

Kingdom Hearts: Requiem of the Heart

By Azeroch

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This is the novel version of my comic that I'm working on. Some of you may have seen the comic cover.

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1 - A Disturbing Find

The air stiffened in the dark, abandoned lot. Suddenly a breeze picked up. In the middle of the lot, a yellow circle of light appeared. Air swirled around the circle until a small tornado formed. It stopped as suddenly as it had started. In its place stood a girl in her late teens. She had long crimson hair and bright blue eyes, though they seemed darkened. She wore a white sleeveless vest and short denim shorts. She took one step out of her arrival zone and immediately dark shapes began to form around her. She quickly looked from one shape to the next. The shapes began to form into bodies. They were short and stocky, and the only other color on them came from their eyes, which were a bright yellow. They had perfectly cylindrical heads with jagged antennae. They rose out of the ground and began to wobble back and forth. The girl's eyes narrowed.

"Shadows..." she muttered. Suddenly a light erupted from her hand. It shone for a second and was replaced by a gigantic key. It had the shape of a flowery heart near the base while the blades twirled up the neck to end in twin hearts. The keychain at the end was that of a flower. It was a Keyblade. The Shadows cocked their heads in interest. The girl stood motionless for a moment before launching her attack. She swiftly sliced one Shadow in half and had already started on the next before it had even hit the ground. A group of three launched into the air. The girl glowed yellow and suddenly rocketed at the Shadows. She dealt them a swift chain of blows and the rest retreated into the ground. The girl landed swiftly on the ground and stood slowly. Suddenly the sound of clapping rang out in the lot. The girl's head snapped towards the direction of the sound. A tall young man with silvery blue hair and a long black trenchcoat stood leaning against one of the support beams.

"Very impressive, Kairi," the man said. Kairi blinked at the man.

"Riku?" she whispered. Riku chuckled. He stood upright and stretched his hand out. A bat wing-like sword appeared in his hand.

"Riku, what are you doing?" Kairi demanded. Riku suddenly grinned insanely. He launched himself at Kairi and she had barely enough time to react. She brought her Keyblade into a defensive position just as Riku slammed his sword into hers. Sparks and flashes of energy burst from their blades. Kairi backflipped and raised her Keyblade.

"You're not Riku...I can see it in your eyes..." she said. The Riku clone laughed insanely. Kairi charged the clone but was knocked back by a protective barrier. The Riku clone leaped into the air and brought his blade down. It slammed into the ground mere inches from Kairi's face. The clone pressed its face right up to Kairi's, still slightly giggling. Kairi growled and kicked away from the clone. Once up, she exhaled slowly and suddenly glowed blue. She reared back and hurled her Keyblade at the clone. It dodged the first attack but was caught off guard by her sudden second throw. It was knocked off balance and Kairi lunged at it as she retrieved her Keyblade. The blade sliced cleanly through the clone's midsection and it dematerialized in front of her face. Her Keyblade disappeared and she strode off into the rainy streets of Midgar.

2 - The Barriers Fall

As Kairi traveled the rain-soaked streets of the gigantic city, she watched as several people hurried underneath shabby tents and broken down buildings. She glanced upwards, towards the richly adorned homes and buildings of the upper level of the double-decker city. She noticed a sign as she passed, reading "Sector 7: Slums".

Slums doesn't do it justice...it's more like a warzone, Kairi thought. She suddenly stopped in front of a church. "This must be the place Squall told me about," she said aloud. Kairi stepped inside and looked around. The church was shabby, like most of the buildings in the area, though it was surprisingly well-kept. There was a shattered window in the roof, and rain fell through the hole into a small puddle on the floor. There were rows of pews leading to a small circular staircase near the back. Several of the pews were broken. At the top of the staircase were two people. One was wearing a purple sleeveless turtleneck with a shoulder plate and baggy black pants. The other was dressed in a short red coat and pink dress. The man in purple had blonde spiky hair and the woman in red had long, brown hair tied in a braid.

"Cloud Strife?" Kairi called. Cloud's head jerked in her direction. The woman also looked at Kairi curiously.

"You look familiar," the woman said. Kairi nodded.

"It's me, Kairi," she said. The woman suddenly smiled broadly.

"Kairi! Look at you! So grown up!"

"I'm seventeen now, Aeris."

Cloud looked from Aeris to Kairi and back. "Aeris...do you know her?"

"I'm a friend of Sora's. Do you remember him?" Kairi asked before Aeris could answer. Cloud's eyes narrowed.

"The punk that beat me three times at the Coliseum? Yeah, I remember him."

Kairi took a couple steps forward. "Do you know where he is?"

Cloud flipped his hair out of his face. "No clue."

"Kairi, how did you get here?" Aeris asked.

"You know how Beast willed himself to Hollow Bastion? I did the same thing."

Aeris nodded. Cloud strode toward Kairi. "So if you are a friend of that punk Sora...do you have a weapon like his?" Kairi nodded and stretched out her hand. Her keyblade appeared in it. Cloud narrowed his eyes again and turned away.

"So could you beat me as well?" he asked. Kairi thought for a moment.

"Yes."

Cloud looked at her and suddenly his eyes shifted behind her. They grew wide for a moment and he suddenly jumped back, reaching for his sword. Kairi spun around.

Five Shadows, two Darkballs, and an Invisible appeared.

Darkballs were large, round, black floating monsters that were formed out of pure darkness. The Invisible was an intimidating sight. It was a very large, almost humanoid creature with a gigantic blue sword and jagged black wings.

"The barrier has fallen!" Kairi cried. Suddenly the creatures vanished into thin air, leaving no trace of their existence.

Behind them stood a figure draped in a black raincoat clutching the Oblivion Keyblade. Kairi's eyes grew wide.

“Sora?”

“Sora!? That punk!?” exclaimed Cloud from behind Kairi. Sora suddenly grinned malevolently and leapt from rafter to rafter out the church.

“Sora!” Kairi cried.

“It will do no use. That wasn’t the real Sora,” said a voice behind Kairi. She turned and gasped. Sora was standing right behind her.

3 - Off to the Next World

He was dressed in a pitch black shirt adorned with several chains and zippers. His pants were extremely baggy and were also riddled with chains and zippers. On his neck was a leather band.

"Sora?" Kairi asked timidly. Sora smiled, but it wasn't his usual warm smile. It seemed, somehow, cold and ruined with age.

"It is good to see you again, Kairi. I have missed you very much," Sora replied. Kairi seemed on the verge of tears when she rushed forward and tightly embraced Sora. He was taken aback by the sudden gesture and it took a few moments before he awkwardly patted Kairi on the back. She withdrew and wiped a tear from her eye. Sora stretched out his hand and the Oathkeeper appeared in it.

"What - ?" Kairi began. Sora looked the Keyblade over and gave it back to Kairi.

"Very good," he said. "I had a feeling you'd be the next Keyblade Master."

"What do you mean?" Kairi asked. "You knew I'd be the next Keyblade Master? How?"

"Well, I had no way to know for sure...but...I just had a feeling."

Kairi stared at Sora for a moment. He was smiling, but she didn't feel any better looking at him. It was almost as if he had had all his life and youthful energy sucked out of him. It made Kairi uncomfortable. Sora nodded and turned to leave. "I must find and defeat the Others - " he began.

"Others?" Kairi asked.

"Replicas of every person that was present when Kingdom Hearts was unleashed. I believe you already defeated Riku's?"

Kairi swallowed and nodded. Sora nodded back. "Good," he said.

"What I am supposed to do, then?" Kairi asked. Sora looked darkly at her.

"You must seal the Keyholes of the Fantasy worlds...and shut the door to Kingdom Hearts once more."

Kairi exhaled slowly. She nodded.

"I'm sure Cloud and Squall would be more than happy to assist you," Sora continued. "In each Fantasy world, you will encounter people that know me. Tell them I sent you and they will point you in the right direction."

"How will I find them?" Kairi asked.

"Don't worry...they'll find you," Sora said. And with that, he strode out without so much as a wave goodbye. Kairi watched him go with slowly tearing eyes. She slumped into a nearby pew and almost began sobbing until she heard a groan behind her. She turned and saw Cloud and Aeris standing, rubbing various parts of their bodies.

"That was wild..." Cloud mumbled. Kairi stared.

"Last thing I remember is Kairi yelling something and then I saw nothing but blackness..." Aeris said. Kairi relayed her and Sora's conversation to them. When she finished, Cloud looked at her for a long time until he finally said, "I'm going with you."

Kairi looked at him. "You are?" she asked. Cloud nodded.

"If the kid wants me to go, then I'll go. I gotta respect anybody who can beat me three times."

Kairi nodded. "Then let's go," she said. Cloud and Kairi left Midgar and traveled for a week across the world to Rocket Town. When they arrived, they found Cid tinkering on his gummi ship.

"Hey Cid," Cloud said. Cid poked his head out from underneath the gummi ship.

"Well, well, if it ain't Cloud...And who is this fine young thing, Cloud?" Cid asked.

"It's me, Kairi," she said. Cid grinned broadly.

"Well then, Kairi! I hardly recognized you! You look about twenty years old!"

“Close. Seventeen,” Kairi replied, grinning.

“Cid, we need this ship,” Cloud said. Cid’s smile disappeared.

“The Heartless?”

Kairi nodded. “They’re back.”

Cid turned to the ship. “She’s got everything you’ll need. The best armor, the best weapons, and the best engine. Where’re you heading?”

“To see Squ...er...Leon,” Kairi said. Cid dipped his head and allowed Kairi and Cloud. Kairi waved at Cid from the window of the cockpit and the gummi ship blasted off.

4 - Of Squall and Leon

Kairi stepped out of the ship into the blinding afternoon sun. Cloud had parked the gummi ship near the woods that bordered the Balamb Gardens. A short hike found them at the gates of the gigantic military academy. Cloud scratched his head.

“Fancy place Leon lives in, eh?”

Kairi shook her head and smiled. They proceeded through the main gate and up the steps leading to the commons area. Students made their way through the various hallways, not giving the strange duo a second thought. Kairi quickly made her way around to the farthest end of the commons area, which held a hallway leading to the dormitories. Kairi found Squall’s room, Cloud in tow, and opened the door. Squall sat on his bunk, polishing his Gunblade.

“I figured you’d be back,” he said.

“I’m flattered that you have so much faith in me, Squall,” Kairi replied, grinning.

“Who’s Squall?” Cloud asked.

“I am,” Squall said, standing.

“You told me your name was Leon,” Cloud said, narrowing his eyes. Squall shrugged.

“I was being pursued by the Heartless. What were my other choices?”

Cloud huffed and leaned against a wall. Kairi shook her head smiling and turned to Squall. “We need your help,” she said.

Squall hefted his Gunblade onto his shoulder. “Did you meet Sora in Midgar?” Squall said.

Kairi opened her mouth and nodded. “How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Squall said, shrugging. Kairi eyed Squall suspiciously but nodded, and turned to leave.

“I guess this makes us the new Trinity,” Squall said. Cloud looked at him. Kairi thought for a moment.

“Yeah...it does,” she said, smiling. Suddenly her Keyblade appeared in her hand. It glowed blue and escaped her grasp to hang in midair. It spun for a moment, then returned to Kairi’s hand.

“The new Trinity...I like that,” Kairi said, staring at her blade.

* * * *

The sky parted as the gummi ship came in to land. Cloud steered the craft onto a large grassy plain and settled it down about a half an hour’s walk from the gates of Midgar.

“So, we need to find the Keyhole for Fantasy World Seven?” Squall asked. Kairi nodded. “What makes you think it’s in Midgar? Isn’t that a little obvious?”

“Too obvious. They’re expecting us to overlook it,” Cloud said. Squall narrowed his eyes but said nothing. The trio climbed out of the gummi ship and walked to Midgar. When they got a little ways in, they noticed something strange.

“Notice those signs? They say ‘Hail to the Black Army, long live Lord Barabas.’ What do you suppose that means?” Kairi asked.

“I don’t know...” Squall replied.

“You got me, but they’re everywhere,” Cloud said.

Suddenly a hand rested on Kairi’s shoulder. She started to turn but a familiar voice said, “Stop. Don’t turn. Just listen. Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Just do it!”

Kairi obliged, and suddenly, she felt as if her stomach dropped at a fast rate. She tried to open her eyes, but they wouldn't. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. Then, as fast as it had happened, it stopped. Kairi's eyes flew open and she gasped. Quickly spinning around, she faced the mysterious person. The young man had medium-length brown hair styled similar to Squall's. He wore a long black trenchcoat adorned with several chains and necklaces. Around his neck was a leather band, and attached to the band was a thin fishnet shirt. His pants had several areas where they could be zipped off, and he had about seven chains on each side.

"Who are you?" Kairi demanded. The young man smiled.

"You don't recognize me?"

Kairi studied the man closer. Suddenly, she realized...

"Sora...?"

Sora nodded. Kairi stared open-mouthed, unable to speak or move. She simply made a series of high-pitched squeaks. Sora waited until she could speak.

"Why...?"

"Because I am a wanted man. You've seen the signs, I'm sure, promoting the Black Army and Lord Barabas?"

Kairi nodded blankly.

"The Black Army refers to the Heartless. Barabas now controls them. I tried to break into his castle, but they found me. I managed to escape, but not before they could identify me. I had to change my whole appearance. I also gave myself a new name."

"And it is?"

"Leon." Sora smiled.

Kairi managed a weak smile.

"So whenever you speak to me in public, refer to me as Leon. Squall already knows about this, but Cloud doesn't. You'll tell him for me, won't you?"

Kairi nodded. Suddenly, unable to contain herself, she rushed forward and embraced Sora.

"I've missed you so much," she said. Sora returned her embrace, and whispered,

"I've missed you as well."

5 - The Keyhole of Fantasy World Seven

Kairi and Sora returned from the void. Cloud and Squall were waiting for them.

“There you are! Wait, who’s he?” Cloud said, looking Sora over.

“This is Sor...er...Leon,” Kairi said. Cloud sighed.

“How many people in this universe are named Leon?”

“It is good to see you again, Leon,” Squall said, extending a hand. Sora shook it, smiling.

Cloud gasped. “Oh, my god. You’re that kid! You’re - ?”

“Don’t!” Kairi said loudly. Cloud looked at her, puzzled. Kairi simply shook her head. “His name is Leon,” she said with emphasis. Cloud took the hint, and nodded.

“Leon...right...?”

“I assume you’re all heading for the you-know-what?” Sora said. Squall nodded. Sora nodded back and turned to leave.

“Where are you going now!?” Kairi cried.

“This is where I leave you to your own devices. Remember, I have a mission as well. I will see you again, don’t worry.” He stopped, then suddenly turned back around and embraced Kairi.

“Remember what you said before?” he whispered. “I’m always with you too. I’ll come back to you...”

“I promise.”

* * * *

The trio made their way down the abandoned street. Up ahead of them was a gigantic circular structure, the main support of Midgar.

“So you think it’s in that?” Squall asked.

Cloud nodded. “I’m positive.”

“But you don’t have any proof,” Kairi said.

Cloud shook his head. “That’s a given. War is always a guessing game. The only certainties in war are death and a common enemy.”

“You’re so optimistic, Cloud,” Kairi said in a fake tone of adoration. Cloud rolled his eyes and flipped his hair back. They approached a door set in the side of the structure. Cloud opened it and, unsheathing his blade, jumped in.

Nothing happened. The room was empty. There were several metal grate catwalks lining the side of the room, and there was an enormous clearing in the middle with a few boxes scattered about. In the center of the clearing was a metal pole glowing blue. Squall and Kairi followed Cloud, both drawing their weapons.

Cloud pointed to the pole. “That’s the main support for the city. It’s made from the strongest steel known to man. I’m pretty sure that’s where the keyhole is.”

“What makes you think that?” Squall asked.

“It’s so obvious, it’s gotta be the place,” Cloud reasoned. Squall snorted.

As Kairi approached the pole, her keyblade began to shake. It glowed yellow first, but suddenly changed to a dark red.

“What the...?” Kairi gasped.

“That’s a no-no, Keyblade Wielder,” said a voice from the shadows. A man stepped from a dark corner of the room, high above on the catwalks. He was dark skinned, and his hair was in corn rows, pulled

back across his skull and secured in the back with a headband set low on his head. He had a blood red, pointy goatee that stuck out from his chin a ways. He was shirtless, but two strips of fur cuffed the tops of his shoulders. His belt buckle bore the Heartless symbol, as did a tattoo on his left shoulder. He wore simple tan baggy pants and heavy combat boots.

"My name is Barabas. You might have heard of me. I rule these worlds, and I command the Black Army."

"You're Barabas? You control the Heartless now? But...but how?" Kairi asked.

"It is...a gift. A special talent, one might say," Barabas replied.

"Did you know Ansem?" Squall asked.

Barabas stroked his goatee. "Not personally. I was a guard at his castle. One of the best, if I do say so myself."

"What happened to you after the Heartless took over Hollow Bastion?" Cloud asked.

Barabas grinned. "Quite an amazing story, actually. I fell unconscious, and when I awoke, I was in a completely different world. The locals told me I was in Fantasy World Seven, this world. Of course, I had no idea what that meant. I was just happy to be alive after the massive battle with the Heartless. Well, it wasn't so much a battle as a massacre. We were decimated. I assumed I was the only one left alive. So I lived in Fantasy World Seven for a few years before I learned that other worlds existed besides the one I was on. Well, that sparked my interest, to say the least. I decided to embark on a quest to find these new worlds, so I bought a gummi ship with all the gil I had and set off. It wasn't long before I encountered all the other Fantasy Worlds. Then I encountered the Heartless. And it was at that time that I learned of my power to control them. I led them to a secret cave I had found. I kept them in captivity, bred them, grew them. Soon, I had a veritable army of darkness. And then, I began my conquest."

"And it worked, evidently," Kairi said.

Barabas chuckled. "My, we have a bright one on our hands. Yes, it did work. And now, I am the supreme ruler of Fantasy World Seven, and soon, all the other Fantasy Worlds as well. And I cannot allow you to challenge my accomplishments. The Keyhole remains unlocked."

"The hell it does!" Kairi yelled. She lunged at Barabas, but a large tremor stopped her. A gigantic armored monstrosity broke through the wall and roared.

"Meet my new and improved Guard Armor. Have fun, kids." And with that, he disappeared.

"I hate upgrades," Squall growled. He aimed his Gunblade at the Guard Armor's head and fired one shot. The bullet struck an invisible barrier and ricocheted off of it. "Yeah, I really hate upgrades..."

Kairi launched herself at the Guard Armor and began to strike at it with her keyblade. The barrier became weaker with every strike, but it held. The Guard Armor reared back its head and brought a gigantic fist down into the ground. The floor shook violently. Kairi steadied herself and attacked the Guard Armor again. Cloud made his way to the top of the catwalks and jumped on top of the Guard Armor, driving his sword deep into the monster's body. The monster cried out in agony and attempted to fling Cloud from its back. Squall directed a constant barrage of gunfire at the Guard Armor. Kairi managed to break off one of its arms, causing it to explode in a flash of blue light.

Suddenly a figure dropped from the ceiling. It sliced downward at the Guard Armor, and nothing happened for a few seconds, but suddenly a line in the Guard Armor glowed blue, and then it exploded in a large flash of blue light. The figure turned its head ever so slightly and smiled.

Kairi gasped. "He has a keyblade!"

True enough, the figure held a keyblade. It was unlike any keyblade Kairi had ever seen, though. It was black, with a very sharp, jagged hilt. Jewels were set into the hilt every few inches, and the blade was wavy. The keychain was the figure of a double-door.

"Who are you?" Kairi asked. "That isn't you, is it Sora?"

"No, I am not Sora," the man said in a deep, faraway voice. The man wore a helmet with a dark visor.

Only the bottom half of his face could be seen. He wore metal armor, but it was armor unlike anything Kairi had ever seen. It looked...futuristic. His entire body was covered in the futuristic armor, except for his boots, which were tall leather boots with straps. Long, flowing, silver-blue hair protruded from the back of his helmet.

"Then who are you?" Kairi insisted.

The man looked at the ground. "People call me Apollo."

"The god of light?" Squall said, disbelievingly. Apollo looked at Squall, but said nothing.

"But that's just what people call you. What is your real name?"

Apollo looked away. "I can't tell you."

Kairi folded her arms and huffed. "Fine. Thank you for the help, Apollo."

"Let me come with you," Apollo said suddenly. Kairi looked at him.

"Why? We don't even know your real name."

"I am a friend of Sora's."

Kairi's mouth dropped. "He never told me about you."

"Well, that's Sora for you," Apollo said, smiling. Kairi stared at Apollo. Could she trust him? He knew Sora, but...could he be lying? Was he really an officer working for Barabas? Was the Guard Armor just a decoy?

"Don't do it, Kairi," Cloud warned. "We don't know enough about this guy."

"You can trust me. As you know, Apollo is not my real name. That is because Barabas is after me, as well. I assisted Sora in the invasion of Barabas' castle."

Kairi gasped. Squall did as well. This made both Kairi and Cloud look at Squall inquisitively.

"What is it, Squall?" Cloud asked. Squall shook his head.

"Nothing...it's nothing."

Kairi looked from Squall to Cloud to Apollo. Squall and Apollo were looking right at each other. Cloud looked as clueless as Kairi.

"Well, it looks like you all need new identities," Apollo said. "It won't be long before the Black Army goes on the lookout for you three as well."

"But we have to seal the keyhole and stop Barabas from conquering the other Fantasy Worlds!" Kairi said.

Apollo hung his head. "It is too late for Fantasy Worlds One through Six. They have been consumed by the Heartless."

Kairi stared at Apollo. Already, six worlds had been consumed? Why hadn't Sora told her this?

"So...the only ones left are...Eight, Nine, and Ten?"

"Barabas has succeeded in conquering Eight. He achieved victory moments before you met him. I was on Eight when it happened. There, I reunited with Sora. He told me you were on Seven, so I hurried over to offer my support."

"Eight is...overrun?" Squall said, disbelievingly. Apollo nodded solemnly.

"What happened to SeeD? Balamb Gardens?"

"They are safe. Quistis led them to the mountains."

Squall smiled. "Good old Quistis."

"Yes, she's quite an amazing woman. I believe she could rival that of your mother," Apollo said, looking at Kairi.

"You knew my mother?" Kairi asked.

"I don't believe now is the time to be discussing this," Cloud said. Squall nodded.

"Come, follow me," Apollo said, "I know of a person who could help you with new identities."

* * * * *

“So, you lot are being chased by the Heartless too, huh?” Yuffie said.

Kairi nodded. “Can you help us, Yuffie?”

“Well, sure. Anything for a buddy, eh?” Yuffie said, laughing. “Now, then, what can we do for Kairi, eh? Hmm...well, lookie here! How about my old duds?” Yuffie held up her green turtleneck and arm bracers.

“Okay, but different pants. Short shorts irritate me,” Kairi replied.

“Aw, that’s too bad, you got great legs. You been working out?” Yuffie nudged Kairi and laughed. “Here, how’s these?” She held up a pair of black baggy cargo pants.

“Perfect,” Kairi said.

“Not quite,” Yuffie replied, “we gotta fix your hair.”

“Oh, right...” Kairi said uncertainly. Yuffie chuckled and led Kairi to a chair.

“Just gonna take a little off the top, eh?” Yuffie said, laughing. She pulled a pair of enormous scissors out of a glass. Kairi shut her eyes tight and waited. When Yuffie finally said, “Done!” in an enthusiastic voice, Kairi waited for Cloud, Squall, and Apollo’s verdict.

“Nice, Yuffie,” Cloud said.

“Very sexy,” Squall said, chuckling.

Apollo simply nodded.

Kairi turned in the chair and looked into the mirror. All of her hair was cut mid-neck length except for one clump which Yuffie had tied into a braid. Yuffie handed Kairi a headband.

“This’ll complete the look, hun,” she said when Kairi looked at her quizzically. Kairi tied the headband around her head.

“Say, that’s the same headband you wore, Yuffie,” Cloud said. Yuffie nodded, apparently quite pleased.

“Okay, Kairi change; Cloud, new duds for you!” Yuffie said. Kairi entered the dressing room, and when she came out, Cloud’s hair was cut and slicked forward with spikes in neat rows leaning forward. He entered the dressing room and came out a few moments later with a dark blue turtleneck underneath nylon body armor. His pants were black zip-offs with a set of three chains on the left side. Squall hadn’t gotten a haircut. Instead, Kairi gave him a dark blue beanie with light blue flames on it. He entered the dressing room and came out a few moments later with a long red overcoat that was tattered at the end. His shirt was a plain black t-shirt, and he wore black zip-offs similar to Cloud’s. “You make the dark look work well,” Apollo said, a faint smile tugging at his lips. Cloud huffed and leaned against a wall, folding his arms and looking away.

“Well, good luck to you guys! Have fun, and tell Sora I said hi if you see him,” Yuffie said, showing them the door. The foursome exited Yuffie’s house and made their way back to the streets.

“I told you guys I knew exactly where to go. Yuffie’s the best at that stuff,” Apollo said. Kairi nodded agreement, looking herself over.

“I like your hair, Kairi,” Apollo said. Kairi fingered her braid. She liked her new hair, too. She wondered what Sora would think.

* * * *

The foursome made their way back to the main support. Kairi pointed her keyblade at the central pole and it began to shake. A spectral keyhole appeared and a thin line of blue light shot directly from her keyblade to the keyhole. A loud click emanated and echoed around the metal walls.

“Well, that’s it for Seven,” Apollo said. Kairi nodded and the four turned to leave.

6 - The Keyhole of Fantasy World Eight - Sora

The gummi ship descended once again near the forest located near Balamb Gardens. Kairi, Cloud, and Squall stepped out of the gummi ship and walked the short hike to the Gardens.

“So where do we start?” Cloud asked.

“We have to find Apollo,” Kairi replied. “He said he’d be at the Gardens, so that’s where we’re going.”

“But what if he’s lying? What if he actually works for Barabas?” Cloud said. Squall shook his head.

“He’s not.”

“You said that in quite a sure tone, Squall,” Cloud said suspiciously. Squall shrugged. Cloud huffed and turned away.

Kairi reached the gates of Balamb Gardens and pushed them open. They walked quickly through the main doors and stealthily made their way to the middle of the school, avoiding Heartless patrols where they encountered them. There, they debated where Apollo might be.

“I bet he went to the dorms,” Squall said.

“I think he went somewhere he thought couldn’t attract attention. Somewhere the Heartless wouldn’t think to look.”

“True,” Kairi said. “Squall? Where’s the least likely place to be seen?”

Squall thought about this for a moment, then finally said, “The Training Area.”

True enough, after a short hike through the Training Area, they came upon a small clearing. Apollo stood motionless in the middle.

“Apollo—” Kairi started, but he held up a hand.

“Silence,” he hissed. Suddenly a great creature easily three times the size of Apollo crashed by, and upon spotting the team, attacked. Kairi, Cloud, and Squall jumped to the side, but Apollo simply jumped high into the air and brought his Keyblade down onto the monster. It shook violently before falling over with a loud thud. It twitched twice and then lay motionless.

Squall was in shock. “How did you do that? That’s the strongest monster in here!”

“It is?” Apollo replied, sounding genuinely surprised. He looked back at the monster and shrugged.

“I know where the keyhole for this world is.”

Kairi, Squall and Cloud leaned in closer.

“It’s under this very school.”

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As the foursome made their way back to the elevator, this time having no qualms about openly attacking Heartless patrols. When they reached the elevator and descended to the bottom level, they did not expect to see what they did. Bodies of students and staff members littered the ground. The area was also infested with Shadows.

“What the—!” Squall started, but Apollo covered his mouth.

“These Heartless are still younglings, probably just born from those people’s hearts. If we do not make noise, they will not notice.” Squall nodded and the group quietly and slowly made their way around the nest. When they finally reached the former throne of Garden Master NORG, they saw not NORG, but Kairi! It was a Kairi clone, sitting on NORG’s throne clutching the Oathkeeper Keyblade.

AntiKairi was wearing the same black raincoat Kairi had seen AntiSora wearing. AntiKairi had a smug look on her face. Suddenly a figure emerged from a black and purple swirling vortex at the real Kairi's left side. Sora stepped out of the vortex looking almost furious.

"Sora!" Kairi exclaimed. This noise brought the youngling Heartless upon them. Squall, Cloud, and Apollo charged the Heartless while Sora and Kairi prepared to face AntiKairi.

"Have you killed yourself yet?" Kairi whispered.

"I can't find me. I must be hiding somewhere," Sora replied, a faint smile tugging at his lips. Kairi grinned and the duo launched themselves at AntiKairi. AntiKairi leaped out of her chair and somersaulted in midair to land facing Kairi and Sora's backs. Sora stopped abruptly and backflipped, spinning quickly to face AntiKairi. Kairi kept running up NORG's throne, then kickflipped off the top to land facing AntiKairi once more. AntiKairi smiled and charged them with blistering speed. Kairi and Sora barely had time to react. They both dove to the side as AntiKairi sped past them, stopped abruptly, and turned to face them again.

"This battle isn't very exciting," Sora commented, grinning. Kairi nodded.

"It needs some spice."

"I marvel at how you taunt your own inevitable deaths, if not by me, then by the hand of Lord Barabas," AntiKairi said in a far-off, spectral tone.

"I marvel at how you can go on like a parrot and not say anything of importance," Sora replied.

"Foolish human. Meet your maker!" AntiKairi launched herself at Kairi and Sora a second time, but this time, Sora was ready. He quickly parried her lightning-fast strike and countered, slashing her across the back. She cried out and clutched at her wound. Kairi stared at Sora. How did he move that fast? AntiKairi turned and glared furiously at Sora.

"That," she huffed, "was a mistake."

"Aw, is someone mad that they got a boo-boo?" Sora taunted, smiling. AntiKairi snarled and again charged, this time heading not for Sora, but Kairi, because she knew Kairi was not as quick. Kairi attempted to block the attack, but she felt the pointed, star-like end of the Oathkeeper dig into her stomach. Kairi cried out and fell.

"Kairi!" Sora cried. AntiKairi turned to Sora and grinned malevolently, apparently quite proud of herself. Sora bared his teeth and growled.

"Aw, is someone mad their lover got a boo-boo?" AntiKairi taunted back. Sora looked at Kairi's comatose body.

"I'm sorry Kairi, I did not want to resort to this," Sora said softly. His Keyblade disappeared and his eyes turned stark white. Sora inhaled sharply and crouched. A sharp wind picked up around him, and as he began to scream, as if in pain, he stood straight. Suddenly, a large black wing sprouted from his back in a spurt of blood. Another followed it, and snakelike, black veins began creeping onto the sides of his face. Metallic claws formed over his hands, and finally, when the wind was beginning to die down, horns grew from Sora's head. He had transformed into a Heartless. The symbol of the Heartless shone brightly on his chest for a moment then disappeared. AntiKairi seemed little moved by this spectacle, and resumed her battle stance. Sora simply stood before her, growling with every breath. AntiKairi made the slightest of movements with her foot, and suddenly, Sora was not in front of her, but behind her. Before she knew what hit her, a silver metallic claw protruded from her chest, drenched in blood. Sora quickly moved to face her front, and before she even realized he was in front of her, her face was clutched in one claw while the other quickly jabbed at her chest. Finally, Sora stepped back to let her lifeless body fall to the floor and disappear. Her last words that echoed through the chamber were, "Lord Barabas... I have failed you..." and then all was quiet. Cloud, Squall, and Apollo emerged from the other side of the chamber to find Sora, in his normal appearance, cradling Kairi in his arms.

"Any of you have a potion? Or maybe a hi-potion?" Sora asked.

Apollo dug in his suit and retrieved a hi-potion. He tossed it to Sora, who administered the medicine to Kairi.

“She’ll be fine in about an hour or so. In the meantime, we should keep a watch out for more Heartless,” Sora said.

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Kairi slowly opened one eye, then the other. Sitting next to her, fast asleep, was Cloud. Pacing back and forth near the throne was Squall, but Apollo and Sora were nowhere to be seen. Kairi slowly raised herself up on her elbows. This small action roused Cloud, who looked over to Kairi and stretched.

“Feeling better, kid?” he asked. Squall heard Cloud and strode over to join them.

“Where’s Sora? And Apollo?” Kairi asked. Squall shook his head.

“Gone. We have no idea where Sora is, but Apollo said he’d meet us in Fantasy World Nine. Are you strong enough to seal the Keyhole?”

Kairi nodded and stood. She stretched her aching muscles for a bit and then summoned her Keyblade.

“Where is it?” she asked. Squall pointed to the throne of NORG. Kairi climbed into the gigantic throne and the Keyhole appeared in a thin outline of blue. Kairi sealed the Keyhole and the party departed for Fantasy World Nine.

7 - A Problem at Fantasy World Nine

The gummi ship blasted out of hyperspace and descended towards a large tree situated in the middle of a vast sea of fog.

“I wonder what that is?” Kairi mused. Cloud landed the ship inside the tree, and the party climbed out.

“Glad you made it,” came a voice. Kairi, Cloud, and Squall all swivelled their heads in the direction of the voice to find Apollo emerging from the dense leaves.

“How did you find us?” Kairi asked, bemused.

“Never mind that. Come, we must find the Keyhole before Barabas does.” And with that, Apollo turned and headed back the way he came from.

“Barabas hasn’t taken this world yet?” Cloud asked.

“The local soldiers are fighting...and losing. I assisted them until I came here to meet you, but my help mattered little, I’m afraid.”

“So where is the Keyhole?” Kairi asked.

“Inside the heart of this very tree, the lifa tree,” Apollo replied. He entered a clearing, where several soldiers were hurrying about tending to wounded and dead. A young man with sandy blonde hair and a tail approached Apollo.

“We’re losing men by the thousands. Those...things...are unreal,” the man said.

“Kairi, let me introduce Zidane Tribal, the leader of the forces in the lifa tree.”

Zidane looked from Kairi, to Cloud, to Squall, and back at Apollo.

“New recruits?”

“They’re here on a...special mission. What they are here to do might just drive back the Heartless and blockade them from this world forever,” Apollo replied. Zidane raised his eyebrows, then rushed forward and clasped Kairi’s hand in his own.

“Let me be of service to you, please!” he begged. “I want to be a part of driving back this horde!”

Kairi looked helplessly at Cloud. He shrugged and looked away, muttering, “You’re the ring leader of this whole thing.”

Kairi then turned to Squall, who did the same thing. She looked back and Zidane and smiled weakly.

“Sure...” she said. Zidane smiled broadly and turned to Apollo.

“Apollo, watch the troops. Have them fall back to a defensive position and give those monsters hell. We’ll be back shortly.”

Kairi gave Apollo an incredulous look, then turned to follow Zidane out of the clearing.

“Now then,” he said, “where are we heading?”

Kairi turned to a path that lead down into the tree’s depths. “Into the heart of the tree.”

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As the party descended into the tree, Zidane grew more and more nervous.

“This tree is sacred. It is the source of mist throughout all Fantasy World Nine. We should not be in here...”

“We have to go this way. If you do not like it, leave,” Cloud said in an irritated tone. Zidane quieted, and in short order, the group emerged into a large cavern. A large branchlike structure shot upward from

the center of the ground to the roof of the cavern, and blue cosmic energy spiraled around the cylinder. Zidane couldn't speak. He simply stood there with his mouth hanging open. Kairi approached the structure, and aimed her Keyblade at it. Nothing happened.