was located, Sora and Riku lay, covering in blood.

Boys, the Imperial uttered.

Thundro ran to them to check if they were dead or alive. He examined both warriors. Riku and Sora were both bloodied about both hands, their knuckles smashed to a pulp. He looked at their faces to find that their faces had puffed up from impact. Their noses and lips were bloodied and ghastly wounds were open on their foreheads. It was then that Thundro realized what caused this.

They've been inflicting injuries on themselves. He thought to himself. They've been pounding their heads and fists against the floor to ease the pain. He then checked for a pulse on each of them. Well, at least you both are still alive. Still, I should have kept a better eye on you. Otherwise, this would not have happened. Thundro put his hands over the key bearers and used his inner energy to heal them. Their wounds disappeared and their energy was replenished. But despite that, the warriors were inactive. Their physical wounds and outer afflictions have been mended. But there is nothing I can do to ease the pain within their minds, their hearts, or their souls.

Master, Sora whispered, Please take it out. Take the orb out of us.

This pain is too great for us. Riku added. It's killing us. We nearly killed ourselves to ease the pangs. It's unbearable.

Are you giving up? Thundro asked, his voice suddenly turning stern.

Well -

Is your cause not worth fighting and dying for? -

We want to fight for our cause and help our friends. Sora said. But, -

There is no but! Thundro shouted. If your cause is not worth fighting for, then just say so, succumb to the ailments that plague you and end your suffering by taking your own miserable lives right now!

Thundro stood up. You will not gain any sympathy from me! I told you that the process was irreversible.

You have only two choices from this point on! You will both bear the pain and live to help your friends.

Or you will succumb to your torments and be no use to them at all. Thundro looked down upon the key bearers. But it's funny though, only now at the end do you two decide to give up. I would have expected more from the great Riku and Sora. But if either or both of you decide to yield to the pain, then I guess you weren't worthy enough! You're not worthy to bear your keyblades, you're not worthy to have friends who respect you, and you are not worthy of my time and effort to train and prepare!

This continuous line of put-downs wore on the key bearers. They had never felt so insulted before.

You've made your point. Riku growled. That's enough.

No, I'm telling you this because you haven't gotten the point! You keep bickering and bothering about your pain and your personal ailments, yet you haven't even once thought about the disappointment your friends will hold against you if you come back and have achieved nothing! That makes all of my efforts pointless! -

But we're strong enough already. Sora said.

And how did that little detail enter your minds, eh? Did it just pop out from your own imagination! Some heart you have, Sora. The feared master of the keyblade, the one who helped defeat Organization XIII and defied the might of the Imperial regime, can't take a little abuse from his trainer. You make me sick. -

That's enough. Riku shouted, defending his friend. Thundro glared at the silver-haired youth.

You are in no position to be telling me what to do, Noctin Tilandir. You may act tough, but when it comes to bearing pain, you can't fathom it. I would have thought that one like you would have been able to bear this kind of ailment, especially after undergoing that torture festivity with General Ameba way back when. -

Be quiet, -

If you ask me, perhaps Ameba should have lashed you across the back a few more times and flay flesh

from bone with every swing. Maybe that would have toughened you up. -

I said enough, Riku shouted. He looked as if he were ready to lunge at the Imperial. Thundro realized this as he saw the sudden burning within the youth's pupils. There was a sudden surge of energy, one that he had not felt before. And for a moment, Thundro backed off. But then the pangs returned to both key bearers and they began to scream out loud again. Thundro, for the first time in four days heard the full extent of their screaming. And it was something that he found unbearable.

I see, Thundro thought to himself. He went to the gravity control panel and activated the gravity level to twenty times the natural level. Unaccustomed to the pressure, the key bearers were thrown to the ground and lay flat on their bellies, screaming and trying to move. But the gravity proved too heavy for them. I did not want to resort to this, but I have no choice. I can't afford having you inflict more damage on yourselves now can I? Thundro quickly withdrew, closing the door behind him. He continued to listen to the screaming of the young men. Perhaps those last few comments were uncalled for. That look in Riku's eyes, he and Sora have gained a great deal of power. I wonder how much they have gained while in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber.

At the same time, back in Traverse Town, the KH team still lingered about, enjoying to their best the life within the settlement. They did anything and everything they could to keep their minds off of the Riku and Sora. However, it was during this time on the final week that Ophelia again had a strange premonition as she had for the past few nights. Funny enough, her dreams and visions occurred the same time the key bearers were undergoing their endurance with the Immunity Orbs. She sat at the table, alone in the green room, her mind concentrated on the faint energy sources far away.

Kairi and Olette came in to see if she was alright.

Are you okay, Ophelia? Kairi asked. You've been like this for the past couple of days.

Is there something wrong? Olette asked.

Riku and Sora, Ophelia uttered. The other two females perked up.

Riku and Sora, Kairi asked, What about them? Are they alright?

They're in pain, such terrible pain. -

Pain, what do you mean? -

They are in such terrible pain. They are undergoing a great deal of suffering. -

How do you know that? Olette wondered.

I can sense them. Their hearts are wavering. -

Are they in some kind of trouble? Kairi asked.

They are not in trouble. This pain they are willing to endure. It must have something to do with their training. -

Then, you've been having that same vision. -

You've been having it too, Kairi? Olette inquired.

I have, for the past four days now. It's a recurring dream I have at night. I see Sora twisting and contorting as if something is hurting him. He's always screaming and hollering and crying for the pain to go away. At the end of every dream, he seems to look at me with those puppy-dog eyes and I always wake up crying. -

Oh Kairi, -

I only hope they can endure a little longer. Ophelia stated.

The gravity pressed upon the key bearers, not allowing them to move. They could not lift their heads to bang against the floor or raise their fists to smash them to a pulp. Instead, now they had to endure the pain within without twisting about their bodies to ease their suffering. Each passing second seemed an eternity to the key bearers as the wrenching throb only grew stronger as a wave against a rocky shore.

I can't move, Riku. Sora uttered.

Damn that Thundro. Riku growled. He did this on purpose. He's increased the gravity so much we can't hope to move a finger.

Is he trying to crush us? -

No, he did this so we wouldn't inflict wounds on ourselves again. -

But the pain is too much. Sora felt a sudden wrenching in his gut, which caused his whole body to go numb. He cried out his suffering, screaming at the top of his lungs. Riku!

Hold on, Sora. But Riku too was overcome by the immense power of the orb as it thrust itself upon him as well. Damn it, damn it, damn it!

I can't take this anymore. Sora's physical and mental torment began to wear down on him, forcing him to crack. The youth was so overcome by the pangs within, it forced tears from his eyes. Make it stop, make it stop!

Sora! Riku said. But the aura of the orb surged through his body, a burning sensation most intolerable. But for some reason, the pain only made Riku more furious and angrier now. Instead of being paralyzed by the numbingly painful effects of the Immunity Orb, he fought it. With that, he fought the gravity, straining himself, pulling away at his weight until he threw himself upon his stomach. He reached for Sora who was still prostrated on the ground.

Riku, I'm gonna die. Sora strained as the energy again pounded away at his torso and abdomens. I feel like my bodies about to explode.

No Sora. Riku tried to crawl over to his friend's side. The heavy gravity kept him in place, but it was not enough to stop Riku. You have to keep going, Sora. It's for our friends, our home, our future.

Riku, -

Stay in there with me, Sora. Riku managed to crawl over to Sora on his bell. He tried to lift himself with his left arm. But the strain he put on his limb was great, the ligaments in the muscle tore and again the youth fell. His left arm was now useless. My arm!

No Riku. Sora looked at his friend, seeing him in agony. Don't strain yourself, Riku.

We have to endure just a little longer. Riku stretched out his right hand, reaching for Sora. Just a little longer, Sora's eyes dripping with tears as he saw his comrade in dire strength. He admired Riku's courage and his charisma. Sora's hopes were restored and a new hope glowed from within that even surpassed the sting of the aura's integration.

I won't give up. Sora said. I will stay strong! Sora moved his arm to the best he could, reaching for Riku's outstretched fingers. Inch by inch, he moved his hand, hoping to touch the tips. In the process, there was a sudden surge of energy coming from Sora, a similar, unknown aura that had earlier accumulated within Riku. It was the power of his new found strength. The effects of the Immunity Orb were already starting to take its shape. A strange blue glow began to arise within the key bearer as his efforts to reach his friend's hand forced him to press one. Little by little, Sora crept. Then with one last strain, he summoned a great deal of energy, which bellowed like a raging fire, forcing the gravity to submit. In all his emotional strain, Sora threw his hand forward until his fingers were clutched around Riku's palm. He then gazed at his silver-haired counterpart. Riku, for some reason began to give a strained smile.

You did it. -

Stay in there with me, Riku.

And you to me as well. -

Thundro felt the sudden surge of energy reverberating through the facility.

That power. He thought to himself. Could it have been? He knew where it originated. Giving a sigh of relief, he smiled and chuckled. Well, well, it seems that the key bearers have done it. They've

overcome the pain and have found enlightenment.

The fourth day had passed and gone, emerging into the final day in which the orbs were to have been fully integrated into the system of the each of the key bearers. Thundro awoke from his slumber. But for some reason, he felt rather refreshed. He yawned and smacked his lips before realizing that something was unusual about his surroundings.

Something s wrong. He thought to himself. There s a strange essence in the air. It was then that he realized what it was that was strange about the morning atmosphere. It was quiet, too quiet. For the first time in five days, there was silence. Immediately, his thoughts went to the key bearers. He threw himself out of bed and ran to the gravity chamber, fearing that something might have happened.

It s barely into the fifth day. I hope Riku and Sora aren t& His teeth and fist tightened. Opening the gravity chamber door, he gazed upon Riku and Sora who lay motionless upon the ground. Thundro quickly deactivated the gravity simulator and knelt by the two key bearers. You boys better not be dead. He checked for a pulse. Sure enough, there was the silent steady beating of their hearts. Thundro sighed. Well, at least you made it into the fifth day.

Using his power, he rejuvenated the key bearers. Riku and Sora slowly opened their eyes and found Thundro kneeling over them.

Master Thundro&? Sora uttered.

Are we alive&? Riku asked.

You re alive, boys. Thundro replied. And how do you feel?

Well, I feel& Riku suddenly sat himself up, his eyes widened with surprise. He felt his body. There was no longer any pain. The pain, the pangs, they re gone.

Yeah, Sora added as he lifted himself off the ground. The pain has stopped. But why is that?

You should congratulate yourselves, boys. Thundro complimented. It seems that the Immunity Orbs have been fully integrated into your beings.

Really&? -

Already&? Riku asked.

That s correct. Thundro replied.

But how was that possible? -

Perhaps it was that surge of energy you deployed yesterday. It may have heightened your strength and quickened the integration process. Thundro folded his arms before him. I guess I was wrong then. You two were not a waste of my time to train.

Alright, Sora cheered. We did it, we did it!

We ve got the orb s power now! Riku added.

Now we ll be able to help our friends. -

Just a minute, you two, Thundro said. The key bearers stopped their celebrating for a moment. Just because you have achieved the power of the Immunity Orb does not mean that your training is finished.

What do you mean? Riku asked.

You will have something else to achieve to add to your arsenal of techniques and abilities. I will present that to you two on the final day. I also have something planned for tomorrow, so you better be ready. -

So what do we do now? Sora wondered.

I believe for today, you two have earned a day of rest. -

Really&? -

Yes, you will be free to do whatever it is that you want for today. If you want to relax, so be it. If you want to train yourselves further, then so be it. You will have the full day and night to yourselves. -

Alright, -

But let s have your hair trimmed a little first. You haven t had a trim since you exited the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. -

Good idea. Riku said.

With that, the three dispersed from their usual regimen. Sora and Riku had earned their right of a full day's rest. They had survived their trial and have gained a powerful asset because of it. Now, their minds and bodies could rest at ease.

Meanwhile, in Traverse Town, Ophelia felt the diminishing of the painful surges. As she arose from her slumber, she smiled to herself. After five days of sensing the vibration of energy far away, she could finally rest her mind.

You did it, you guys. She said.

The fifth day passed without any incident. The key bearers, for the first time in almost three weeks, were allowed to do as they please for a full day. Riku and Sora did a little free sparring, took nature walks, and meditated to sharpen their skills. Thundro was impressed. Despite being relieved of his authority for one day, the key bearers did not spend it in mindless laziness and continuous siestas. Instead, they did what they could to improve their mind and bodies.

Day turned into night and the key bearers were able to slumber without fear in a comfortable bed. As the night passed on, transforming into the wee hours of the second to the final day, they awoke easily and without trouble. Riku was the first to arouse himself from his bed. He looked over at Sora, peacefully sleeping with one hand on his stomach, the other coinciding with the side of his face.

Riku crept over to Sora's bedside and put his hand on his chest.

Hey, Sora, he uttered, It's time to wake up.

Sora's eyes slowly opened. He yawned and rubbed his eyes before gazing at his friend.

Hey there, Riku. He replied. Good morning.

So how did you sleep? -

Oh, Sora stretched, I haven't slept this well in the passed three weeks, or for that matter ever since we left home. I finally get to sleep in a nice warm bed in a secured area.

There were beds in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber. -

I know, but I was just a little uneasy sleeping there. It was always day time in there and there was nothing really protecting us between our accommodations and the vast openness of that dimension. -

There was nothing out there though. -

Yeah, but still it was a little uneasy. -

Just then, there was a wrap at the door. It was Thundro.

Boys, are you up? he asked.

Yes, we are. Riku replied.

I'm coming in. Thundro opened the door to greet his two pupils. I trust that you slept well.

The best sleep since we started our adventure. Sora said.

It is the second to the final day of your stay here, boys. I want you to get dressed. I'm going to put you through one last simulation. -

Alright, Riku confirmed.

By the way, you do not have to worry about putting on your Imperial uniforms. You can attire yourself with your old wardrobe again. -

Really&? Sora asked.

There is no need for you to be formal in dress from this point out. Thundro opened the wardrobe at the foot of Riku's bed. He pulled out the old outfits of the key bearers, neatly folded. I took the liberty of cleaning and pressing your wardrobes.

Thank you, Master Thundro. -

You do not have to be formal in title as well now. Your main training has passed. The only thing that

matters now is to keep your bodies conditioned well enough to aid your comrades. -
Riku and Sora nodded and put on their old gear. The feel of cotton snug against the skin was a sensation they had been craving for three weeks.

Now, Thundro continued, Adjourn to the Pendulum Room for your last simulation.

The three made their way back to the Scenario Chamber. As they had done multiple times before for the past couple of weeks, the key bearers took their stand upon the scenario platforms.

So is this going to be the final test that we have? Sora asked.

This is not exactly a final test. Thundro replied. I always found that it is at times satisfactory to show your skills off in a battle you participated in years before.

You mean, we ll be fighting a battle from our own past? -

But why&? -

It s just to show off your new found skills to both your former enemies and your former selves. -

You mean we ll also be meeting with ourselves in this past battle? Riku asked.

That s correct. And because it s a simulation, your presence will not affect the outcome of this present reality. The question left is, which battle somewhere in your past would you like to engage in? -

Well, I don t know. Riku turned to Sora. Do you have any ideas?

Let s see. He replied. It was then that Sora had a brilliant idea. He snapped his fingers, declaring his decision. I have it. I know which battle I would really like to show off my talents to.

Just give me the description and I will have it calculated into the simulator. Thundro said.

The battle I want to go back to is& -

20 - Xemnas Battle Revised

Xemnas Battle Revised

Prologue

Before beginning this chapter, I would like to point out an important factor. Because Riku and Sora will be reenacting the battle against Xehanort, they will also be confronting their original selves as they had appeared at the end of KH2. So when addressing the KH2 version of Riku and Sora, their names and certain key words will be written in italics. However, if their names or preceding key words are not italicized, that indicates that I am referring to the grown-up versions of the key bearers from "Final Confrontation." With that in mind, I hope you will take this factor into consideration and enjoy the preceding texts.

Further note: Due to some problems with the download, the italics do not work. Therefore, you will have to read very carefully in order to distinguish between one set of key bearers from the other.

Now, it was the end of the great climactic battle against Organization XIII. It's last surviving member and supreme dictator, Xemnas, the Nobody of Xehanort, now confronted two heroes. Riku and Sora, the youths who had caused the downfall of his once mighty empire. Prior to this stand off, the key bearers had caused a great deal of damage, depriving everything that the Organization had achieved, including the destruction of the once magnificent Kingdom Hearts. One by one, each of the members fell until only Xehanort remained. His first attempts to fight Riku and Sora were in vain. And once again, he stood against them alone in the realm of light. But this time, he was preparing not to hold anything back. His once full black jacket had regressed to something more menacing as Nobody white intermingled with Heartless black. Like a tall tyrant, he glared at the key bearers.

"Heroes from the realm of light," he began, "I will not allow it to end this way, not yet. If light and darkness are eternal, then surely we nothings must be the same, eternal." There was a brief silence between the two sides. Then, Riku broke the silence

"You're right," he replied, "Light and darkness are eternal. Nothing probably goes on forever too." Riku then gave that stern glare. "But guess what, Xemnas?"

"That doesn't mean you're eternal!" Sora added.

Xemnas, overwhelmed by the confidence of the key bearers only brought himself to chuckled "No more eternal than that radiance of yours." He replied. Appearing in his hands, he drew out glowing red sabers, which would be the envy of any Sith lord. The key bearers drew out their weapons, ready to battle to the death. "Anger and hate are supreme." Xemnas suddenly vanished. The key bearers were caught off guard. Suddenly, the Nobody appeared before them. He first took hold of Sora and threw him into the air. Believing that Sora was powerless airborne, Xemnas flew at blinding speed and went slashing away at the key bearer. But Sora was able to evade and retaliate. However, Xemnas' energy of thorns was just as formidable, strike and spreading, attempting to maim the key bearers.

"I'm coming, Sora!" Riku shouted. He lifted himself up and joined his comrade in the flighty air battle. In synch, the two key bearers fought, facing energy orbs, thorn waves and sudden teleportation attacks by Xemnas as he appeared suddenly before them with his red twin light sabers. At times, his speed was so

ridiculous, he created an after image. In the process, he also created clone which appeared temporarily at times to attack the key bearers and catch them off guard.

“Be gone!” Xemnas would cry as he struck another blow. Compared to Xemnas’ skills, the key bearers were still rather sluggish. Sora and Riku used the power of Curaga and their number of potions to their full advantage, continuously healing themselves when severe damage was taken. “You can’t hope to defeat the likes of me!”

“That’s what you think!” Sora shouted. He unleashed his keyblade and managed to pummel Xemnas, dealing a critical blow. But even so, it seemed that Xemnas had not been affected by the attack.

“I hope you enjoyed your little fiasco, boy, because it’s going to cost you your life.”-

Xemnas suddenly unleashed a plethora of spinning attacks, appearing and vanishing before the key bearers like a phantom and striking them when the opportunity made itself known. Riku and Sora did all in their power to evade and retaliate, but it was apparent that Xemnas was through playing games as his attacks became more aggressive and more complex. Riku acted as a shield while Sora went in for the kill, but even their coordinated strategy wore thin as Xemnas eventually found a counter for it.

“Here, take this.” Xemnas shouted. He started to unleash laser barrages on the ground and in midair, attacking the youths at their vulnerable spot. He would first battle the youths in mid air swift attacks. And when they were tired and started to descend, he would then use a barrage of lasers to strike them from every designated angle. However, it seemed that Xemnas’ main target was Sora as most of the Nobody’s aggression was going against him. At times, he would pummel the youth in mid air with a continuous stream of lasers. Xemnas would smirk as he saw Sora’s body torn away little by little and heard the boy’s cried. “Die,”

“Riku,” Sora cried. “Help me!”

“Sora,” Riku replied, jumping in to aid his comrade. “Don’t panic, I’m coming!” He flew in protected his comrade. The chaos of the confrontation went on for ten minutes straight. And despite that length of time, Xemnas did not seem to lose stamina, whereas the key bearers seemed to lose it constantly. As it seemed that things could not get any worse, Xemnas himself went in for what he believed would be the final blow. He rushed in and grabbed hold of Sora in a powerful energy hold. He pummeled Riku away, to far to help. Riku looked on as Sora was suspended in mid air by this bright energy.

“Now you will die.” Using the orb of energy, which encompassed the key bearer, Xemnas began to slowly sap away Sora’s strength. Sora cried out as he felt his life source slowly leaving him.

“Riku,” the youth strained.

“Sora,” Riku cried. He rushed into help. But no sooner had Riku begun his run, the clone of Xemnas appeared before him, preventing him from advancing any further, using energy shields to repel the key bearer. But despite the formidable foe’s efforts, the key bearer was not deterred. Instead, Riku continued to advance, despite the resistance. He fired a barrage of energy waves to fend off the clone and continued this process until he reached the Xemnas who held Sora captive. Riku grabbed the Nobody’s hand and broke the hold, setting his friend free.

“Thanks Riku,” Sora complied.

“No problem,”-

Sora quickly healed himself and was again back on the battlefield, ready to fight.

“Impudent fools,” Xemnas growled.

“Shut up,” Riku pummeled the Nobody, spun him around and threw him into the distance. “If you ever touch Sora like that again, I swear your life is mine!”

“Big words, Riku, but can you back them up?”-

“It’s my turn,” Sora shouted, rushing in. “I’ll teach you for sucking the life out of me!”

Again, for a prolonged time of another ten minutes, the key bearers engaged in tough and rather sticky battling with Xemnas, teleporting, evading, and retaliating. Lasers, thorn energy, and repelling orbs

spread and intermingled in the epicenter of battle where the clash of keyblades commenced.

"We can't keep this up, Riku." Sora said.

"Neither can Xemnas." Riku replied.

"But he doesn't seem to lose any stamina."-

"It's all just a façade. I bet he's drained completely."-

As the final blow was given, Xemnas and the key bearers broke off their battle. The Nobody hovered high in the air while Riku and Sora looked at him upon the ground.

"I've had enough of this." Xemnas uttered. "You will not look to the sky with hope." He concentrated their energy to its full potential. "Let's see how you enjoy this, my trump card." All of a sudden darkness encompassed the room and a dome consisting of stationed lasers, each geometrically separated with great perfection, appeared around the key bearers, high and low and from every angle.

"Oh boy," Sora uttered.

"Brace yourself, Sora." Riku said. "This is gonna be bad."

"Now die," Xemnas shouted. And with that, hundreds of lasers flew at the key bearers from every direction. Using all the energy and stamina they had left, the key bearers evaded and blocked each laser that flew at them. Riku and Sora watched each other's backs and deflected every beam that attempted to strike them. The longer they resisted, the more intense and condensed the lasers became in their ferocity. For almost a full minute, the key bearers had to maintain their guard, spinning about their keyblades to repel the dangerous light. In the end, however, they managed to survive the onslaught around them and the trump card of Xemnas. But the result left them tired and weary. Both key bearers fell to their knees. With energy drained and no more potions to revive them, Riku and Sora were unable to put up resistance any further.

"Our energy's completely drained." Riku uttered.

"We can't stop though." Sora replied.

"As I had expected," Xemnas chuckled, "You have no energy left to battle with." He slowly approached the key bearers. "And so it ends here for you."

"No," Riku growled, "It can't end like this."

"Is this it?" Sora uttered.

But as it seemed over for the youths, a sudden flash of light bellowed behind them. There was a strong gust of wind and surge of energy. Xemnas and his opponents looked on to see this bizarre phenomenon occur before them. From the bright light, two shadowy silhouettes appeared and stood tall before the trio.

"What is this?" Xemnas thought to himself.

"Riku," Sora cried, "What's going on, who are those two?"

"I don't know." Riku replied, just as stunned.

As the light faded, those present were in awe as who appeared. Riku and Sora had finally arrived.

"We're back." Sora said, "The battle against Xemnas."

"And there they are." Riku chuckled.

"What in the world...?" Xemnas uttered. "Who are you?!"

"That's what I'd like to know." Sora added.

"Those two guys just appeared out of nowhere." Riku said.

The key bearers approached, in unison, a fearsome sight to their younger counterparts. They past their former selves, a quiet smirk on their faces.

"Riku, Sora," Sora addressed, "You two have done well. Now let us take it from here."

"But, who are you guys?" Sora asked.

"You might say that we're your backup." Riku replied.

"Our backup, eh...?" Riku said.

“What is the meaning of this interference?!” Xemnas demanded. “Who are you?!” The key bearers glared at the Nobody.

“But Xemnas,” Riku declared, “Surely you should know us. You should know us very well.”

“I have never laid eyes on you before!”-

“Are you that dense, old man? You’ve been fighting us this whole time.”-

“What are you...?” It was then Xemnas realized what Riku was talking about. He looked at one duo and then to the other. After realizing, Xemnas began to guffaw. “Well, well, as I live and breathe, it is you.”

“You...?” Sora wondered. “Has Xemnas met those guys before, Riku?”

“I don’t know.” Riku replied. “But they do look a little familiar...very familiar actually.”

“You’ve certainly grown up haven’t you, Riku and Sora, wielder of the keyblades!” Xemnas declared. Riku and Sora were stunned to find that the two strangers who appeared before them were none other than themselves.

“What,” Sora uttered, “Those two guys are us?”

“No wonder they were so familiar.” Riku added. He gazed at his older counterpart. “I still look like a stud even after a few years.”

“So tell me,” Xemnas asked, “What is it that brings you here to this time?”

“Just came to deal a little payback.” Sora declared.

“Is that so?”-

“You put us through a lot of hell, I just wanted to come back and give you the beating of your life.”-

“You might have aged a little, Sora, but I highly doubt that you and Riku are a match for me.”-

“So that’s your opinion?” Riku asked.

“I guarantee it.”-

“Then it just goes to show how little you know.”-

“Fool, there are no others as powerful as I!”-

“Egotistical aren’t we?”-

“If that’s what you think,” Sora said. He looked at Riku. “Hey, Riku, what do you say I take care of this little problem myself?”

“It’s your score to settle, Sora.” Riku replied. “You do what you want.”

“Very well,”-

“Idiot,” Xemnas chuckled, “Are you so confident in your own abilities that you mean to battle me on your own?”-

“That’s exactly what I mean.”-

“You two might want to get back.” Riku instructed the younger duo.

“But...” Sora uttered.

“Do as I say. Sora can handle himself.” Riku looked at his elder counterpart with curiosity.

“Are you and he for real though?” he asked. “Are you two guys really us in the future?” Riku suddenly turned around.

“That’s right.” Riku replied. He walked up to younger Riku. “You and I are the same. And you will be surprised what we are capable of doing in the future.” He then turned to Sora who was about to enter battle. “You will see how much we have progressed.”

Sora stood before Xemnas, ready to battle against his old foe.

“Well, this should be review for you then, Sora.” The Nobody declared.

“Actually,” Sora replied, “After everything I’ve put myself through, I came to realize how weak you were. Recalling the details of this battle and your methods weren’t worth taking into account.” This statement caused Xemnas’ blood to boil. He had never before been insulted in such a way.

“How dare you speak like that to me in such a manner? You insolent pup,” Xemnas suddenly attacked. He deployed his double light sabers and struck with all his might. But to his surprise, Sora was not there

to be hindered. Xemnas was confused. "Where did he go?"

"Sora just vanished." Riku uttered. "But where...?"

"Do I have the ability to disappear?" Sora asked.

"That's right," Riku chuckled, "You two haven't developed that keen sense yet."

"What sense...?"-

"Sora didn't disappear, he's simply moving very fast. However, he's moving too fast for you guys to detect him."-

"But how can that be?" Riku asked. "No one's capable of moving like that, not even Xemnas."

"Well, as you can see, Sora's achieved that." Riku gawked at Xemnas who was still looking about confused and bewildered.

"Where did he go?" Xemnas growled.

"Above you," Sora replied. Xemnas looked up to see the key bearer hovering about like about him, perfectly stationary. "I'm really disgusted with your tactics. I expected more out of you Xemnas."

"Fool boy," Xemnas attacked again, holding nothing back, he used his thorn energy, his spinning attacks with his twin light sabers. He unleashed a barrage of lasers, but for some reason, despite his ferocity and close proximity to the key bearer, he was not able to hinder him. And what made it more aggravating to the organization leader was the fact that Sora had not even deployed his keyblade yet. He was only dodging and evading as if with little effort, predicting the attacks Xemnas would use ahead of times.

"Look at that," Riku declared while folding his arms in front of him as if a proud Saiyan warrior,

"Xemnas is so slow, he can barely keep up with Sora."

"What are you talking about?!" Riku shouted. "I can barely keep up with Xemnas!"

"Don't I have a keyblade in the future?" Sora asked.

"You do have a keyblade." Riku replied. "It's just that this fight is so futile for Xemnas, Sora doesn't have to worry about deploying his keyblade. But he'll deploy it sooner or later."

"Why don't you fight me right, boy?" Xemnas mocked the key bearer. "Where's your keyblade? Or don't you have one in the future?"

"I have a keyblade." Sora replied. "I'm just not gonna use it on you. You're not worth the effort."

"Is that so?" The Nobody slightly scoffed at that statement. "Are you just saying that because you don't have one and are hoping to bluff your way out of this?"

"I don't need to bluff."-

"Admit it, Sora. Even in the future years, I still accumulate a sense of fear within you."-

"That's not true, if it were then I wouldn't be here right now would I? You would have defeated me way back then, or should I say here and now." Xemnas realized the truth. Had he been victorious, Sora would not have been there, facing the Xemnas, in his older form. "Despite my disliking of you, Xemnas, there is still a chance for you to walk away. I don't wanna have to take your life a second time."

"I will not back down to idle threats." Xemnas began to attack again with just as much ferocity. "You destroyed everything that I had created! You toppled my control of all worlds! You destroyed by Kingdom Hearts! You brought down the might of Organization XIII and all Nobodies! And even more detestable, though I don't know if you still do, but you have that traitor Roxas residing within you."

"You envied Roxas didn't you? Not only because he obtained the power of the keyblade, but he also had me, his original self, to reside back to. You never were able to reunite with your original self because Riku took it over and you feared the fate of a Nobody. Without the one half, the other could not maintain its existence. Therefore, you would fade into nothingness. I can understand that sentiment and the fear of fading into nothingness, but to use the methods you required to carry it out..." –

"To each his own, Sora," Xemnas suddenly split into two. While one attacked Sora from the front, the other appeared behind the key bearer. Sora was able to evade the first blow, but as he turned to

confront the second Xemnas, the Nobody appeared before him and using his energy, sent a powerful surge through the body of the key bearer. Sora was suspended as the energy encompassed him.

"Oh no," Sora cried, "That's Xemnas' life absorption technique."

"He's gonna suck the life out of Sora." Riku added. He turned to his future self. "You have to help him!"

"There is no need." Riku replied, unwavering. "If this were serious, then I would have jumped in without pause. But Sora can take care of this situation all by himself."

The three watched as Xemnas slowly drained the key bearer of his life force.

"And so you will meet your end." Xemnas chuckled. But to his shock, Sora suddenly looked at him with those deep blue eyes of his as if nothing remotely dangerous was happening. His façade was calm and expressionless. This was a concern of Xemnas. For some odd reason, his grasp on Sora seemed to slip.

Then, in a sudden burst of power, Sora's aura broke the hold, shattering the encompassing surge around him, dispersing the energy into the atmosphere. Xemnas stepped back in terror. The others were just as shocked.

"Did you see that?" Sora uttered. "Sora broke the seal!"

"But how can that...?" Riku added.

"Bravo, Sora," Riku applauded. "I bet Xemnas didn't see that coming."

"How on earth did you overpower my technique?" Xemnas uttered.

"It just goes to show you that I've progressed a great deal." Sora replied. Xemnas jumped back.

"You...you're not the same Sora."-

"I was wondering when you were gonna figure that out."-

"You dare to insult me?!" Xemnas began to increase his power to its maximum. But still Sora was stalwart.

"You can resist all you want and use any of your attacks as many times as you desire. But all of your efforts will be in vain."-

"Is that so? Then maybe you'd like a taste of my trump card!" Xemnas accumulated his infamous dome of lasers.

"Oh no," Riku cried. "It's this technique again!"

"Xemnas' trump card," Sora added.

"Sora..." Riku said. His emotions were undeterminable.

"Now die," Xemnas sent an endless barrage of lasers to strike Sora. Sure enough, one hit him, then another, then another, and another and another until the lasers started striking the key bearer by the dozen, then by the score, and finally a hundred in one swing. A bright light and clouds of smoke began thicken in the center of the dome. Xemnas' fire continued until the laser icons on the dome itself were starting to explode due to the continuous fire.

After a full minute of barraging, the attack finally settled and only a cloud of smoke remained. Xemnas smiled to himself, satisfied with the results.

"Maybe that'll quiet that future self of Sora for good." He then looked at Riku and the other key bearers. He landed short of twenty feet from them. "Well, it seems there are only three of you left."

"You monster," Sora said.

"You're cruel." Riku added.

"It just goes to show that even in your future forms; you stand no chance against me." Xemnas declared. But as he gazed at Riku, he noticed a calm look on the young man's face. "Why are you so calm, Riku? Aren't you shocked that I killed, Sora?" But Riku only smirked silently.

"Who said anything about me getting killed?" a voice suddenly shouted from behind the Nobody.

Xemnas was stunned. He quickly turned towards the cloud of smoke that slowly dissipated into the air. To all their surprise, except for Riku, Sora emerged from the cloud without a scratch.

"Impossible..."-

"He's alive...?" Sora uttered.

"Sora's alive?" Riku added.

"Now you see why I wasn't the least bit concerned about Sora's safety." Riku chuckled. "In his present state, you couldn't hope to defeat him no matter how hard you tried."

"This cannot be! How in the world could you have improved so much?" Xemnas growled.

"It has been a few years." Sora declared. "And a lot can happen in that extension of time."

"I see..." Xemnas suddenly began to smile a devious look. His lip corners lifted up indicating a possible concoction in his mind. "If that's the case then,"

Xemnas suddenly unleashed a barrage of lasers. Sora easily evaded. But while the key bearer was in his eluding, Xemnas took the opportunity and attacked the two key bearers who were standing behind Riku.

"What is he doing?" Sora wondered.

"He's attacking us!" Riku shouted. The key bearers, except for older Riku, deployed their keyblades. Instead he just stood before the younger duo and deployed an energy shield.

"You'll have to go through me first." Riku declared.

"I think not." Xemnas suddenly split and vanished. He then reappeared and got hold of the young Riku and Sora, encompassing their bodies with a powerful energy. He then threw the duo before their elder counterparts as a barrier. Riku and Sora watched as the Nobody deployed his despicable act against their past selves.

"What's your game, Xemnas?" Riku growled.

"If I can't defeat you physically," the Nobody declared, "Then I'll defeat you the next best way! I'll outwit you!"

"And you're taking them hostage?"-

"You prattled on continuously about how you were the future selves of Riku and Sora. You actually managed to survive this fight with me, indicating that you, by some miraculous twist of fate, were able to defeat me in your own time. However, if I kill these two now, then there is no way that you'll be able to survive. Thus, you'll disappear into oblivion!"-

"You..."-

"That is your one great weakness, Riku, Sora. You never thought about that twist did you?"-

"You bastard..." Sora growled.

"Let me see how you like this little maneuver." Xemnas began to suck the life out of the key bearers who were suspended in the air. Riku and Sora began to cry out in agonizing pain as their felt their life force being drained. "Now watch as I kill your past selves and send you to suffer the same fate as my followers!"

"Help us...!" Riku cried.

"Help us...!" Sora added.

"That's enough..." Sora growled. "You leave them alone..."

"Don't worry. I'll drain them to the point where they can't fight back." Xemnas chuckled. "In the meantime, why don't you play with these for a while?"

Xemnas snapped his fingers. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, hundreds of Dusks appeared around the older pair. Riku looked about to see all the dusks around him. Sora, however, seemed rather absorbed, hearing the screams of his past self.

"You..." He growled.

"Sora," Riku uttered, "Take it easy."

“Now let’s see how you fancy taking on an entire legion of Nobodies!” Xemnas chuckled. He looked to the Dusks. “Destroy them both.”

The dusks suddenly attacked.

“I hoped it wouldn’t have to come down to this.” Riku said. He deployed his keyblade. Then, with one strike and a sudden flash, the key bearer eliminated a good half of the entire Dusk force. Xemnas was stunned.

“He destroyed that many Dusks already?” he uttered. “It can’t be...”

“Riku...” Sora uttered as he felt his energy slowly leaving him. “Look...”

“He defeated all those dusks with one blow.” Riku added. He then glared upon the weapon of his elder counterpart. “Look at that keyblade.”

“What kind of keyblade is that?”-

One, two three, the Dusks were eliminated in couple of slashes. Riku on the other hand did not break a sweat. He felt no fatigue.

“If that’s the best you can do,” Riku chuckled, “Then you really are in trouble.”

“Fool...!” Xemnas shouted. He called forth more Nobodies, this time ranging to a plethora of different types, with its own unique and devastating power. But still, Riku defeated them with such ease. “This can’t be happening. Riku’s strength is so great, he can slash down Nobodies by the waves in one movement. Had he fought Organization XIII as he is now, all the members would have been wiped away in a single breath.” He then looked at Sora who still stood about. “But why is it that Sora does not fight back?” He then glanced at younger Sora, who was still moaning in agony from his slowly draining energy. “Does he not care for the fate of his younger self? Do they not care of what happens to these boys?”

“Sora,” Riku said. “I know I can handle this by myself, but aren’t you gonna join in? Aren’t you gonna save our pasts, or are you expecting me to do all the work now?” But Sora was silent. But then a strange surge began to uplift within Sora. Like a dark phantom, the aura began to bellow, dark in its nature, a darkness that even the Heartless would not dare accept. Riku felt the chill. He looked at Sora and dared not question his friend’s actions. “Sora,”

“No more...” Sora growled. “No more...”

“Sora,” Riku suddenly began to sweat. “Sora, don’t do it. Don’t lose control.”

Just then, the key bearer’s body began to glow profusely. The winds suddenly picked up and the ground began to shake.

“What is this power?” Xemnas uttered.

“This strength...” Riku whispered, straining himself to stay alive.

“Incredible...” Sora gasped. “I’m that powerful in a few more years...?” Overcome by exhaustion, Sora fell limp and unconscious.

“You’ve caused enough pain.” Sora growled. “Let justice be done upon you!”

“Damn it,” Riku said.

Xemnas’ eyes grew wide with apprehension. Never before had he felt so much energy.

“Where did Sora gain so much power?” he thought to himself. Just then, as Sora looked up, his eyes had changed from a gentle blue to a soulless yellow. As he gritted his teeth, his K9’s elongated to sharp fangs. His fingernails grew pointed and his body seemed to flex giving Sora hard muscle tone. His hair seemed to suddenly sprout about, becoming more spiked, stretching upward. Xemnas felt the inner part of himself turn cold with an indescribable fear. “What is this power?”

“Sora’s delved into the rage,” Riku uttered. “And he’s fixed on attacking Xemnas.” He then looked to his counterparts. “If I know Sora, he won’t know the difference between friend and foe. It’s up to me to save them.”

Sora’s energy suddenly burst into the air and every Nobody that was present was destroyed by the

surge.

"This is not Sora." Xemnas uttered. "He's a demon. He's much too dangerous to keep in existence."

"It's over for you, Xemnas." Sora roared in a deep and sinister voice. "What you have done is unforgivable. Let justice be done upon you." He then unleashed his keyblade. Xemnas saw the menacing eloquence of the keyblade. Its strength matched Sora's yellow eyes. "Prepare to die..."

"You dare come close to me and I swear I will kill your past counterpart without hesitation!" Xemnas held the orb containing Sora. "Try me if you dare!"

But such a threat did not deter the now enraged key bearer. Again Xemnas cried, putting pressure on young Sora.

"Don't you even care about the fate of your younger self, Sora? Don't you care about your own existence?!"-

"I am not Sora." The key bearer declared, his eyes glowing with the slit pupils of a wild animal. "I am the Keyblade Hound..."

"Keyblade Hound...?"-

"Whether I live or die, I will rip your head from atop your shoulders...!"-

Just then, as Xemnas was overcome by fear, Riku appeared before him and broke the hold he had on the key bearers. He then kicked Xemnas in the chest before sweeping the younger counterparts under his arms and dashing away.

"I have them, Sora!" Riku cried. "Now do what you have to do!"

"Yeah..." Sora looked at Xemnas with those cold eyes and without pause, charged head on against the Nobody. Time seemed to stand still and Xemnas saw his life, his achievements and his failures flash before his eyes.

"This can't be the end..." he uttered.

"Die..."-

"No," Xemnas deployed his light sabers and charged at the Keyblade Hound. "I will not let it end like this! I will be the one to strike first!"

There was a bright flash of light and a high pitched clang of metal. In a heartbeat, the two were opposite each other, their weapons still raised. For a moment, it seemed there was no clear winner. But then, Xemnas collapsed to the ground.

"Cursed keyblade..." he uttered. His body dissipated and vanished into the light of the atmosphere as if his form was made of ash. Nothing was left of Xemnas. As it had been before, he was slain by the hands of Sora.

Allowing his will and pure heart to take hold, Sora regressed back to his normal self. Riku approached him.

"That was going a little overboard, don't you think, Sora?" Riku asked.

"Sorry," Sora replied. "He just got me really angry."

"Well, make sure not to overdo it next time."-

"I will." Sora then looked to he and Riku's slumbering past selves. "How are Riku and Sora?"

"They're doing alright. It's just that they had all the energy drained out of them."-

"Damn that Xemnas..."-

"Could you give me a hand, Sora, and take one of them?"-

"Sure Riku." Sora took hold of himself. "I'll take care of my past counterpart." Both key bearers lay motionless in the arms of their future selves. "So what should we do with them?"

Just then light appeared before the key bearers.

"Light..." Riku uttered.

"Let's go..." Sora replied.

With past selves secured in their grasps, the key bearers entered the light and came before the

darkened beaches at the end of the world.

“End of the line...”-

“Yeah...”-

“Even still,” Riku’s ears picked up the gentle crashing of the waves. “That sound is so peaceful here in the realm of darkness.”

“To think that we almost declared exile here,” Sora added. They lay the key bearers gently on the black sand, “This brings back old memories.”

The two looked to the dim light like a pale moon in the distance. But as they did, the sound of a slow tick-tock began to echo. Then, the world seemed to fade around them.

“The simulation is over.” Riku said.

“But what about...?” Sora asked. He kept his eyes upon their past selves as they turned blurry before him.

“They’ll be alright. Remember, nothing ever actually happened.”-

“Yeah, I guess so.”-

Within moments, the scene of the beach at the end of the world had vanished and the key bearers again found themselves before Lord Thundro.

“Well,” he asked. “How did it go?”

“We beat Xemnas again.” Sora replied.

“Don’t let that battle go to your heads, boys. You must remember that the fight against General Saber will not be as easy as that. In fact, you may more likely find yourselves in Xemnas’ shoes for that confrontation.”-

“We’ll keep that in mind, sir.” Riku said.

“Since we still have a full day, let us continue training a little longer, for the sake of maintaining your skills.”-

“Right,” the two youths concurred.

“Then adjourn to the gravity room. We will commence our last training session there.”-

The three dispersed from the Scenario Chamber and continued their training for one more day. It would not be long before they would return to the others and help them in the up coming battle against General Saber, the last of the Blade Generals and the final link to saving King Mickey.

However, rejoining their comrades in Traverse Town was not to be. Later that same day, a message arrived in Traverse Town, delivered by Leon and Cloud. The message itself seemed rather desperate. When receiving the message, Ophelia, Kairi, and Olette were spending their leisurely relaxing time at the Inn drinking custom made coffee.

“Miss Billiard,” Leon shouted, as he and cloud rushed to the table from which the ladies sat.

“What’s the problem?” Ophelia asked.

“We have a big problem.”-

“What is it?” Kairi wondered.

“We found the location of General Saber!”-

“What...?!” Ophelia stood up. “You know where Saber is?”

“Yes,” Cloud replied. “But we should discuss this issue with the others.”

“Have everyone assemble at the green room.” Leon added.

“Very well,” Ophelia acknowledged. She looked at Kairi and Olette. “Find Goofy, Donald, and Kirin and tell them to assemble at the green room in thirty minutes.”

“Right,” Olette and Kairi concurred and scurried off to fight their comrades.

“You guys come with me,” Pointing to Cloud and Leon.

“Right,” the two young warriors replied. They accompanied the colonel back to the hotel in the second

district.

Thirty minutes had passed and the KH team was once again together.

“So what’s the news you have to tell us?” Kirin asked.

“What’s the news on Saber?” Kairi added.

“Apparently, he’s been assigned to a world called Atlantis.” Leon explained.

“Atlantis...?” Donald inquired.

“The lost city of Atlantis to be precise. Apparently, Saber found out from an anonymous source that there is a powerful energy essence that resides in that world.”-

“An energy essence...?” Goofy wondered.

“It is believed that that this energy source has incredibly destructive power.”-

“How destructive...?” Ophelia asked.

“Very destructive, in fact we believe that that same power source was used to destroy the entire continent of Atlantis. Plato put it that Atlantis was swallowed by the sea in the course of a single night.”-

“I see...” Kirin said, “With a force that powerful, the Imperial Axis would prove invincible. They could threaten the whole of the Alliance. They could even attack Oceansburg again and this time they’ll be able to destroy it with very little effort. There would be no way to stop them if the Axis gains control of that power source.”

“Sneer has no one strong enough on reserve to go after Saber.” Leon said. “We’re the only ones that stand in the way of him and his men.”

“This time, I’ll be going with you?” Cloud added. “I want to know if the rumors are true myself.”

“What rumors...?” Goofy asked.

“If it’s true that he and his gang have come back.”-

“Who...?” Kairi asked. Cloud stalled for a moment before giving them a name.

“Kadaj...”-

“Kadaj...?” Donald asked. “Who is that...?”

“You might say that...” Cloud again hesitated. “He’s my brother...”

“Your brother...?”-

“I don’t know if it’s true, but I heard that Saber had recruited someone with features that matched that of Kadaj and his gang. If it’s true, I have to stop him.”-

“Well, whatever the issue may be,” Ophelia declared, “We know for certain that if the Imperial Axis gains access to that energy source, we might as well kiss all our efforts good-bye.”

“But what about Riku and Sora,” Kairi asked. “Aren’t we supposed to wait for them?”

“Our priorities rest with stopping Saber right now. If the mythical energy source of Atlantis is as great and powerful as you say it is, then even Riku and Sora won’t be strong enough to withstand its potency if it’s unleashed. We have to go as soon as possible.” Ophelia turned to Leon. “When will you need us?”

“We depart now!” Leon replied.

“Then get your gear ready, ladies and gents. Rendezvous to the ship immediately,” She turned to Olette. “Olette, you remain here and take care of the children.

“I will.” Olette replied. “Good luck.”

“Let’s head out!”-

“Yeah,” the others cheered.

“I want a message sent to Riku and Sora. Tell them to meet us at Atlantis as soon as their training is over. In the meantime, we’ll do all in our power to hold off Saber until they arrive.”-

“Right,” Leon replied.

“Move it!”-

The KH team rallied. Twenty minutes after, the message had been sent and the team was on their way

to Atlantis. Armed with their signature weapons, the members boarded the gummi and were swiftly on their way.

“Set coordinates for Atlantis.” Ophelia ordered.

“Coordinates set,” Leon replied.

“All hatches secured?”-

“All air hatches sealed.” Kirin said.

“All rockets ready to launch.”-

“Rockets reaching critical level,” Donald declared.

“All personnel fastened?”-

“All personnel fastened and secured.” Kairi said.

“Cloud, take us out.”-

“Ready for take off,” Cloud declared. “Preparing to launch in T minus five...four...three...two...one...zero...”

Igniting the rockets, the gummi sped off at lightning speed towards the Atlantis Empire and General Saber.

In the meantime, Olette, Hayden and the children watched from the walkway of the second district as the gummi ship lifted into the sky and vanished into the distance like a shooting star.

“There they go, kids.” She said “Wave good-bye!”

“Bye-bye,” Hayden cried out. “Come back soon!”

“You take care of yourselves.” Olette said with an inward voice. “The fate of all worlds depends on you now.”

21 - The Final Test

The Final Test: The First Key Bearer Emerges

Once again the day passed with Thundro pushing the key bearers harder than ever before. But by this time, Riku and Sora had reached the end of their regimen and were by this time used to the strain. They battled with lightning fast reflexes in ten times the natural gravity. Their senses had been heightened to a new level. After enduring the equivalence of two years, undergoing a hellish surrounding, which nearly ended their lives, in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber, the key bearers had achieved a level of training that would have otherwise taken them several extended lifetimes for them to accomplish.

Thundro smiled as he watched his two students spar with great ferocity before his eyes.

“To think,” he thought to himself. “Just three weeks ago, those two couldn’t even hope of moving in three to five times the natural gravity level. Now here, there are battling at immense speed at ten times the natural gravity. I have to hand it to them. They’ve come a long way, from cocky novices to battle hardened warriors. In the end, my harsh regimen and ruthless attitude toughened those boys up. That, as well as their will to continue.”

“Is that all you’ve got, Sora?” he heard Riku shout. “Don’t tell me you’re giving up already!”

“In your dreams, Riku!” Sora shouted as he lunged at his friend. The two grappled their keyblades in an interlocking skirmish.

“Had they not been worthy enough,” Thundro continued to speak in his mind, “They would have died on that first trial battle against me.” He checked his watch. The time was 6:00 p.m. on the dot.

“Boys,” he shouted, “Bring it in!”

“Bring it in?” Sora asked.

“Already...?” Riku added. They rushed to Thundro. “What’s the deal? It seems way too early than usual.”

“This is the final day of training, boys. It was in fact a day in which I wasn’t planning on instructing you. So you might say I am impressed that you decided to continue your training.”-

“Well...” Sora uttered with a sheepish grin.

“To the point, you’ll have to rest your bodies for the final test tomorrow.”-

“Final test?” the key bearers were curious.

“What do you mean?” Riku asked.

“You mean like a written exam?” Sora asked, a little apprehensive. Sweat suddenly dripped from his forehead. “Just to let you know, I really suck at final exams. Like that time I had to do a midterm exam for my Philosophy class about Descartes and Hume and...”

“There’s nothing to be so fidgety about, Sora.” Thundro interrupted. “This will not be a written exam. This will be one last spar.”

“A spar...?” Sora sighed. “Well, I’m good at that.”

“You two do recall when you took the trial battle to be accepted as students under me. Consider this your graduation battle.”-

“Alright...!” Riku said.

“So we’ll adjourn early tonight so you two can get a good night’s rest.” Thundro turned away. “I shall retire to my quarters then.”

“Alright then,” Sora replied. “Good night, sir.”

The peace of the night came again and the key bearers enjoyed their final night at the facility. Sora lay in his bed, looking around at their tight little nook. For some reason, he felt a bit nostalgic. Riku had finished showering and was now drying himself off. He emerged from the bathroom in his black boxer-briefs and a towel over his shoulders. As he reached for his jeans that lay neatly on his bed, he looked at Sora who seemed to stare aimlessly at the ceiling.

“Are you alright, Sora?” he asked.

“I’m just thinking.” Sora replied

“About what...?”-

“About our time in here...”-

“It wasn’t very often.”-

“Yeah I know, but it seems like only yesterday we came here.”-

“I know what you mean.” Riku buttoned and zipped up the front of his pants and just sat on the bed shirtless. “We gained a lot in Thundro’s training regimen. We’ve become more balanced in our fighting technique and our strength has increased to a level I never thought possible.” There was a moment’s pause between the key bearers. Then Sora turned his head to look at his friend.

“Hey Riku,” he said.

“Yeah...?”-

“Do you think that training with Thundro had made our friendship stronger?”-

“We’ve had our differences in those times, Sora. At times we would argue and end up fighting each other. But in the end we made up. So yeah, I think our friendship has tightened.”-

“He sure is a hard task master at times.” Sora sat up on his bed and lay his feet over the edge onto the cold ground. “So you think we’re ready for the fight against Saber?” Riku smiled and shifted himself from his bed next to Sora. He put his arm around him.

“To tell you the truth,” Riku uttered. “I really don’t care.”-

“You don’t...?”-

“Not right now anyway.”-

“Well, what do you care about right now?”-

“This...!” Riku suddenly threw his arm around Sora’s neck and began to give him a hair ruffling noogie on the top of his cranium. Sora struggled to get out of his friend’s grasp. They ended up rolling off the bed and onto the floor. Then Sora managed to get himself over Riku and straddle him. He pinned both of his arms down.

“Do you give, Riku...?”-

“Not a chance...!” Riku struggled, kicking his legs about, hoping to turn himself over. But Sora was relentless this time.

“Not so funny with the bottom rail on top now is it?! Do you give up?!”-

“Not yet...!”-

“You can’t win this time, Riku! There’s no space for you to roll over to.”-

Riku continued to thrash about before realizing that it was useless. He smiled and laughed.

“Okay Sora,” he said. “I give...”

Night quickly passed as soon as it had started and the key bearers once again found themselves standing before the mighty Lord Thundro. This time, the trio assembled at the place by the waterfall where their preliminary battle had commenced three weeks before.

“Boys,” Thundro declared, “It has been an honor to train worthy young warriors like you. I commend you for making it this far, surviving the harshness and enduring the cruelty. Your spirits have been toughened and your bodies have been forged with new armor. Your minds have gained a great deal of knowledge both on the battlefield and within your own philosophies. Therefore, the final test shall

commence.”

“Right,” the key bearers replied.

“Boys, this will not be a duel. This will be a bout. Do not hold back under any circumstance.”-

“So there’s no holds barred?” Sora asked.

“In the fight against Saber, do not expect anything similar to a duel. He will not fight by restricted standards. He will do all in his power to kill, especially with the grudge he bears against you. Thus, I will not hold back either. But remember your training and the lessons you have learned and you will not fail. I guarantee it.”-

“Understood,” Riku replied.

“Key bearers, I salute you. Now let us begin!”-

The key bearers drew out their weapons. But to their surprise, Thundro was not armed. He did not bear the sheaths of his twin swords which he had used to battle them time after time again.

“Aren’t you going to use a weapon?” Sora asked.

“I intend on using a weapon.” Thundro replied. “But I will not regress to deploying my twin blades for this particular battle. Instead...” Thundro drew his hands out. There was a sudden flash of light. And appearing in his hands were the weapons he would bear into battle. “I’ll use these.”

To the surprise and shock of the key bearers, they couldn’t believe what they were seeing.

“It can’t be...” Sora uttered. “Those are...are...?”

“Keyblades...” Riku added with a waver. “Two of them...”

“But if Thundro has keyblades, that means he’s a...”-

“He’s a key bearer too...”-

“I was hoping for that reaction, boys. Behold my weapons of choice! Laevateinn and Mjollnir...”-

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” Riku shouted. “Since when were you going to tell us that you were a key bearer...!”

“Not just any key bearer, Noctin Tilandir, but the key bearer, the first key bearer who ever existed. I am the first to wield the power of the keyblades.”-

“No way...” Sora said, all astounded.

“These were the first ever forged, weapons descending from the Norse Pantheon.” He first introduced the keyblade in his right hand, a magnificent piece of art as ever there was. Consisting of silver and mother of pearl, the keyblade was slick and curved and its hilt circular with precious stones evenly spread on its outer border. The shaft was like a tri-bladed sword with its triple shafts. And for the head, what could only be described as the head of a mallet completed the entourage in such splendor and power.

“On my right,” Thundro explained, “I bear the mighty hammer of justice, once wielded by Thor the legendary god of thunder, Mjollnir!” He then pointed to the second keyblade. It was a double-shaft keyblade with a moon crest as both head and hilt. Its design was emerald embedded with gold with a forged ring dangling as its chain. “And born in my left hand, I wield the mythical and mystical Laevateinn, forged from Draupnir, the ring of power by Loki, the great trickster god. These are the originals, the first forerunners of the keys of hearts, the very first keyblades.”

“The first keyblades...” Sora was astounded. “Who would have thought?”

“So you intend to fight us with those then?” Riku asked.

“That is correct.” Thundro took his stance. “And I will show no compassion this time. I will battle with the full extent of my heart and soul, with all the passion I have ever experienced in the midst of battle. The new keyblade masters versus the first keyblade master. Let this battle commence!”

Thundro made no further hesitation and charged. The key bearers were stunned as their instructor lashed out with such ruthless violence. He slashed and swiped with incredible accuracy. For the first couple of minutes, the key bearers were not able to make sense of how to react.

"Hey, take it easy will you?!" Riku demanded.

"Are you getting soft already? And after all that trouble I went through getting you ready for this moment?!" Thundro suddenly began to deploy his teleportation technique, attacking from all directions. The key bearers quickly engaged, going on the offensive, evading and dodging as best they could. But Thundro was too fast and at times, he would nearly cut them, tearing at their clothing instead. "If you fight like this against me, you'll never be a match for Saber!"

"He's attacking us as if he really wants to kill us." Sora said.

"I think that's what he's planning to do!" Riku replied.

"But isn't this going a little too far?!"-

"C'mon Sora, you should be used to this by now!" Riku put up a defense. But as the impact of Thundro's keyblades hit his own, it was clear that Thundro was not going to limit himself in his power or his bloodlust. "But then again, I really haven't gotten used to this either."

"I intend to kill you, boys!" Thundro declared. "If you hesitate, you will die! Throw aside the bond you forged with me these past three weeks and attack and hinder me as if I were Saber himself! I will give no mercy. Therefore I will expect no mercy in return! Only when the critical death blow has been given will this battle stop!"

"But I thought this was just a spar!" Sora said.

"That's not open for discussion at the present moment is it?! Had I told you it was a bout of life and death, you wouldn't have agreed to it! Now you have no choice, but to fight!" Thundro lunged, preparing to strike the youth between the eyes. Sora dodged just as Laevateinn streaked by. There was a painful sting on his right cheek. Sora looked to see a few red droplets flying in front of his eyes. He tumbled to the ground and quickly jumped back to his feet. He felt his cheek and sensed a wet substance smearing. Gazing at his hand, he realized that he had been given a deep cut.

"Thundro..."-

"That is the extent of my word, Sora. You will fight and survive this last battle, or you will die!" Thundro attacked him head on again, not giving him a chance to breathe. But then from out of nowhere, Riku appeared in defense of his friend and blocked the incoming weapons.

"Riku...!"-

"Are you alright, Sora?" Riku asked.

"I'm fine..." Riku then glared at Thundro as their keyblades ground against each other, forcing sparks to flare.

"Why are you doing this, Thundro? Why are you trying to kill us after all the trouble you went through training us?!"-

"I have taught you all that you need to know! I have given you all the things necessary to fight Saber, spare for two things, a lesson and a second item. The final lesson is this," Thundro's eyes had changed. They looked ruthless, cold and emotionless like a doll's eyes. His pupils had grown small indicating that his mind was only focused on one thing, the death of his pupils. "The sensation left for you to experience is death..."

"Death...?"-

"If you are not ready to kill, then you better be ready to die!" The lock between the key bearers ended and Thundro and Riku pushed themselves away. "Saber will show no mercy to you! Think of this as your first step towards battling him! It's a step which you must survive!"

"I see," Riku took his stance. "Unless we kill, we'll be killed! But that's already a concept we know! We killed when we had to!"

"That's not the entirety of the point I'm making."-

"Then what the point you're trying to make?" Sora asked.

"If you must kill, then you do it without interference from your consciousness!" Thundro attacked again.

“You see an opening and you take it on the first shot!” The trio clashed again. Tightly in their agility and speed, they clustered in a ball. Streaks and flashes of light and the clash of thunder reverberated as the key bearers engaged. “I know your tactics. I have heard of your technique to dispense with bothersome foes. You maim them out of commission, to the point where they are incapable of retaliating. Or you use your elemental attacks or your summoning spells to either immobilize them or render them unconscious, anything to avoid having to needlessly take the life of another. Well, Saber will not have it! If he gets the chance, he will exploit that void in your hearts and use it to his advantage. You might not be willing to needlessly take life, but he’s willing to do that no matter what! He is willing to do anything, so long as it guarantees the deaths of the ones responsible for taking the life of his cousin.”

“That’s right.” Riku thought to himself, remembering the grudge behind Saber’s actions. “He’s fighting for revenge. So he won’t be satisfied until both Sora and I are dead.”

“Now you realize the predicament. Saber’s philosophy on dedication and revenge are absolute. Unlike most, he will not throw aside his own desires for the sake of an enemy’s words. So negotiations will not avail against him. He has sworn to kill you two and there’s nothing to persuade him otherwise.”-

“But that’s Saber we’re talking about!” Sora shouted as he evaded and blocked another attack. “Why are you being so ruthless...?!”-

“I want to see if you have it in you to kill without hesitation and without concern or pity for the life and fate of your enemy! That is all that concerns me!” Thundro lunged again and again and again, forcing the key bearers to keep up their efforts to evade and block. “Besides, I myself have a grudge against you.”

“A grudge against us...?” Riku asked.

“But what did we ever do to you?!” Sora demanded.

“The one thing I never hoped would have to happen.” Thundro declared, “Having to pit one set of pupils against the other. I detest the sight of seeing young individuals I have trained battling against each other, and would like that to be avoided at all costs. And since Saber is nowhere to be found at the present moment for me to slay, I’ll have to dispense with my other pupils!”

“So, that’s all it was to you, a waste of time?! You took three weeks to train us and you got us in top condition! And for what, so you could kill us yourself?!”-

“The real question is, Sora, did you waste your own time?!”-

Thundro charged again, swiping away at the key bearers. Despite the clear motives of the Imperial, the key bearers were still reluctant to hinder him. But as the battle dragged on, Riku and Sora came to the conclusion that there was no other option. They either had to kill Thundro or die at his hand.

“We have no choice.” Riku said. “We have to kill Thundro.”

“But Riku...” Sora uttered.

“He is still an Imperial at heart after all. At least we can allow him to die the honorable death of an Imperial.”-

“Yeah...I guess...”_

“Then let’s do this...for our friends...”_

“Yeah...!”

The tables suddenly turned. This time, Riku and Sora went on the offensive and attacked Thundro with all their might. They cared not for hindering him this time as they now knew the importance of this final fight to the death. They no longer looked at Thundro as a master and teacher, but rather a sworn enemy who had come to take their lives. Thundro took up the defense as the youths descended upon him with incredible gusto and ferocity. Despite the danger he had put himself and the key bearers in, he only smiled.

“That’s the way boys.” He said. “Show me what you’re made of!” He deployed elemental attacks at the key bearers. At first, the key bearers didn’t dare throw themselves into the bursts of fire or wind, or

the upheaval of earth. They could still feel the chill and heat of ice and flame and their faith in the Immunity Orb seemed to diminish quickly.

"I thought the Immunity orb was supposed to help us fend off different elements." Sora said. "Then how come I can still feel the heat and the chill sting me?!"

"Maybe it's just a phase." Riku replied.

"Are you willing to chance that?" Just then as Sora evaded another wind attack, He saw Thundro before him.

"Let's give it a little experiment shall we?" He unleashed a massive twister encompassed by fire and ice, a technique similarly used by his two pupils. Sora was overwhelmed by the fire and wind and ice.

"Sora," Riku cried, fearing for his friend. But as he observed, he realized that Sora was not at all hindered. In fact he was not at all wavered. The wind, the intense flames, and the frozen chill had no effects on his body. Despite the devastation that happened around him, Sora was unmolested as if he were taking a leisurely stroll in the park. He looked at himself, seeing the elements just bounce off of him.

"Wow..." the young key bearer uttered. Riku was amazed.

"So the Orb does work." He said.

"Excellent..." Thundro chuckled in his mind. "The orb has fully integrated into Sora's body."

"Well, Thundro," Sora chuckled. "It looks like you can't use elemental attacks against us anymore."

"We've gained a strong asset thanks to you." Riku added. The key bearers attacked again. Thundro unleashed a barrage of fire at both key bearers, but again no effect occurred and the youths were not halted in their advance. "Let's see if you like a bit of the same!"

"Flaming Funnel," Sora shouted. He and Riku deployed their combination attack and the column of fire engulfed the Imperial. But to their surprise, Thundro was unharmed.

"You'll have to do better than that." He declared.

"No way, he has the Immunity Orb too?"-

"Who do you think forged the idea?"-

"That explains it then." Riku said. Both sides stood upon the charred ground fifty yards or more away from each other.

"So I guess elementals don't work on either of us." Sora declared. "I guess in this case, it's strictly hand to hand combat with out keyblades.

"Not necessarily," Thundro chuckled. "I still have a few aces up my sleeve. I think you'll enjoy this little technique!" Thundro then raised Laevateinn as if he were ready to strike his opponents. The key bearers were confused.

"What the heck is he doing?" Riku wondered.

"Is he trying to strike at us all the way from there?" Sora added.

But rate reared its ugly head as suddenly, the keyblade suddenly spiraled upward into a chain of keyblades, securely linked to one another.

"Laevateinn Transformation number one," Thundro shouted, "Keyblade Whip!"

He lashed his weapon towards the key bearers. The tip of this new weapon reached all the way to the key bearers. Riku and Sora were still shocked at what they saw. Only at the last moment did they evade. The tip of the whip cut through the ground where they were previously standing. The moment the crack was emitted, the lash was retracted and once again regressed into one keyblade.

"What the heck was that?" Sora was all astounded. "I've never seen a keyblade do that."

"What kind of keyblade is it?" Riku asked.

"That was the first transformation of Laevateinn." Thundro declared. "It's called the Keyblade Whip."

"But how can that be?" Sora said. "How can a keyblade transform like that?"

"It just goes to show you that these two are the prototypes of the keyblades that followed. These

keyblades, unlike most, contain incredible power. Power matched to the gods they were wielded by. Loki was the Great Trickster God as well as shape shifter, which meant he could transform himself into anything he desired. If that was true for Loki, why not do it to the keyblade as well?"-

"Incredible..."-

"And with Laevateinn, with the help of Mjollnir, I will assure your destruction!" Thundro then raised Mjollnir above his head. "Now let us continue!"

An electric surge accumulated upon the head of Mjollnir, causing the foundations of land to shake.

"That light," Sora said in awe, "What is that?"

"It's an electrical surge." Riku replied. "But I wouldn't worry. We have the Immunity Orb in our favor. That electricity can't hurt us."

"Sound your roar, mighty hammer of justice!" Thundro cried. He pounded the keyblade upon the ground and the high voltage mass surged towards the duo with a booming rumble, shattering the soil in its path.

"I've been known to be wrong sometimes though." Riku was having second thoughts. At the last minute, the youths dodged the attack, but it was too late, the surge erupted, exploding in a scattering and sonic boom which blew them away. They tumbled upon the ground with debris falling upon their heads.

"This can't be." Sora uttered. "I thought we could withstand any kind of elemental attack."

"You can withstand any elemental attack." Thundro replied. "But Mjollnir is another story. Since it was forged to eradicate an enemy with one mighty blow, no force can withstand its power. The only way to truly withstand the blow directly would be if you had power equal to that of a god. But to achieve that, you would have had to endure another three weeks amplified a thousand fold in regimen, and extended a thousand fold in length."

"But that's a lifetime and a deathtrap."-

"I said the Immunity Orb will help repel elemental attacks. I never said it was perfect." Thundro charged again. "Now that you know the advantages of these keyblades, you will meet your end." He grappled with the key bearers, using the now revealed tactics of the Laevateinn and Mjollnir. The lush grounds and beautiful scene of nature was suddenly transformed into an area of destruction and devastation as trees were uprooted and rocks were rattled loose from their foundations. The roar of Mjollnir and the sudden strike of Laevateinn's keyblade whip again forced Riku and Sora to go on the offensive.

"This is ridiculous." Sora grumbled. "How the heck are we supposed to contend with those kinds of keyblades?"

"He has to have a weakness somewhere." Riku said. They dodged and evaded at the same time conversing on their plan. "Those keyblades are designed for more of a long range combat. They keep us at a fair distance. If we can somehow get through..." Then Riku snapped his fingers. "I got it. We'll use our evasion technique."

"But Riku, that didn't work the last time we used it on him."-

"It won't have to. We just have to..." He whispered silently into Sora's ear.

"You boys can secretly prattle all you want, but there is no strategy you can use that'll break my defense." Thundro declared.

"That's what you think!" Riku suddenly unleashed a swirling twister towards Thundro was unaffected by the wind.

"You already know that that won't work on me." But as the debris cleared, he realized that the key bearers were no longer around. He looked through the corners of his eyes. The key bearers were nowhere to be found. Thundro smiled, "A shinobi tactic, eh? They've learned well not to attack head on." Just then, there came a sudden flash of light, Sora's Corona Flash Barrage. Then, appearing through the light emerged Riku's Darkness Decoys, one after another. They charged, head on against the Imperial.

"It's over for you!" Riku shouted.

"Clever, boys," Thundro said. He then slashed through the ranks of the incoming decoys, diminishing them. "But not clever enough."

"I got you now!" Riku shouted as he charged head on.

"Big mistake," Thundro lashed forth the keyblade whip. Riku quickly eluded. He threw himself out of the way within inches.

"Do it, Sora!" Riku shouted.

"You're mine!" Sora roared, charging from the extreme right flank. Thundro saw him coming at the last minute.

"Not a bad strategy." Thundro chuckled. "You caught me off guard." The Imperial suddenly used Mjollnir in Sora's direction. "But your timing was just a little too early." The surged rushed against Sora. But the key bearer evaded.

"I don't think so! That electrical surge may be powerful, but it can only travel in a straight line!"-

"You shouldn't presume." Thundro then twisted his keyblade about and slashed in an upward, side-sweeping motion. A powerful energy wave streaked through the air, catching Sora off guard. The young key bearer was struck and screamed out as the electricity of the gods gripped his body.

"Sora," Riku cried.

"It's over for you Sora." Thundro chuckled.

"So says you." A voice uttered. Directly from behind, Sora emerged and made ready to deliver the final blow. Thundro was caught completely off guard. He turned to see Sora's keyblade aiming between his eyes.

"Impossible," Thundro thought. He suddenly vanished from sight. Sora growled as his keyblade struck the charred dirt instead.

"Man, I almost had him."-

"Damn, that strategy nearly worked." Riku said. Thundro appeared again. He was all astounded as he saw two Soras before him, the one falling to the ground, struck by the surge, and the other that attacked from behind. Thundro sensed the inner core of the beings. He then smiled.

"That was incredible." He said. "You nearly had me in a spot. It seems, Riku, that you have developed your Darkness Decoys even more. Now, not only can you allow your clones to endure longer, but you have also developed the technique in which you can forge the likenesses of your comrades also, very well done indeed." Thundro lowered his keyblades. "However, such a façade is not enough to deceive me. If there's one thing that no Darkness Decoy or clone, at any sort or level, can assimilate, is a life force signature, which has a distinct energy source. So if you were to use that technique again, I would know exactly which one of you is the real thing. To add, now that you have used that tactic, I will be expecting similar ones, so that won't work on me a second time."

"Damn it, so close and yet so far."-

"But then again, I won't let you have your way now will I." Thundro drew up Mjollnir and prepared to face Sora. "I will end this! Here and now!" He swung Mjollnir at the youth. Sora prepared to evade as he saw the keyblade's head glow with another electrical surge. Thundro swung, but instead of the electricity bellowing out, there was a sudden sonic boom. The key bearer drew up his keyblade, using it as a shield, to ward off the sound wave. The impact caused Sora to stagger and fall to his knees. Then as it seemed over, something like a chain suddenly gagged him as it wrapped around his neck. Sora looked to see that the keychain at the end of the Mjollnir's hilt had extended.

"What the...?" he uttered.

"Mjollnir grappling chain..." Thundro chuckled. He then yanked the chain and Sora went flying, gagging as he was pulled.

"Sora," Riku cried. Once in Thundro's hands, the Imperial tide Sora's hands behind him then pulled

him up by the chain. Sora staggered in such dramatic fashion, looked helpless yet determined in a bondage pose.

“What do you intend to do now?” Thundro asked.

“How did you do that?” Riku asked.

“The sonic boom was a diversionary tactic. Using the grappling chain was my true objective.”-

“Thundro you...”-

“And now with Sora in my hands, you have no other choice, but to do as I please. Otherwise, I will make him suffer.”-

“Riku...” Sora cried as he was strangled by the chains around his throat.

“Drop your keyblade...”-

Riku hesitated. He didn't want Sora to get hurt. But if he diminished his keyblade, he'd be opened for attack.

“I...” He uttered.

“I said drop your keyblade,” Thundro roared. “Or I will cause ten thousand volts to surge through the grappling chain and roast Sora to a crisp.”

“Riku,” Sora cried, “Don't do it! Don't worry about me!”

“But Sora,” Riku said. He was still hesitant.

“I am not like your old foe, Xemnas.” Thundro declared. “I know that you two hate to see the sight of the other suffering in such torment, and will do anything to see that the other is unhindered. Well, in this case, I could care less about how you feel. And right now, if you don't lower your keyblade, Riku, I will kill Sora.”

“Forget about me, Riku.” Sora shouted, “Don't give up!”

“You have five seconds to drop that keyblade!”-

“Don't do it, Riku!”-

“Five...four...”-

“Don't give in...!”-

“Three...two...!”-

“Very well, Thundro.” Riku shouted.

“That's better...” But to Thundro's surprise, Riku didn't lower his keyblade. Instead, he formed his stance to perform Kenshin Himura's devastating attack, the Kuzu Ryu Sen. “What are you doing?”

“If you kill Sora, then there will be nobody left, you can hide behind, that'll stop me from taking your head.”-

“That may be true, but your friend will be dead! I will have accomplished what I so desire.”-

“That may be so, but Sora's ready to throw his own life away and I will not let him die in vain.”-

There was a pause. Then, the Imperial smiled.

“That's exactly what I was expecting from you two.” Thundro eased his grip and undid the chains that bound Sora. He backed away.

“What are you doing?” Sora asked. Riku ran to Sora.

“Are you alright, Sora?”-

“Yeah, but...”-

“The battle is concluded.” Thundro replied.

“You mean...?” Riku was confused. “You mean the fight is over?”

“If this had been a real confrontation, Sora would have already been dead and either you or I would have met the same fate, Riku, that or both of us.”-

“But you said,”-

“That this was a fight to the finish? I did say that, but it was all metaphorical. The reality was that I had to see how you would have favored in the situation I provided for you. And though your friendship is strong,

you were willing to sacrifice your own lives to assure the success of your cause. That is true dedication. Besides, had I a true tendency to kill you, you would have been dead from the start.” Thundro turned around. He then raised his keyblades before him. “Boys, raise your vacant hands.”

Riku and Sora did as their instructor commanded and raised their vacant hand.

“Let the keyblades choose who will wield them.” Then, from Thundro’s hands, Laevateinn and Mjollnir vanished from sight.

Then, the keyblades appeared in the hands of the youths, who were shocked by the development. Sora had gained the power of Mjollnir, the mighty hammer of justice. And Riku obtained the power of Laevateinn, the mystic power of Loki.

“Now you have gained items just as powerful as the Immunity Orbs. Sora, you now wield the power of Mjollnir. That keyblade will thus enhance your fighting strength and your use of magic and summoning spells, giving them more effect. Mjollnir also has the ability to defeat an opponent with one hit, using the finishing move as I have deployed in our duel. Riku, the power of Laevateinn will also increase your use of summoning and elemental spells. Now its striking power is not as powerful as Mjollnir’s, but it takes three different shapes. The keyblade whip is one of them. Then there is the Chaos in which it transforms into a larger blade that can defeat a company of enemies in one strike. Finally, there is the Twilight in which the blade becomes double-sided like a bow, in case you find yourself in one of those tight predicaments. Let these weapons serve your well.”-

“But...” Sora uttered. Both he and Riku were still stunned by receiving such a generous gift.

“You’re giving them to us...?” Riku asked.

“These keyblades have been by my side since the day they were given to me. But I do not believe they should be wielded in the hands of a man who has caused so much death and destruction as a former loyalist and lord of the Dark Empire. Perhaps it was my strong heart and soul that allowed them to stick by me. But I dared not use them in battle and soil their precious forms for a cause that bore only the desire to dominate. Thus, I pass the power of the very first keyblades on to you who are worthier to wield them.”-

“But why...” Sora wondered. “I mean you can still wield them in a great cause! Why don’t you fight alongside us?”

“That is something I cannot do.” Thundro turned away. “I loved the Dark Empire with all my heart, but I detested the methods they used. For a time up ‘til now, I even raised my sword against my old comrades and took their lives for the sake of a cause and an organization I had always thought countered my own beliefs. Thus, I have betrayed both sides. Just as now, I have trained one set of students to assure the death of the other. I am to blame for the suffering of both sides and I regret that very much. Ergo, I will remain in seclusion.”

“Thundro...” Riku said.

“Oh yes, and one more thing before you go, boys.”-

“What’s that?” Sora asked.

“Don’t start to think that because you have obtained the immunity orb that you’re invincible. I must first tell you of some of its significant drawbacks.”-

“What are they?”-

“First of all, the Immunity Orbs’ strength is not absolute. As you know, the orb cannot protect against any physical attacks by a bodily limb, a weapon, or even an energy wave, which of course is pure energy. But here is the second drawback. Elemental attacks are one thing, but natural atmospheres are another story. Since the Immunity Orb finds no real threat in natural surroundings, its energy will not be deployed to protect you. That means if you are somehow tossed into magma, or into water, you will drown and burn.” The key bearers were stunned.

“But I thought the Immunity Orb could fend off any element.”-

"It depends on any element not in its natural state, like a manipulated element. But if there is no manipulative energy behind the element, then the power of the orb will remain dormant."

"Damn it,"

"As I said, the Immunity Orb is not perfect." The Imperial paused for a moment, "And finally, the last drawback. Though it is able to withstand elemental attacks from without, it cannot protect you from within. In other words, it is most likely that Saber has the ability to manipulate the darkness within the minds and hearts of people, turning them in his favor. So if you have to use something to boost your abilities, refrain from using any elements that obtain negative energy, like your Rage and Saiyan Devotion, Sora, or the dark element within your heart, Riku. If you unleash those, you have created a link that will allow Saber to take hold of your minds and bodies. That is the one great weakness to the orb's power. It is to fend off exterior threats. But threats from within are another matter. The only way for Saber to break the orb's defense is if you allow him to." For a moment, the key bearers were rather edgy. "There's a reason that the orb has such weaknesses and that is the one universal reason."

"What's that?"

"It is so that no one person can become absolutely powerful and use it to gain their own desires."

"I see." Riku said. "We understand then."

"Then you must go now and help your friends. They need you." There was silence between the three before Riku made his own vow.

"Then I vow this to you, Thundro." He held up his new keyblade. "We will use these keyblades in the name of the cause to which you truly fought for."

"My cause...?"

"For peace..." Thundro saw all astounded. He could only smile and nod. Riku diminished the keyblades in his hands and drew up his right hand. They shook hands hardily. Sora did the same.

"Thank you for all you've done for us." Sora said.

"It has been an honor to be your instructor." Thundro replied.

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

"Back to Traverse Town," Sora added. Riku took out the gummi capsule and unleashed their ship. Both key bearers entered the vessel. The rockets rumbled and the ship lifted off. The youths gave a salute to the Imperial below. The gummi thus vanished into the horizon.

Thundro watched as the ship blinked out into the blue.

"Farewell boys..." he uttered. His eyes seemed rather blurred and a snuffle tickled his nose. A weight upon his chest seemed to slow his reaction. "I must be coming down with something." Thundro withdrew back to his quarters

But no sooner had he reached his room, there was a transmitted message that awaited his reply.

Curious, Thundro accepted the transmission. He read the context and gave a sigh.

"So the team has left Traverse Town have they?" He said to himself. "What incompetence. A message from yesterday has only now arrived." He deleted the message and gave no second thought to what he had received.