Heartdimension Neptunia I: To Kingdom Come (Kingdom Hearts x Neptunia Crossover)

Posted originally on the fanfiction.lol at https://fanfiction.lol/works/1166.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	Femslash (F/F), Hetero (F/M), General (non relationship-focused)
Fandoms:	Kingdom Hearts, Hyperdimension Neptunia (Video Game)
Relationships:	Neptune | Purple Heart (Hyperdimension Neptunia) & Sora (Kingdom Hearts), Donald Duck & Goofy & Sora (Kingdom Hearts), Compa & IF & Neptune | Purple Heart (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Kairi/Sora (Kingdom Hearts), Neptune | Purple Heart/Noire | Black Heart, Noire | Black Heart (Hyperdimension Neptunia) & Riku (Kingdom Hearts)
Characters:	Sora (Kingdom Hearts), Neptune | Purple Heart (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Donald Duck (Kingdom Hearts), Goofy (Kingdom Hearts), Compa (Hyperdimension Neptunia), IF (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Riku (Kingdom Hearts), Kairi (Kingdom Hearts), Noire | Black Heart (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Histoire (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Arfoire (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Maleficent (Kingdom Hearts), Ansem, Seeker of Darkness | Xehanort's Heartless (Kingdom Hearts), Leon (Kingdom Hearts)., Yuffie (Kingdom Hearts), Aerith (Kingdom Hearts), Artisan (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Broccoli (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Cloud (Kingdom Hearts), Falcom (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Falcom (Ultradimension) (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Dogoo (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Cyberconnect2 (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Jiminy Cricket (Kingdom Hearts), MarvelousAQL (Hyperdimension Neptunia), MAGES. (Hyperdimension Neptunia), Sting (Hyperdimension Neptunia)
Additional Tags:	Crossover, Action/Adventure, Friendship, Mystery, Cross-Posted on FanFiction.net, Cross-Posted on AO3, Originally Posted Elsewhere | Cross-Posted, no beta we die like master eraqus, Canon Compliant, For as much as I'm able, I'm surprised no one's made this yet, I suck at descriptions I apologize, You'll recognize some lines from the OG Neptunia (the PS3 one not Rebirth 1), FF7 Characters act like their Remake versions, Makers will appear in each Disney World but not all of them., Ultra-Falcom has her own name here to differentiate from Hyper-Falcom, Nep sings Disney songs now but only in snippets, Noire is wearing her Ultradimension fit for this story, The 'Newtype' is wearing her Hyperdimension fit though, There's a Jojo reference snuck in here, Neptune experiences more emotions like anger and sadness and stuff, Loose References to other KH titles like Birth by Sleep and Union Cross, FF7 Characters also use their Remake Trilogy moves, Keyblade Wielder Kairi (Kingdom Hearts), Sora and Neptune are siblings; soul-siblings!
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Heartdimension Neptunia (Kingdom Hearts x Neptunia Crossover Series)

Stats:	Published: 2026-11-03 Updated: 2026-11-10 Words: 200,254 Chapters: 22/26

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by Kaz_149

Summary

Neptune was an amnesiac who woke up in a dark place. However, through the guidance of a Heavenly Voice, she was granted a chance to explore the outside world, and as she crosses paths with a boy wielding a mysterious key, their adventure of friendship, mystery and faith shall test their resolve!

All Chapters are done and will be posted over time! (Also available on FFN and Ao3...once it comes back)

Chapter 1: Chapter 0: Dive (Connect) to the Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

???

"It's dark...Pitch black..."

A young girl looked around the pitch of blackness she found herself in. She is a bright young girl with purple hair, wearing an oversized white parka, two white clips on opposing sides of her short hair and a scrunched furrow to show her confusion.

"Where even am I anyway? And why do I look like I've been splashed with fluorescent light?"

She looked around her surroundings and then at herself, seeing her features glowing brightly in the void.

"Did the power go off? No, I'd remember if a power outage went off. Maybe someone cast an End of the World spell? You know, Control-Alt-Delete? No, not that either."

Eventually, the girl became frustrated and started to tap her right foot impatiently.

"Well, whatever. Hello! Is anyone here? Can I walk around? Don't blame me if I started to collect rings floating by the ground..."

Her face then scrunched up as she thought of something disgusting...

"But ewwwwww, who knows what I could step in?" the girl said in a panic "It could be something like, ABC Gum. Ugghhhhhh, should I just wait for more text lines to pop up?"

And so, the girl waited...

And she waited...

And she kept waiting...

Until thirteen seconds passed, she eventually lost her patience.

"Geez, I am BO-RED! Who was I supposed to be waiting for, anyway!?"

"Ah! I found someone! Have you been waiting long?"

The girl looked around in surprise. At last, someone else deigned to speak in this featureless void!

"A voice! I totally heard a voice!" the girl then shouted out in the open. "Where are youuuuuuu~? Can you hear meeeeeee~?"

"I hear you loud and clear." the second voice, carrying a mature vibe in her speech, responded. "Thank goodness I managed to find someone here..."

The girl raised an eyebrow at that. Find someone?

"So, um...Ms. Heavenly Voice. Mind telling me where we are, exactly?"

"Oh, well..." the second voice cleared her throat, wherever she is. "this could take three hours to explain..."

Oh, the girl did not like that! Three hours of exposition? No thanks! She'd fall asleep in seven minutes without company or food here!

"Okay, skip that then! Just tell me what do ya want? You came here because of something, right?"

"Very well! I implore you, please lend me your strength!"

And now, the voice is asking for help? This has been a strange encounter, that's for sure.

"Help you? With what, exactly?"

"The worlds are in grave danger! If one does not act, the darkness shall consume all! I implore you, Neptune. Please stop the coming darkness!"

So, the voice is basically asking her to go save the world, er, worlds, right?

"Sounds like the average plot of an RPG to me! Nothing wrong about it, just, never thought we'd touch upon this to begin our story, I guess..."

But one detail bugged the girl...

"Hold up. Neptune?" Is that supposed to be her name?

"Yes. That is your name. Do you not know it?"

The girl shook her head furiously.

"Nuh-uh. Actually, I just woke up, in a way, just a while ago. I dunno a lot about myself, really."

"I see..."

There was only silence for approximately three seconds, before...

"Very well. Since you do not know about yourself, I can tell you."

The girl, Neptune, looked in surprise. Her eyes are practically shining like stars!

"Really!?"

"Yes. Really. But in exchange, you must free me from the clutches of an evil witch."

"Ooooohhhhh, now we're getting into the RPG train ride here!" the girl cheerily said, clapping her hands. "Alright, Ms. Heavenly Voice, you got a deal!"

The voice sighed in relief.

"Thank you, Neptune! Simply knowing that you will help me is a great relief..."

"Sure, but, uhhhhh...One question."

"Yes?"

"How do I get out of here?"

Right. Neptune is still stuck in the empty void of...whatever this is...

"Is there a hidden door around here?" the girl thought aloud, pacing back and forth as she lightly pounded her own head. "Do I need to look up a guide or something? Wait, how I can even do that here? Hrgggggggg..."

"Please calm down. I can guide you through and help you get started, but I cannot maintain this link indefinitely."

"Oh" the girl intoned. "So...are you on dial-up or something? Need more quarters for that payphone?"

"No, I-" the second voice groaned. "Anyway, I am trapped in the clutches of an evil witch. If she notices that I am communicating with you, or anyone for that matter, she will cut our link and it will be difficult to re-establish it."

"So, like, if that ever happens..." the girl wondered. "...we can't talk like this anymore?"

"No"

The response was simple and terse.

"Alright-y then!" the girl, apparently named Neptune, cheered, rolling her right arm. "That means we gotta hustle, so lay it on me, Ms. Heavenly Voice! What do I do?"

"Okay, first, try to feel a presence here."

This instruction only confused the girl further.

"Uh, there's only us here, you know."

"Yes, but...hmmmm, how to put this..."

Another three seconds have passed...

"Try feeling with your heart, Neptune."

"My...heart?"

As if on instinct, Neptune closed her eyes and stretched out hand...

"...!"

And she felt something, snapping her eyes open in surprise! Even in this empty void, the girl managed to feel a presence.

"Ms. Heavenly Voice, I feel something!" Neptune shouted in joy. "I definitely felt something!"

"That's great, Neptune! What is it?"

The girl's eyebrows furrowed, trying to get a feel of...whatever she felt.

"It feels like...someone's hurt. No, they're...sinking?"

"Ah! It must be the heart of someone whose lost their world recently..."

"Wow, so their world came crashing down on them, huh?" Neptune said, feeling bad for whoever she felt just now. "I dunno how to deal with heartbreak..."

The heavenly voice groaned again. "No, I mean, literally. Their world must have been consumed by darkness and now their existence is hanging on by a thread. Please, Neptune, connect with that person's heart! It may provide you with a way out of here."

The girl pondered a bit, never letting go of the connection.

"Well, anyplace is better than here." Neptune shrugged. "There's literally nothing around these parts, anyway."

"Good, now reach out to them. Do as you did before."

Neptune focused, feeling the connection getting stronger...

And stronger...

And stronger...

Until a bright light shined in front of her.

"Woah! What's happening!?"

It glew brighter and brighter...

Until it dimmed and faded, leaving no one behind in the empty void...

??? ????? ????? - Dive to the Heart – Station of Purple Progress

Opening her eyes, Neptune surveyed the area.

"Hmmmm...still not much around here"

She looked around and saw nothing but nothingness, but when she looked up, she noticed a light shining down on her.

"Huh, that light wasn't there before..."

She then looked down...

"What the nep!?"

And sees what appears to be a large stained purple glass painting of herself, sleeping in front of a few circles. Seven circles to be exact.

"Okay. This is weird. I don't recall having something commissioned in my image recently..."

"It appears you made it..."

Neptune looked around again. It was the other voice!

"Ooohhh! Ms. Heavenly Voice!" Neptune cheered as she waved her left hand. "Thanks for the advice earlier! Now, we're somewhere else!"

"Indeed. I surmise that this must be some sort of trial you must undertake before your journey can truly begin."

Hearing this got the young girl excited, shown by her light clapping of hands.

"Hoo boy! The obligatory tutorial level! So, what'ya got for me?"

As if to answer her question, three marble pedestals spawned across the area, each holding different weapons.

"Methinks that I should go get my preferred weapon of choice here, right?"

"Yes. Feel free to pick one at your leisure!"

"No need. I know what I want."

With a spring to her step, she hopped onto the pedestal holding a sword.

The Dream Sword

A weapon of incredible power.

Holds raw strength that can defeat any foe.

Is this your choice?

"Absolutely! A hero ALWAYS has a sword to start off. It's RPG Protagonist 101."

Upon her declaration, the sword vanished from her hand.

"Now choose which one to give up."

It seems her trial is not done yet.

"Give up? You mean, I gotta make myself weaker on one stat in exchange for excelling in the other one I chose? Man, this design's so early 2000's."

Hopping down, she walked a bit while she thought of her choice. Eventually, she hopped up to the pedestal containing the staff.

The Dream Staff

A weapon of indistinguishable magic.

Holds spellbinding might of incredible power.

Do you wish to give this up?

"Well, I've never been the most intelligent gal out there..."

"You've never been out of anywhere until recently..."

"Eh, details."

Sensing that her answer is confirmatory, the staff vanished from Neptune in a flash of light.

You have chosen the path of the warrior.

You have surrendered the path of the sage.

Is this your final answer?

"Heck yes, it is!"

With her answer given, the pedestals tumbled and the ground began to shake.

"W-what's happening?" Neptune asked in a panic, signified by her eyes turning in white circles.

"You have cleared your first trial." the heavenly voice responded calmly. "Now you are on your way to the second trial."

"T-This is a rocky way to start your game, don't you think!?"

And yet, the only sounds that could be heard are those of the girl's screams and the dissolution of the glass platform...

Dive to the Heart – Station of Black Regality

"I'M FALLING!"

And fell she did. A great tumble onto the next station, a dark blue one, which contained the image of a girl with black, twin-tailed hair.

"Uhhhh...I wish the person in this image is real. She would've made for a nice landing pillow..."

"Please don't say that about real people, Neptune." the heavenly voice scolded. "Anyway, you are now on your next trial."

Getting up in a single hop, Neptune steels herself for her next trial.

"Alright! Bring it on!"

In a flash, the Dream Sword spawned in her hand!

"Okay, can you do a few swings with that?"

"No problem-o!"

Down slash!

Thrust!

Leap and strike!

"A classic three-hit combo! You like that, Ms. Heavenly Voice?"

"Splendid! Now then..."

Suddenly, a dark...ant-like creature spawned in front of her.

"Oooohhhh! Is this gonna be my enemy from this point forward?"

"Yes. These dark creatures are but small spawns of the darkness. Go and defeat it."

Charging forth, Neptune executed her three-hit combo and defeated the creature with ease.

"Easy peasy!"

"Well done! But be wary. Weak though that creature is, it has a special ability."

"Special ability?"

Another one spawned in front of her, but it was sunken on the ground. It then crept behind her and rose up from the ground!

"...! From behind!"

Looking back, Neptune could only brace herself for impact.

"Owie! It scratched me!"

Feeling a little hurt from the sneak attack, Neptune struck down the creature just as easily as she did the first one.

"That's for scratching the hood, you...weird, ant-thing!" Neptune shouted, shaking her free fist in anger.

"Never underestimate your enemies, Neptune. Each of these creatures carry their own strengths and weaknesses. Adaptability is the key to victory against them."

And then, three of the creatures rose from the ground in front of her.

"Take what you have learned and triumph, for it is the way forward."

"Wise words! Alright, time to nep 'em all up!"

Since this is just a mob battle in a tutorial segment, Neptune easily defeated these trash mobs with ease. A mistake here or there was probably overlooked.

"Good work. Now you cleared the second trial!"

"Cool beans! But wait, if I'm done here, that means..."

Just as she suspected, the platform began to be swallowed in a dark void.

"Why does this have to be the only way forwaaaaaardddddd~?"

Her complaints were muffled as she was swallowed in the dark void.

Dive to the Heart – Station of Green Pastures

"No! Anything but that! Anything but the eggplants!"

Neptune was thrashing around on the ground, as if she had a terrible nightmare. One involving...eggplants of all things...

"Neptune! Please get up!"

The girl's eyes shot wide open upon hearing that familiar voice.

"I'm awake!"

She stood up immediately, snapping awake as she now looked at her surroundings.

This time, the glass painting, this time green, she's standing on is that of a tall, blonde woman in a green dress.

"Okay...so, what's the sitch, Ms. Heavenly Voice?"

"Please, I am Histoire."

"His-to-ire? That your name?"

"Yes. I figured I may as well tell you now before I forget."

"Cool, but I think I may botch the name, so can I call you Histy?"

"Sure. Anyway, you are now at the next trial, Neptune."

The girl got excited.

"Awesome-sauce! So, what do I do?"

"This may come as...out-of-sequence as you would expect, but let's test your other capabilities."

Neptune raised an eyebrow at that.

"Such as?"

A large crate spawned a good few meters from her.

"Try moving that crate, Neptune."

"Okay, but where?"

"Anywhere's fine."

Seeing a crate this large, lifting it with her arms is out of the question. Push it, it is.

"Hrrrrrkkkk!"

She pushed it forwards a few meters forward, then she pulled it a few more meters back.

"Good. Good."

The sound of a flashing light was heard. To Neptune's right, a barrel spawned.

"That barrel looks lighter than this crate."

"Indeed. Do you mind lifting it?"

Without another word, Neptune left the crate and approached the barrel, carrying it over her head with her two hands!

"Oooooohhhh, this thing's kinda light."

"So it is. Now, then..."

"I'mma throw it!"

And threw it she did. Goodbye, crate and barrel. Your purpose in this tutorial has been fulfilled.

"Well, that" Histoire said with surprise. "...takes care of that, then!"

As Neptune grinned at her small victory, she noticed a small red box where the objects were last seen.

"What's that?"

She approached it, and opened it, revealing a glass jar with a green star on it.

"Is this an item?"

"It appears to a Potion, Neptune."

"Items are always important for an RPG Adventure!"

She then pocketed the item. As she did, a flash of light spawned a medium red chest to her right.

The girl's eyes lit up like stars in the night upon the sight. "Oooohhhh, treasure!"

"You seem to know what to do with this one, don't you?"

"Well, duh! I'mma open it!"

Approaching it, she gave the chest two light taps with her sword, which caused it to open, revealing...

"Hey...is this...?"

Neptune picked up the yellow orbs from within the chest.

"Pocket change?"

"It appears so."

"Well, money IS important to buy items and stuff! It's RPG 101."

Keeping the 100 munny in her pocket, another flash of light appeared, spawning a peculiar pink door at the edge of the area.

"A door?"

"This must lead to the next trial. Let's go, Neptune."

Seeing nothing else left in the area, the girl approached the door.

As she did, the door slowly opened. Neptune approached closer as the light shone brighter...

Dive to the Heart – Image of Home

"Okay, where am I now?"

She looked around to see a peculiar town. No, city may be more accurate.

"Histy, are you there? Hello!"

No response.

"Guess I'm all by my lonesome here...Better go look around then..."

She walked around the city. As she crossed the streets, she came across another person.

It was a girl, nearly the same height as her, with short, iris hair, red eyes and wearing a white blouse with bear slippers.

Is she in her pajamas or something?

"Hey there, stranger! Do you know where we are?"

"What are you so afraid of?"

"Huh?"

Neptune looked bewildered. The other person answered her question with another question!

And it doesn't even relate to what she asked earlier!

She must be an NPC!

"What am I afraid of?"

"Growing old? Nah, that's just part of life."

"Being indecisive? I mean, decisions are hard to make at times, but I can just shelve it for later. Besides, acting is better than thinking for me."

"I guess being different than who I am used to. I mean, if you see me not acting like the same old Nep, would you feel weird about it?"

Upon answering the question, the other girl vanished.

"Woah! That...was weird...Am I in some sort of ghost town?"

With nothing else to go on, Neptune continued walking around.

"That giant tower over there looks pretty suspicious, though."

Decided on her destination, the girl sallied forth to the center of the city where the tower stood.

Making a detour around a park, she comes across another person. A little girl wearing a yellow bee jacket and matching yellow hair to boot!

"Another stranger! Though, if my gaming sense is telling me something, you must be another NPC with a life-changing question."

"Hey! What's the thing you want over anything else?"

And there's the question. If it works like the others, then the girl will fade upon answering it.

"What I want most, huh?"

"My belongings? Well, that would matter if I had anything other than the clothes in my back."

"Being the winner? When it comes to games, it's all about having fun, right? Who's top dog or not is a matter of opinion, in my opinion."

So that leaves...

"Meeting and befriending new pals! Games and life are more fun if you can share it with others, you know?"

And just like the first girl, the little girl faded away, her question answered.

"Geez, this is surely one weird way to assess someone, huh? Whoever came up with this must have had a strange therapy session or wanted one like this..."

Nonetheless, Neptune kept moving. She has a tower to get to!

Eventually, as she neared the tower, she came across another girl. This time, she was wearing a white shirt with an orange tie and a dark green skirt and had red hair tied into short twintails. She also had an...oversized watch(?) on her right wrist.

"Another NPC. What question do you have for me, o hot-blooded stranger?"

"What is the one thing you wish for in your whole life?"

"What I wish for, huh?"

"Seeing rare sights? I mean, there are tons of that, depending on the person. Beauty's in the ear of the beholder and all that."

"Being strong? Nah, a bit too straightforward. Besides, it'd be weird to see me with incredibly buff muscles and all that."

"How about broadening my horizons? It ain't just about seeing new things, but learning more about ourselves and the world around us and all that? I'd take that over formal classes any day of the week!"

With her question answered, the other girl vanished, just like the others.

"...?"

Sensing something strange, Neptune approached the tower, seeing a glowing tome in the middle of the entrance.

You are afraid of being different, of becoming someone you are not.

You desired friendship, companionship to share life's bounties with.

You wish to broaden your horizons in order to better learn about yourself and the world around you.

Thus, your journey begins in midday...

"Oh, so I'm the 'go with the flow' kind of gal, huh? Seems...pretty strange, yet insightful..."

Is this your decision?

"Like it wouldn't be anything else!"

Satisfied with the answer, the tome glew brighter and brighter, as the next and final trial began...

Dive to the Heart – Station of White Serenity

Arriving at the next glass painting, colored white, consisting of a short, brown-haired girl wearing a white coat, with a white hat to boot, Neptune took a few steps forward.

Before she could properly assess her situation, several more of the dark creatures from earlier appeared and surrounded her!

"I was wondering if we're gonna get more mob fights! Come and get nepped!"

It was a fierce battle. Between Neptune's aggressive approach and the creatures' wave tactics, neither side gave an inch.

And yet...

"Hiyah!" Slashed one down!

"Hoo!" Struck two with a thrust!

"Take...this!" And a downward swing to the right against three!

...Neptune handled the tiny creatures with ease.

"Phew, that was a bit of a workout, huh?" the girl said, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

"-eptune! Neptune!"

The girl looked around in surprise as a familiar voice rang in her head.

"Heya, Histy! Where've you been?"

"My apologies." Histoire apologized. "For some reason, I lost the connection between us. Thankfully, I was able to find you, as the link wasn't cut yet..."

"That's cool." Neptune reassured, looking around. "So, what do I got to do now?"

"Hmmmm. It appears you are close to the end of this trial. Once you clear it, you will finally be out in the world."

The girl's face lit with excitement.

"So, we're at the end of this tutorial segment? Awesome! This has got to be one of the more elaborate ones, for sure!"

"Indeed. Now then, do you see the path before you?"

She sees it, alright. The light that moved revealed several smaller steps leading to another Station ahead.

"Yup. Straight to the finish line, then?"

"Yes. Let us see the end of this path!"

Taking a moment to center herself, Neptune jogs through the revealed 'staircase' leading her to the place of the final battle.

Dive to the Heart – Station of Awakening

As she arrives at the bright blue station, which strangely did not depict anyone, but had numerous objects such as rafts, stars and the like painted in small circles on the top center, Neptune approaches closer to the light at the other side.

"Be wary, Neptune. For the closer you get to the light, the greater your shadow becomes..."

Wondering what Histy meant by that, Neptune turned around, to see her own shadow growing larger as she neared the light...

And then, it stood!

"Nep-wha!?"

As the giant shadow loomed over the young girl, who was stepping back in awe and fear, she could only think of one thing...

"RUN AWAY!"

She turned around and ran, only to stop herself the moment she remembered one important thing...

These Stations...have no physical exit!

With no way out, the girl made one other choice.

She drew out her sword and readies herself to fight!

The shadow had long changed shape. It was huge, having a giant heart-shaped hole in it's chest, it's hands and feet are stubby and tiny, and it's head has only two yellow eyes and messy hair.

It was a **Darkside**.

"A giant for a tutorial boss! Bring it on!"

She charged forth as the giant brought it's right hand, filled with dark energy, down to the ground, leaving a pool of darkness around it.

Seeing an opening, Neptune unleashed attack after attack at it. As she does so, the ant-like creatures from earlier spawned across the pool, ready to attack.

But Neptune was not fooled by the same tactic twice! She diverted her swings against the smaller creatures, eliminating them before they could land a meaningful blow against her!

Seeing the giant's arm still stretched out, she got a brilliant idea.

She immediately hopped on it's elbow, then to it's shoulder and launched a strong jump attack on it's head, dealing big damage.

"How's that, giant!?"

But the giant wasn't done yet! It knelt on the ground and protruded it's chest, causing it's heart-shaped hole to produce dark energy!

"Incoming!"

It shot out bolts of dark fire against it's tiny opponent. She responded by running behind the giant's left arm and started hacking it apart!

During her assault, one of the shots nearly got to her, but in her frenzy, she ended up deflecting it against the Darkside, hitting it square on the head.

"Woah! Didn't know I could do that..."

However, it barely felt the hit, and thus continued sending dark bolts at her. Seeing this interaction, Neptune stopped her attack and instead timed her hits with the dark bolts, deflecting each back at it while damaging her source of cover. Eventually, enough hit it that it reeled back!

"Hah! How's that!?" The girl cheered as she hopped back to inspect her work,

However, as if to show the cruelty of fate, Neptune's sword vanished from her hand!

"Oh! Why now!?"

The Darkside, in it's anger, pinned Neptune down in it's dark pool, threatening to drown her in the darkest abyss.

"Ack...I can't...I'm the protagonist of this...story...I haven't even...got to see the outside world yet..."

She weakly reached out her hand...

"Histy...help me..."

"Do not fear, Neptune..."

A bright light appeared before her.

"...For even in the deepest darkness..."

A floating object slowly descended down upon her.

"...The light within you will guide you to your chosen path..."

The object then slowly floated towards the sinking girl, causing her to glow abright.

"...Believe in that light...in yourself...and in those who believe in you..."

In a flash, the Darkside was struck down and a figure stood in the opposite side of the Station.

"...For that belies your true strength...And the truth about yourself, Neptune."

Feeling lightheaded, the figure was surrounded in a bright light and in her place, Neptune fell down, fainting after a hard battle.

The Station then glew as it changed design. From it's previous iteration, it now features a boy with brown spiky hair, wearing a white jacket and red shorts and yellow shoes. In front of

him are seven circles, three of which are filled by another boy and two girls, one the boy knew and the other girl being...

Heartdimension Neptunia I: To Kingdom Come

Chapter End Notes

Whooey, we're off to a fine start, huh? This is something that has been bugging on my mind lately, and I wanted to get to get this out of the way. I'll talk a little more about this in the first proper chapter, which should be out around the same time as this one, so I'll see you there!

Chapter 2: Chapter 1: Night of Fate (Beginnings)

Chapter Summary

> Neptune wakes up in a cozy town and meet some people who tell her about the world she's in.
>
> Meanwhile, other parties are also here, unaware of the destined meeting that is to come...

???????? ???? - Second District

It was evening in this world. The streets are empty and the houses are alight. Despite the seemingly peaceful setting, wariness filled the two young girls who walked out of the streets.

"You sure you got everything?"

"Yessy! All the supplies and rations that we need are right here!"

A sigh. "Hopefully, they'll last us for the next of couple weeks..."

One of the two girls, a girl with short, peach hair wearing a C-Clip and headband on her head, wearing a peach sweater and a black skirt, stopped to look up at the night sky.

"Look!"

The other girl, who has medium length brown hair and a leaf hairclip, wearing an oversized blue coat with a belt filled with numerous square shapes of differing colors, covering her black undershirt and black shorts, looked up to see a star twinkling and then fading out of existence.

"A star faded out. And if what they said is true..."

The first girl began to cry.

"That means another world has been consumed..."

The second girl groaned.

"That means if anyone's lucky, they'll find their way here. In this Refuge World."

"Where would they be, though?" the first girl wondered, wiping her eyes of any lingering tears.

The second girl closed her eyes, pinching her nose.

"I don't know, but right now, we have to worry about ourselves first. Especially since we have no idea WHAT our world even was..."

"Will we be okay, though? What about those creepy monsters?"

"Don't worry about them. She's out on patrol right now, so let's head back already."

The second girl began to pick up her pace, causing her friend to panic.

"Ah! Wait up! I don't wanna get picked on again by the scary Mr. Monsters here!"

Little did the two girls knew that their being here has set them on a collision course with another who will remain by their side for most of their days...

???????? ???? - Third District

"Ughhhhhh..."

Neptune slowly woke up to see herself in a dark alley. In front of her is an orange cartoon dog with a red collar.

"Nighty-night, doggy..."

But the dog wasn't having it, and pounced the girl awake!

"I'm awake! I'm awake now!"

The girl stood up and looked around, noticing she was in a dark alleyway. A very small dark alleyway.

"Hey, boy. Do you know where we are?"

The dog raised his head, turned around and ran off in the span of a few seconds.

"So much for a definitive answer..."

She walked after him as she took note of her surroundings. To her right, she noticed a door with a flame symbol on it. To her left is an open square, with a large wooden door and a lock before it.

"Hmmmm..."

She tried to budge the door open, but it wouldn't move!

"That way's a no go..."

"Heya stranger. Fancy meeting someone new in these parts."

Neptune turned around to see a tall woman with red hair, green eyes and a horn headband wearing a white cloak around her.

"Oh, yay! First contact!" The young girl cheered, clapping her hands. "So, can you tell me where we are right now?"

"Sure thing" the woman nodded. "First off, this is Traverse Town, a Refuge World where those who lost their worlds Drifted to. People have been getting by here thanks to rations provided by the Moogles and another nearby world."

She folded her arms as she closely inspects the young girl. "So, what about you? What's your story?"

"Well, let's just say I'm on a quest to save someone from the clutches of an evil witch and leave it at that" Neptune answered with confidence, placing a hand on her chest.

The woman hummed. "You sure didn't hit your head before you came here? You seem a bit too young to go on adventuring..."

"Don't let my cuteness fool you, for I am plenty tough!" Neptune boasted as she puts her hands on her hips.

"You sure seem confident" the woman chuckled. "Far be it from me to stop you, but be sure to come back to rest every now and then, okay? This may be a Refuge World, but there are no shortage of supplies and beds here, got that?"

The girl beamed at the offer. "Thanks for the hospitality, nice lady!"

"Sure thing. By the way, what's your name?"

"It's Neptune! What's yours?" the young girl introduced herself, extending her right hand out.

"Nep-tune, huh? Mine's Artisan." the woman introduced herself, extending her left hand in greeting. "Pleasure to meet you"

The two shook hands.

"Okay, I better get back on patrol. Be careful around here. There are monsters around here, even if the streets look clear."

"I'll be alright, Arty. I can defend myself!"

The woman chuckled. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you."

She then turned around and left the district.

"Time for me to pick up the pace, too!"

Neptune decided to leave the district, using the gate located up the stairs she just saw earlier.

Traverse Town – Second District

As Neptune walked out of the Third District, she came across a haunting sight.

A woman tripped as she screamed. Eventually, darkness corroded her very being until she vanished, leaving only a heart behind. That heart was then consumed by darkness, spawning a small armored creature in the woman's place. About five seconds later, the creature vanished.

Only to be replaced by more of the ant-like creatures from before!

"Those tiny things from the tutorial segment!"

Neptune braced herself for a fight, but completely forgot about one thing...

"I AM COMPLETELY UNARMED!"

Panicking, she looked around frantically.

"Oh please, let there be something. Anything will do!"

And her eyes beheld her salvation!

"Yes!"

Leaping to her left, she grabbed a cypress stick that was lying on the ground.

"Alright, you fiends! Time for you all to face the power of Neptune!" the young girl declared, sighing afterwards. "Wow, that was really generic..."

Invigorated by the acquisition of a weapon(?), she proceeded to attack the creatures with her usual attacks and combos.

"Hyah!" Upward slash!

"Toh!" Downward strike!

"Come on!" Downward area strike!

Only to find her attacks are barely damaging them! If only she had a better weapon...

"Okay, I may need a better plan here..."

The creatures aren't giving her time for that, though, and pounced on her!

"Ah!"

As she braced for impact, a bright light shone on her hand. More specifically, the hand that was holding onto the cypress stick.

"Wha-"

As the light faded, the stick was nowhere to be seen. In it's place was a...key shaped sword-thingy. It was colored black, is of medium length, yet quite slick with it's design, with purple lines glowing around it. The guard is shaped like an oversized N, with a purple crystal holding a near-whole circle with a small line drawn on it's opening on top for a keychain.

Wasting no time, the creatures attempt to strike again. Sensing hostile intent, Neptune wielded the weapon and stroke down the creatures in a two clean strikes.

"Dude, this is one strange weapon. Almost thought it was a chainsaw for a second there."

As she relaxed from the lack of hostile presences, the weapon she was wielding earlier vanished from her hand.

"Awwwww, you're gonna take this weapon away, too?" the girl moaned in mild annoyance. "Or is it one of those weapons that come at the flick of a wrist or something?"

She tried flicking her right wrist, and sure enough, the key-shaped weapon respawned onto her hand.

"Nep-wow! I didn't think that'd work!"

She flicked her wrist again, and the weapon disappeared again. At least she knows she can call it out again.

"Okay, so to recap, I woke up in a Refuge World, found creepy monsters lurking about, I have a massive key-sword thingy to fight them off and I gotta save Histy from an evil witch."

She clapped her own face three times to perk herself up. "Okay! First rule of exploration. Run around and keep track of everything!"

With her spirit invigorated, Neptune sallied forth once more, fully intent on learning where she is and what is going on out there.

Traverse Town – Red Room

"I'm back!"

Artisan opened the door into the room, seeing the two girls from earlier settling in with their bought supplies.

"Welcome back, Arty!" the girl in the sweater greeted.

"Hey, Artisan." the girl in the blue coat said. "How's the patrol?"

"It's fine, IF" Artisan replied to the second girl. "How's shopping with Compa?"

IF, the second girl, sighed. "Could've been better. It's not easy to purchase the needed goods, especially when we're short on munny and it's getting harder to haggle with these darned moogles for lower prices..."

"Now, Iffy..." Compa scolded her friend. "We can't be too careful when it comes to our survival. Like my grandpa said 'It's better to overprepare than to never prepare at all'"

"Yeah, but..." IF countered. "I fail to see how purchasing all those dessert ingredients was considered necessary!"

"You'll never know, Iffy! Sweets can really get the brain going!"

And so, the two devolved into another silly argument. Artisan could only sigh at the sight.

"Geez, they're off in their own little world again...it's like they don't remember I was even here"

Traverse Town – Accessory Shop

"So, to recap again. I've Drifted(?) into this world, found out I can wield this key-shaped sword, wandered around town, fought a bunch of those monsters, bumping into a manor with a literal couple of dogs missing their 99 kiddos, and now I'm here after shopping with three little duckies over next door. You with me so far, old man?"

Neptune, meanwhile, was busy summarizing her tale to the dirty-blonde old man wearing an engineer's garb on the counter.

"I hear ya, lassy. Believe me, yer story's pretty wacky, too. But it ain't the only one I heard so far in this town."

Neptune seemed offended, summoning her weapon.

"Hey, since when do these type of weapons pop out of nowhere nowadays?"

"Not very often, I'm afraid" the old man said, inspecting the weapon. "You ain't the first one here that has that kinda weapon."

"Wait, seriously?"

Now this had the girl's attention.

"Well, the thing about your weapon is, it's supposed to be pretty rare. Only few people can actually wield the darn things even!"

"And you met someone who can also wield something like this?"

"Yup. A kid just like you, actually. Drifted here like you did. He's probably exploring the town as we speak."

Suddenly, they heard sounds of weapons clashing outside.

"What the nep?"

"Ah, darn. What's up with the racket outside!?"

"Hold it, old man!" Neptune declared. "Since I got a rare weapon, why don't I go check your problem out?"

The old man chuckled. "You seem pretty confident, much like the kiddo from earlier. You know what? Go ahead. Knock yourself out. Just don't go dying on me, ya hear?"

Neptune gave the old man a peace sign. "Just leave it to Neptune, old man!"

As she left, the old man shouted. "Name's Cid, by the way!"

Traverse Town – First District

"Alright, Neptune's here to save the day!"

As she stormed out of the Accessory Shop, she sees two figures, one man and one woman, looking at her. In the middle of them is an unconscious boy.

"Aha! So, you decided to prey on the innocent, have you!?"

"Uh, what's this broad's deal?" the woman, wearing what appears to be ninja garb, asked.

"Beats me." the man, wearing a black jacket and black pants, answered. "However..."

His gaze turns to the young girl's weapon.

"She's got one too."

The ninja's eyes widened. "Wait! There's two Keyblade Wielders here!?"

The man sighed, pinching his nose. "This just got more complicated..."

"Hey! What's the big idea!?" Neptune shouted to the two figures. "You done hatching your vile schemes, evildoers!?"

"I better go calm her down before she misunderstands the situation further..."

Before the man could do so, Neptune was already on the attack, leaping long for a heavy strike.

"...!"

Acting on reflex, the man brought out his weapon, a sword with a gun trigger for a pommel, and parried the blow, sending Neptune tumbling back.

"What's the big ide-AAAHHH!" Neptune suddenly yelled, pointing her shaky finger at the man's gun-shaped sword. "What's with that weapon and why does it look cooler than mine!?"

"She's not quite in there, huh?" the woman said, carrying the unconscious boy on her back. "I'll take him in. Will you be okay?"

"This is hardly my first rodeo." the man said cooly. "Now get going, Yuffie."

The woman, Yuffie, saluted. "You got it, Squall. Try not to lose like you did with the last kid!"

As she left, the man could only pinch his nose in annoyance. "I told you, it's Leon"

"Hey, if you are done talking to the imaginary wall, then let's get this fight going!"

Neptune recovered and readied her battle stance. "Don't worry, kiddo. Once I nep this guy up, he'll tell me where that ninja lady took ya and Neptune'll save ya like the heroine I am!"

Leon huffed. "Fine, if that's how you want it..."

Neptune struck first, launching a slash to the right, which he blocked.

She then aimed for a thrust, but her opponent parried the blow.

Hopping back, she leapt forward for a spinning jump slash, which pushed Leon back a bit.

"So, she relies on power swings. She actually hits harder than the last kid did. In that case..."

Leon then channeled magic energy onto his hand and launched a fireball at his opponent.

"A telegraphed fireball move! Bad call!"

Neptune, seeing the fireball coming, she batted the fireball away.

"Now where did he go?"

She looked around, and in about two seconds, she looked up to see Leon bearing down at her with a downward strike!

"Woah!"

She hopped away, barely dodging in time, and she kept on dodging his blows, a quick downward slash and a heavy horizontal slash, before Leon launched another fireball at Neptune!

"Ack!"

The fireball hit it's mark, pushing her back and dealing some damage.

"Despite her spirited demeanor, she's been able to adapt to most of my attacks. In a way, the boy from earlier held on in the same manner."

As the dust settles, Neptune coughed out the smoke blocking her sight, her parka slightly charred from the last attack.

"Sheesh, you've ruined the parka! Now, I'm mad!"

Rushing forward, she stroke against Leon...

"Here she comes!"

...and launched a furious combo at him!

Two diagonal slashes!

Then a power thrust!

And then a downward slash, followed by a heaving attack that sends her opponent into the air!

"What is this strength!?"

She then jumped up and performs one more slash, sending Leon down, damaging him upon impact!

"Guh! This is what I get for holding back against two Keyblade Wielders..."

"Like that? That's my first special move! I call it...**Cross Combination**! Eat that!"

Despite her small victory, Neptune is running out of breath. Her vision's also getting hazy from fighting all night without rest.

"Wanna...keep going? I can...do this all...night~"

And just like that, she passed out like a light.

"And she passed out, just like the last kid did..."

Leon got up and inspected his opponent.

"Things really did get worse, huh?"

He then carried the girl like a princess and brought her out of the district.

Traverse Town – Alleyway

"Uhhh, Donald, are you sure about this place? It seems kinda spooky..."

"Oh, what's the big idea, Goofy? I'm not scared!"

Currently, Donald Duck and Goofy, two of Disney World's Royal Guard, are in this world in search of the 'key', in order to find their missing king. In order to find that, they first need to search for a man named Leon, who can guide them on the proper direction.

"Excuse me"

Donald immediately jumped in terror from the sudden touch of a finger, causing him to hug his friend in a panic.

"Are you two the King's Guard?"

A woman with green eyes, a pink dress and a matching pink ribbon approached them with a playful smile.

"Seems pretty gallant for the so-called Royal Guard, eh?"

The first woman giggled. "Come now, Artisan. Anyone would freak out in a cold, dark place like these sewers!"

Hearing this got the hot-blooded duck all angered. "What's the big idea!? You want a piece of me!?"

Artisan chuckled. "Don't get your feathers ruffled up, ducky!"

"That's right, we're here to help you."

The two andromorphic animals looked at each other for a bit. Can these two women be trusted?

Traverse Town – Green Room

"Come on, lazy bum. Wake up!"

The boy shook his head as he gets up from the bed.

"Where...am I?"

He looked up to see a girl with red hair, wearing a white shirt and a purple skirt looking at him.

"Those creatures will keep coming after you...so long as you wield the Keyblade."

The boy only felt confused by the words the girl mentioned. Those didn't seem like the kind of words she would usually say, he thought.

Still...

"I'm just glad you're okay, Kairi"

The girl laughed.

"Kairi? Who are you talking about? I'm the Great Ninja Yuffie Kisaragi!"

Hearing the name, the boy shook his head again, and sure enough, a different girl, one with black hair and ninja garb stood in front of him.

"I think you overdid it, Squall!"

She turned to the man who was leaning near the door to other room nearby.

"That's Leon"

The boy turned his attention to the weapons hanging by the door. His weapon, a simple short-length Keyblade with a yellow guard and a silver mouse head for a keychain, stood there with another that is black and purple.

"The Keyblade..."

"We have to get that off of you to shake off those creatures." the ninja explained. "Turns out that's how they were tracking you."

"Granted, it won't work for long" the man continued as he grabbed the boy's weapons. "Still, hard to believe someone like you is one of the chosen ones..."

He then took a left swing with it, causing it to disappear...and then reappeared at the boy's hand.

"Well, I suppose beggars can't be choosers..." Leon remarked, approaching the boy.

"How about you start making sense?" the boy asked frustratingly. "What's going on here?"

"Woah, slow down there, kiddo" the ninja exclaimed. "You're not the only one here who needs to hear what we have to say."

The boy only looked confused, so the girl points towards the sofa.

More specifically, the girl with purple hair and white parka that's snoozing peacefully on said sofa.

"zzzzz...Nepnepnepnepnep...zzzzz"

"Who's she?" the boy asked.

"Believe it or not, that girl over there's the wielder of the other Keyblade." the man answered.

"He can tell! He nearly got thrashed by her after you went to town with him." the ninja guffawed.

"So, you were watching me, then..." Leon pinched his nose in annoyance.

"Hey, Great Ninja, remember?" Yuffie boasted. "Getting back and forth in familiar territory is no biggie for one like me!"

"She can wield this too?" the boy wondered, raising his weapon while looking at the sleeping girl.

"It's a fact" Leon answered. "It'll take some time for her to wake up though..."

???

"-eptune? Neptune? Please, wake up!"

Neptune groaned. "Five more minutes, please."

"For the love of...JUST WAKE UP ALREADY!"

The loud shout was enough to snap the young lady awake.

"I'm wide awake now!"

When she came to, she noticed that she was in a familar place...

A familiar, empty place...

"Back here again..." Neptune said, casting her head down. "So much for the taste of freedom, I guess..."

"No, this is only a dream." a familiar voice answered. "It is the only way I can freely communicate with you, Neptune"

"Oh, hey Histy! Short time, no hear! How've you been?"

"About as well as my current predicament allows me. I see you have awoken to your power."

"My power?" Neptune said, scrunching her face. "Wait, you mean that...key-weapon I have?"

"Yes! The power of the Keyblade."

"Key-blade? That's a...pretty simple name. What is it?"

"It is a powerful weapon. Despite it's shape and size, it is capable of destroying those dark creatures you've been encountering. And other feats as well, both benevolent and malevolent."

"Woah!" Neptune gasped in amazement. "Seems like this weapon's quite a big deal, huh?"

"It is a weapon thought lost to time." Histoire continued. "Only legends speak of it's existence, even now."

"I see. Know anything else about this, Histy?"

"I'm sorry, but my knowledge on such a weapon is quite limited. You may need to seek other sources of information if you wish to know more about it."

"Eh, it's fine." Neptune shrugged, placing her hands on her back. "I'll probably learn more about it on the way to you, Histy. Still, how am I gonna go about freeing you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I promised I'd free you and I'm gonna do it." Neptune declared with a pumped fist. "But if I'm going out there to beat that evil witch you've talked about, I'm gonna need some help." The girl continued, placing her hands on her hips. "A hero always has a party to accompany them on their journey, after all!"

"I see." the heavenly voice answered. "In that case, I sense several presences near you that can aid you on your journey."

"Ooooohhhhh." Neptune cheered, clapping her hands. "That's neat!"

"In addition, you may encounter people like yourself. People who feel lost as they do not know anything about themselves."

Neptune gasped. "So, they're fellow amnesiacs just like me, huh?"

"Indeed. You will know them when you feel them. Ask your heart, and it shall guide you to them."

"My heart, huh..."

Silence filled the area for a good three seconds.

"...By the way, Histy, I've been meaning to ask." Neptune said as she crossed her arms in thought.

"Sure. Ask away."

"Lately, my heart's feeling...I dunno...heavier? More filled? Like, I feel stronger than I was when I woke up in that Refuge World."

"Ah, that must be the connection you made before." Histoire answered. "You are likely close to the one you have connected to right now."

"Oh, so...like my soulmate?"

"I cannot say for sure, but I'm sure your heart will not lead you astray."

"All this talk about the heart is making methinks that they got a lot of power in this story." Neptune wondered in her usual whimsy.

"Meta talk aside, you are correct." Histoire confirmed. "Belief and faith in one's heart is the key to surmounting the trials ahead, but you need not fight alone."

"Yup." The girl chirped. "A good hero always got a reliable party with them, and you said there are good choices near me, right?"

"Yes. I wish I could tell you more about the dangers ahead, but I cannot maintain this link for long." the voice bemoaned. "You would have to get those answers from others."

"Alright-y! Just hang in there, Histy! Ol' Neptune's gotta bust you out good! It's a promise"

A chuckle is heard. "I look forward to it. Be careful, Neptune"

Traverse Town – Green Room

Neptune fluttered her eyes open, waking to see...

"An...unfamiliar ceiling?" She looked to her left to see three people staring at her. A man, a woman and a boy.

"Look who's awake!" the woman exclaimed.

Getting up, Neptune stretched as she clutched her stomach. "Oooohhhh, my body feels sore and my tank's running on empty. You guys got any grub?"

The three looked among themselves.

"I think I have some crackers on me."

The woman pulled out some unopened crackers from her pocket.

"Here you go! It's not much, but hey, at least your stomach won't be empty!"

Neptune clapped her hands in celebration.

"The blessings of a good samaritan! Thank you!"

She took the crackers with gusto and started chowing down on them.

"See what I mean?" the man complained.

"You weren't kidding" the boy said. "She looks like she's got a one-track mind"

The girl stopped for a bit to stare at the two males in the room.

"Anyway, you two are owed an explanation over what's been going on lately." the ninja lady inferred.

"Ooooooohhhh, is it exposition time!?" Neptune said with stars in her eyes.

"Yep. You two need to know what's going on if you want to survive out there" the ninja woman said.

Traverse Town – Red Room

"Ooooooohhhhh, fluffy ducky!"

"Wak! Lemme go! LET ME GO!"

Compa is busy glomping Donald. Apparently, walking, talking animals are a rare sight for her.

"Come on, Compa. Drop the duck. They've got some explaining to do." IF urged, which cause the other girl to sadly stop glomping.

Once the other two women stopped giggling at the sight of a ruffled Donald, they began their exposition dump.

"Okay, so you four know that there are other worlds besides this town, right?" the woman in pink started.

"Yep." Donald agreed.

"That's what you told us, yeah" IF followed.

"But they're supposed to be a secret..." Goofy said, covering his mouth.

"Are they?" Compa asked.

"Yep." Artisan nodded. "The reason why their existence is kept mum is because the worlds aren't connected."

Aerith continued, closing her eyes in recollection... "But when the Heartless came, everything changed..."

Traverse Town – Green Room

"Heartless?" the boy asked.

"The one that attacked you both." Yuffie answered.

"You mean those ant-like creatures?" Neptune asked, to which the ninja nodded.

"Those without hearts" Leon explained. "They seek out the darkness in people's hearts..."

He paused for a second.

"And there is darkness in every heart..."

Neptune took the chance to sniff herself.

"I don't emit any stinkin' darkness. Besides, girls like me only emit rainbows and marshmallows!"

This got both the ninja and boy laughing at her remark. The man, on the other hand, facepalmed.

"Wow, you're such a hoot!" Yuffie said, regaining her composure. "Anywho, you two ever heard of a man named Ansem?"

Traverse Town – Red Room

"Ansem?" Goofy asked, sensing something familiar with the name.

"If I recall, he's the ruler from your home world, right Aerith?" IF asked.

Aerith nodded. "He, along with his apprentices studied the Heartless. He had kept his research in a detailed report"

"Oooohhhh" Compa said. "Can we see them, please?"

"We would...if we had them..." Artisan cringed.

"So, what? Are they lost?" IF asked.

"It's pages are scattered everywhere..." Aerith replied, shaking her head.

"Scattered?" Donald repeated.

"To many worlds." the woman in pink answered.

"That will take a lot of time to find them..." IF wondered.

"Oh, maybe your king went around to find them!" Compa believed.

"Yeah!" Donald agreed.

"Yes. Our thoughts exactly" Aerith nodded.

"Oh yeah!" Goofy suddenly shouted. "Ansem!"

"What were you thinking about?" Donald demanded.

"Well, the King mentioned to us that he befriended a guy named Ansem when he was looking into what's been going on in the worlds." Goofy explained.

"So, your King knows who he is?" IF asked.

The dog-man nodded. "Yup. He said that he is a wise ruler and an avid researcher with a love for ice cream."

"Wise, huh..." Aerith mumbled bitterly.

"He used to be called Ansem the Wise, back when he ruled that world" Artisan narrated in the woman in pink's place. "Of course, that's before we heard the rumors regarding him."

"Rumors?" Compa repeated.

The hooded woman nodded. "Supposedly, Ansem's been leading forbidden research, ones involving the hearts of people. There are even rumors that he has kidnapped children for experiments without anyone's knowledge. And before the world fell into darkness, he had left to continue his research alone, leaving his apprentices alone."

"That's terrible..." IF said with anger.

"How sad..." Compa wept. Donald followed suit with a small cry.

Aerith sighed as she shook her head. "Whatever the case may be, it is undeniable fact that our world was lost to the Heartless and now they are running rampant across other worlds. Anyone lucky to survive ends up in Refuge Worlds like this one."

"That's why we gotta find the King quick!" Goofy urged. "He'd know how to handle this!"

"Wait a minute!" Donald reminded as he dragged the camera down to his face (since when can he do that?) "First, we need that 'key'!"

"'Key'?" the other two girls asked, tilting their heads.

Aerith answered their question. "That's right, the Keyblade..."

Traverse Town – Green Room

"So, this is the key..." the boy said, holding up his Keyblade.

"That's right." Yuffie nodded.

"An ancient weapon from times past, said to be able to unlock any lock and bring forth either everlasting peace or all-consuming catastrophe." Leon explained. "The Heartless have great fear of the Keyblade. That's why they'll keep coming after the both of you, no matter what"

"So, these things can attract those Heartless and are the only ones who can destroy them completely?" Neptune asked. "Did I get all that right?"

"Yup" the ninja agreed.

"What about you guys?" the boy asked. "Leon there was pretty tough in our fight..."

"That's the thing. We could only..." Yuffie tries to explain. "...what's that word, Leon?"

"Disperse"

The ninja nodded in gratitude. "Yeah. That's about as much as we can do by ourselves."

Traverse Town – Red Room

"Without something like the Keyblade, we can only do so much damage to the Heartless before they reform themselves and attack again." Artisan explained.

"I see" IF nodded. "No wonder we couldn't do so much ourselves."

Compa looked down in shame as well. "We tried fighting them off ourselves, but they just came back moments later, so we just ran away..."

Traverse Town – Green Room

"Well, I didn't ask for this!" the boy complained.

"I didn't ask for this either" Neptune said cheerily as she now held her Keyblade that came back thanks to Leon. "But hey, I'm not complaining either!"

"The Keyblades choose their wielders" Yuffie explained. "And they chose the two of you!"

"So, tough luck" Leon brushed off, leaning back near the door to the other room.

"Still, how did all this happen?" the boy tried to recall. "I recall being in my room, then a storm hit the island...and then..."

He then stood up in shock. "What happened to my home!? My island?"

The boy then hung his head in sadness "Riku. Kairi..."

"Poor kid..." Neptune could only say in empathy. Despite not having a home of her own, she could sympathize with the feeling of being lost in an unknown world.

"You know what...?" Leon started. "I don't really know..."

"You should be lucky, kiddo" Yuffie said, lying down on the bed. "Not every Drifter's lucky enough to wash up in a Refuge World like this one."

Traverse Town – Red Room

"Drifter?" the duck repeated.

"Those who were casted out of their home worlds." Aerith explained, motioning her hand to Artisan. "In a way, everyone living in here is a Drifter, but Artisan here is a special case."

"How?" the dog asked.

"Well, you see, before I arrived at this town, my own home world's been gone long." the woman in white answered. "The first world I Drifted to was in fact, Leon's home world. Then once that world started to fall, we all packed up and ran here."

Traverse Town – Green Room

"Drifters, huh?" Neptune repeated. "Didn't know that nice lady was one..."

"Yup. People like Artisan lost their home world then ended up in ours." Yuffie explained. "But the funny thing is, some Drifters like her can't recall much about their home world."

"They can't!?" the girl exclaimed.

"They can't" Leon answered. "No matter how much they can recall, they can't remember a lot of details. They can remember certain things in their lives before, but anything down to their world's name, or important events and cities, they can't recall."

"Didn't we agree that those cases are considered special though?" the ninja asked. "I mean, you and me and Aerith and old Cid can recall our home just fine and I'm sure the kiddo over here can recall his home island, right?"

The boy nodded slowly, still feeling sad.

Traverse Town – Red Room

"So, you girls can't recall much about your home either?" Goofy asked the two girls beside them, having been told as an aside that IF and Compa are also Drifters.

"Yessy!" Compa said rather happily. "I can remember living with my grandpa and signing up for nursing classes. Other than that, I can't remember much about where I live."

"I remember being a member of a guild" IF recalled. "Which one, I don't remember."

"And I remember being the leader of a group" Artisan mentioned. "What group it was, well, you can take a guess."

"Have you figured anything out?" Donald asked.

"We've been trying to survey out through the Lanes Between." Aerith answered. "But so far, nothing has hit her yet..."

Traverse Town – Green Room

"..."

Seeing the boy in a fit of depression, Neptune gets up and walks up to him.

"Hey buck-o. You listenin'?"

No response. He's definitely not a corpse, anyhow.

"Listen, I get that you miss your closest pals. Believe me, if I had pals like yours, I'd feel the same, but that's all the more reason we gotta hustle! They ain't gotta wait for us forever, you know?"

The boy looked at the girl.

"How would you know?"

The girl flashed a grin.

"I don't. But if you kept moving around, I bet you they're doing the same! That's why you can't stop now! Because I won't either."

Neptune then scratched her cheek.

"I mean, sure, I don't know where my home is, what my life was before I came here and all that, but...!"

She raised her Keyblade.

"I made a promise to help someone out, so come heck or high water, I'll keep on going. So, what say you, kiddo? You in?"

The boy stared at the girl.

Then he smiled, raising his Keyblade to intersect with hers.

"That's Sora. Just Sora."

Neptune chuckled. "Okay, Just Sora. You can call me Neptune, or whatever nickname you want."

Sora chuckled back. "Okay then. Nice to meet you, Neptune"

"Still, how'd you get that and still got beat up by Mr. Emo over there?" the girl asked, putting her Keyblade down as she pointed to Leon.

"Actually, Sora won that round. He just passed out after running around all day." the ninja clarified rather cheekily.

"Oooohhhh, so same as me, then! Awesome-sauce!" She raised her right hand. "High-five!"

Sora laughed as he met Neptune's hand in a high-five.

Leon sighed. "Anyway, just tell me when the two of you are ready. We'll meet up with some guests over and-"

"Leon!"

Yuffie's cry interruped them as two of the armored Heartless ambushed them in the room.

"Yuffie, go!"

The ninja ran to the door, leading to the other room. Some could swear they heard a duck yelling for a second there.

"Sora, Neptune, let's go!"

The three pursued the Heartless, who fled by crashing out of the nearby window, all the while the other party stood in confusion...

At the sight of Donald Duck, being perfectly flattened to the wall by the nearby door...

"Oooooohhhhh" Compa cheered at the sight. "Flatty ducky!"

Traverse Town – Third District

"Think we lost them?" Sora asked his companion.

"Methinks that these creeps are setting up an ambush here..." Neptune declares.

"So, they're getting smart now..." the boy complained.

"Hmmm...My Nep Senses are tingling..." the girl said, poking the sides of her forehead with her fingers. "They're sensing an important, live-changing event is about to occur around our corner..."

Meanwhile, above near the watchtower, the party of four braced themselves as the armored creatures from earlier surround them.

"Geez, are these the Heartless guys?" Goofy asked, ducking behind his shield.

"They don't look very cute..." Compa said, wielding a comically large syringe. "Or intimidating..."

"Don't let your guard down, guys" IF warned, brandishing her twin qatars. "They have strength in numbers..."

Donald snickered. "In that case, I've got the spell for them!"

As soon as he fired it off, the spell sent their whole group flying...

"What the...?"

...and tumbling down towards the two figures in the square!

"WOAH!"

"WAAAAAHHH!"

OOMPH!

"Geez, why do I get the feeling this kind of thing should happen to black-haired tsunderes?" Neptune complained as she felt the weight on her back. "You doin' okay, Sora?"

"I...think so..." the boy managed to say.

However, the duck and dog that landed on them managed to see the boy's weapon.

"Oh, the key!"

"Look, Iffy!" Compa exclaimed as she looked at the tiny girl's weapon. "We found it!"

"Yeah..." IF replied, sweat dropping from her head. "Two of them, in fact..."

The ground then started to shake, and after a while, the area they are in is sealed off by pillars. The armored Heartless then appeared and surrounded the group.

"Aw-right!" Neptune taunted them. "Time for them to get nepped!"

Two of the Heartless began to gang up on IF, who deftly dodged their slow and clumsy attacks, and launched swift slices of her own.

"You're too slow!"

Taking one out, she proceeded to dodge the attack of the second enemy, which caused it to trip. Slow and clumsy, remember?

"I got it!"

Compa rushed up and planted her giant syringe on the Heartless' behind, and with a press down on the top of her weapon(?), she takes out her prey.

"Nice one!" IF cheered.

"Thank you!" Compa returned.

Meanwhile, Goofy was trading blows with another of the Heartless. Thanks to their slow and clumsy nature, the knight was able to parry it's attacks and...

"Here I go!"

...with a heavy **Charge**, he took out his attacker and his two reinforcements soon after!

Meanwhile, Donald was busy staring down at two of the armored Heartless, daring the other to make a move.

They tried to pounce on the duck, but he leapt forward, right between the openings the two Heartless made.

When the two Heartless were left in a pile, the wizard prepared a **Fire** spell and roasted the Heartless but good.

"Too easy!"

Neptune was busy clashing with one of the armored Heartless. They certainly fought a little better than the ant-like ones, that's for sure.

But nothing a good ol' Nep combo can't solve.

"Hah!" Downward slash!

"Hey!" Diagonal slash to the right!

"Hi-yah!" Leaping strike finisher!

"All over!" Neptune cheered with a spin for her victory. "You doin' good, buck-o?"

"I got this!"

Sora was busy clashing with one of the armored Heartless as well. Not wanting to lag behind, he launched his strike.

"Huh!" Downward slash!

"Hah!" Forward thrust!

"Hoh!" Downward horizontal finisher!

"Take that!" the boy spun his Keyblade in celebration.

"Phew" Neptune sighed in relief, wiping the sweat from her forehead. "Nice work, team!"

IF, however, remained wary. "Don't drop your guard yet!"

As soon as she said so, large pieces of purple armor suddenly dropped to the ground and started to assemble itself. With giant metallic boots for feet, giant claws for hands, a large cylindrical torso for a body and a silver faceplate for it's head, the Guard Armor faces down it's foes.

"So, this is the boss of the world, huh?" Neptune said in excitement.

"Looks kinda tough" Goofy said, raising his defenses.

"Stay sharp, guys!" Donald rallied the group as they charged against the boss.

The Guard Armor is a tough customer. With its detached body parts, it can handle the party of six with ease.

Neptune, Donald and Compa tried to attack the feet first, but their constant stomping proved fierce resistance.

"Ack! Stop stomping around!" the duck complained.

"You're hurt!" Compa cried. "Let me heal you guys!"

With swift actions, the aspiring nurse patched up Neptune and Donald's wounds.

"Wow! That was nifty work!" the girl in the parka praised.

"I feel all better now!" the duck cheered.

The nurse giggled. "Thanks so much!"

Meanwhile, Sora, Goofy and IF are busy jumping up to deal with the hands, but their scratches and spinning assaults made it difficult to concentrate.

"Won't these things stay put!?" the guild member complained.

"Why don't we try tiring them out?" the boy with the key suggested.

"In that case, I have an idea!"

The dog with the shield bid his time until the claws were about to start their spinning attack. Just as it did, Goofy charged with his shield and parried the attack, causing the hands to recoil!

"I got it! Go!"

Wasting no time, Sora and IF jumped up and slashed down the hands, wiping them out from the fight!

"Nice going!" the boy cheered with a thumbs up.

"Pretty clever of you!" the guild girl praised.

Goofy could only give out his signature chuckle.

"Goofy! Get back!"

Hearing his friend's call, the knight leapt to the left, allowing his fellow guard's charged Fire spell to hit the Armor's feet, eliminating them from the game.

"The limbs are gone!" Neptune cheered.

"Now it's just the torso!" IF exclaimed.

However, the Armored Torso started to move erratically...

"Guys...I think Mr. Heartless' pretty mad..." Compa whimpered, not liking what's happening.

...by spinning around and around until it was charging around the arena like an uncontrollable twister!

"IT'S SPINNING LIKE CRAZZZYYYY!" Neptune yelled as she braced for cover.

"RUN FOR IT!" the guild agent yelled.

And so, the group immediately ran around like headless chickens against the Guard Armor's wrath.

"HELP ME, IFFY!"

Which somehow got Compa hanging on to it for dear life!

"Compa!"

"I got her!"

"I'll help!"

Goofy and Sora immediately stepped in front of the Armor and began to impede it's charge with all their might!

"Grrrrrr!"

"Hrrrrkkkk!"

The two felt their legs giving out, their feet being pushed back, but they did not relent. They stood their ground as the Armor's spinning began to slow.

"It's working!" Neptune cheered. "Go, guys, go!"

After a couple of seconds of guarding, the Armor was stopped and Compa was thrown off to the side...

"WAAAAAKKK"

...and right unto Donald.

"Oooohhhhh, I'm seeing stars..." the nurse managed to say as she felt soothing energy healing her.

As Compa regained her composure, she looked to see a staff held by a duck that she is currently sitting upon.

"Eeep! Sorry, ducky!" the nurse apologized as she tried to help the duck up.

"At least you're safe..." Donald managed to say as he was helped up.

"The thing's about to charge up again!" IF shouted. "Let's finish it off now!"

"Count me in!" Neptune rallied.

"O souls of the Netherworld, burn my foes" the gulld member chanted as flames surround the Heartless. "**Demon Flames**!"

The ensuring fire attack damaged the armor enough that it's concentration broke, leaving it open to one more attack!

"I'll finish this! **Cross Combination**!"

Two diagonal slashes!

Then a power thrust!

And then a downward slash, followed by a heaving attack that sends her opponent into the air!

Just as she jumped up, she was joined by Sora.

Seeing each other in the air, they nodded and performed one last attack on the Guard Armor...

"HAAAAAH!"

...sending it convulsing to the ground. As it floated around in desperation, it stopped after a while and as its inanimate remains faded away, a giant floating heart flew away, now freed from its captor.

A Few Seconds Later...

"So, you guys are looking for us?"

Donald and Goofy nodded at Sora's questions as the boy points to himself and Neptune.

"More like looking for the weapons they're holding..." IF murmured.

"But those Keyblades are very picky with their wielders, so they're pretty much a package deal!" Compa said.

"That's true"

The two turned around to see Artisan, Leon and Yuffie, regrouping with the party.

"They too have been seeking the wielder of the Keyblade" Leon said as Yuffie nodded.

"Hey, why don't you both come with us?" the walking, talking dog suggested. "We can go to other worlds on our vessel."

"Vessel? Like...a SPACESHIP!?" Neptune asked with stars in her eyes.

"Yup!" Goofy confirmed.

The girl squealed in delight. "You hear that, Sora? SPACE TRAVEL! We're going to outer space and into other WORLDS!? This is like, the awesom-est of awesome-sauces! Doesn't that excite you!?"

Sora tried to put a smile. "Y-Yeah..."

Neptune, however, can see the strain on his face. "Come on, these guys are offering to give us a ride around. We can go find your BFF's out there."

"Can we?" Sora asked, still not convinced. "Can we really find Riku and Kairi out there?"

"Of course!" Donald answered.

This got the boy's face lit up.

"Are you sure?" Goofy whispered to his companion.

"Who knows?" Donald replied, pointing to the two Keyblade Wielders. "But we need them to come with us to help us find the King."

"Sora, Neptune, go with them." Leon urged. "Especially if you want to go find your friends."

"He's right. They're not gonna wait around for us, so less moping, more moving, or something" Neptune said with her 'sagely' advice.

"But!"

Donald suddenly said.

"You can't come looking like that."

His companion looked at him.

"No frowning. No sad face, okay?" the duck said with a calm a tone he could muster.

"Yeah!" Goofy said with a big smile. "Ya gotta look funny like us!"

As Donald pushed the A-hyucking Goofy off, he gives his smile. "This boat runs on happy faces!"

"Happy?" Sora repeated.

"Yeah. Come on, buck-o! Give us your toothiest grin! Lesse those pearly whites, Sora! Are you man or ARE YOU MAN!?" Neptune roared.

"Are they trying to cheer him up or forcing him to smile?" IF wondered.

"They say you shouldn't keep smiling for too long" Compa advised, touching her cheek bones. "It will stretch your cheek bones too much and your face will hurt."

"Good thing I don't smile a lot, then" the girl in the blue coat said offhandly.

The nurse-in-training could only shake her head. "You lead a sad life, Iffy..."

Meanwhile, Sora was out there, giving his 'best' smile yet. Well, more like stretching his own to force the biggest smile he could give, but hey, effort.

But judging from the loud laughter given out by Neptune, Donald and Goofy, it cheered them up at least.

"That's one funny face!" Goofy said.

"Ahahahaha! Oh man! Way to force yourself, dude! That...was...hilarious." Neptune guffawed.

"Very funny, guys" Sora sighed. "Okay. Why not? I'll go with you guys."

"And I will be going too." Neptune declared. "Where he goes, I go. Where I go, he goes!"

"Think you guys got room for two more?"

The group looked to see IF and Compa approaching them.

"We want to go with you all!" Compa requested.

"Sure!" Goofy accepted. "The more, the merrier!"

"Wait a sec!" Donald interrupted. "Our ship can handle up to three passengers! We need time to adjust for four, let alone six!"

"Oh, that won't be an issue." Artisan declared as she approached the group. "I've already requested Cid to modify the cockpit of your ship. It should be big enough for all six of you."

"WHAT!?" the duck screamed in protest. "Since when!?"

"Several hours ago" the woman in white said nonchalantly. "I figured this is how things will go, so I placed a request in advance."

"But..."

"Now, ducky. Remember that your King already approves of any meaningful changes to your ship as part of our deal." she then looked to Leon. "Right?"

Leon hmph'ed in response. A confirmatory answer.

"There you have it!" Artisan said. "Don't worry. They're also doing something for me, so think of them as tag-alongs, if it worries your feathers so much."

Donald could channel his frustration one way, by wiping his face so hard that his beak recoiled like a cartoon character would.

"Fine" the duck said, wagging his finger at the two. "But you two better do your part here! This is no pleasure cruise!"

"That won't be an issue." IF said confidently. "When it comes to information gathering and keeping you dunderheads straight, I am you gal."

"And if you need your booboo's treated or a nice meal prepped, Compa's your girl!" the nurse pitched in.

"Well, this is turning out to be quite the gathering, huh?" Neptune chirped, putting her hands on her hips. "Don't you think so, Sora?"

He chuckled, rubbing his nose. "Yeah. We're gonna have a great time. I know it!"

"Oh well, let's do this!" Donald declared as he puts his hand forward. "Donald Duck."

Goofy followed suit. "Name's Goofy"

"Compa's my name!" the nurse placed her hand on top of theirs.

"Call me IF." the guild agent followed as well.

"I'm Sora." the boy raised his hand as he looks at his fellow Keyblade Wielder.

"And I...am...Neptune!" the girl proudly declared as she and Sora placed their hands on the pile.

"All for one and one for all!"

And thus, the party of six was formed. These heroes and heroines would go on to many worlds in search of their friends while aiding others along the way.

This...is their story.

?????? ??????? - ??????

In the middle of a dark room, a green circle showing the party of six is displayed. Surrounding this circle is a group of dastardly villains. Who could have the charisma(=underhanded deals) to gather these vile figures in one place?

"Those little squirts took down that Heartless!" a man with the voice of a snaky oil-salesman said in frustration. "Who'd have thought it?"

"Such is the power of the Keyblade" another man wielding a snake staff said smugly. "The children's strength are not their own."

"Why don't we turn them into Heartless?" a woman laughed evilly, her tentacles keeping her afloat. "That'll settle things quick enough."

"And those blasted animals are the King's lackeys" a pirate said, pointing his hook at the duck and dog talking in the group. "Swoggle me eyes, they're all bilge rates by the look of them."

"Personally, I'm eyeing those two Drifters over there" the first man smoothly said, pointing to the two other girls. "Those two are quite the special case. I know I got my fair share of them back home. I tell ya, those gals will become trouble down the line, ugh."

"Better claim them fast!" the woman with tentacles dared. "Those two would surely have delectable souls for my chamber!"

"Would you two focus here!?" the pirate scolded the two. "These brats are gonna cause trouble on all our decks, ya hear!?"

"Why worry so much? Not knowing what happens next is part of the fun!" another man, or rather, an oversized bag, boasted. "Then again, you are no prize yourself."

This, along with the bag's mocking laughter, set the pirate off. "Shut up!"

"Enough!"

The villains looked to the source of the voice, an evil fairy with green skin, a black robe draped around her, black horns and a staff with an evil green orb.

"The Keyblade has chosen them." the witch said. "Will it be they who conquers the darkness? Or will the darkness swallow them? Either way, they could be quite useful..."

"I agree"

The gathering of villains about-faced to see another witch, one with an oversized black hat and purple skin and goth makeup on her face. On her side is a peculiarly large tome.

She is definitely an old lady.

"The Keyblade is said to bring forth untold catastrophe at the wrong hands. Without the proper guidance, they will surely bring more trouble than their worth."

"What, you think you can do better, Ms. Latecomer, eh?" the first man asked rudely.

She only placed a finger of her lip. "Wait and see."

Traverse Town – First District

"And this is from all of us"

Aerith handed the group a bag of 1000 munny.

"Be sure to spend wisely!" Yuffie warned them. "The wrong purchase could mean your doom down the line!"

"I wouldn't worry about that" IF boasted. "Between me and Compa, we'll make sure that our shopping lists are well-organized."

"Speaking of Compa..." Sora wondered. "Where are she and Neptune?"

"She said she's going to treat her wounds from the last fight" Donald recalled.

Goofy hummed. "I wonder what's taking them so long..."

"HELP!"

The party looked past Leon's group, seeing a familiar someone running down to them.

The sight made Donald and Goofy shield Sora's eyes immediately, while the boy did the same for them with his own two hands.

"Someone, save me from this torture!" Neptune, who is mostly wrapped around in bandages like a mummy, pleaded.

"Nep-Nep! Stay still!" Compa called out, holding an entire spool of bandages. "Your booboos won't heal if you don't rest!"

Neptune gasped. "She's coming back! Sora, hide me!"

"HEY!" IF shouted to the girl with the key. "There are guys here! At least dress up first!"

As the scene before them devolved into chaos, Leon's group could only think one thing.

"Will they really be okay?" Yuffie voiced out their thoughts.

"I'm sure they'll do fine..." Aerith said. "I hope..."

Leon sighed, closing his eyes as he pinched his nose. "This will be a long journey for them, won't it?"

Artisan chuckled. "Maybe. But it won't be a boring one, that's for sure..."

And there we go! Now our story can truly begin! Anyway, the main reason I thought up of this story is because of the common points between the two trios. You have the happy hero (Sora & Neptune), the dopey, well-meaning one (Goofy & Compa) and the one trying to keep the group straight wearing blue (Donald & IF).

With that out of the way, there's one more thing I need to present. Since this story is based on a numbered title, these segments will show up as well! That's right, Neptunia fans, it's time for...

NEPSTATION

Neptune: You're watching Nepstation! Hah! It's feel so good to say that after so many years. How long has it been since we last did this skit? Hm? Ten years!? Get out!

Histoire: Neptune, you're still live on air...

Neptune: *clears throat* Sorry 'bout that! Anywho, since we're here now, lemme introduce you to today's co-host, my new travel buddy Sora! Say hi to everyone, buck-o!

Sora: H-Hi there...

Neptune: *giggles* C'mon, kiddo. Don't tell you get nervous when we're in live television or something?

Sora: I-I can't help it! So many people are out there, watching us. What would they think about me? About us?

Neptune: Well, here's my piece of wisdom for ya. Just try imagining them as a vegetable garden or something. That usually works.

Sora: Okay...*deep breath* Okay! I think I got it!

Neptune: Right. Now then, since we got started, let's actually get down to the news!

---

an image of three Shadows with the Heartless Emblem appeared onscreen

Neptune: Warning! Strange monsters called Heartless have been appearing throughout numerous worlds! If you see any of these creepy crawlies about, do not panic and calmly find a good spot to hide. If you can go contact help, please do so, or you'll become Heartless Chow, and believe us, it is not good chow...

Sora: Have you...actually tried that?

Neptune: ...Anyway, onto the next topic.

Sora: Don't cut me off!

---

an image of a certain guild agent, whose eyes were crossed out, dealing with two moogles appeared onscreen. The guild agent's hand was emptied out of her munny

Neptune: Moogle deals are rising throughout the stock market. You'd think with all this Heartless hub-a-dub, they'd at least hand out some products for charity, right? But nope, they're doubling down their business deals and are developing haggling countermeasures to, I quote, 'prevent exploitation from unsavory parties in the midst of a crisis'.

Sora: Recently, we got a complaint from one of their usual customers regarding this. She said 'These darn moogles are too cautious and greedy! These should really start decreasing prices if they don't want to lose customers at this rate!' She must be really having a hard time, huh?

Neptune: Yup, yup! Which serves as another reminder to all our viewers in times of crisis. Ration your belongings, be they food, clothes, munny, your consoles, whatever you deem

precious like a goblin! Save them and keep them safe and close like a teddy bear! You'll thank me later!

Sora: Okay! Now, onto the last news segment!

---

an image of three little ducklings, wearing a red, blue, and green shirt and cap, appeared onscreen, holding their hands out in joy. Their eyes are however, blocked out with black cross marks

Sora: Recently, a small shop has opened up, ran by the Three Little Duckling, Huey, Dewey, and Louie. Funded and invested by the rising Scrooge International Trading Enterprises, this store has all your basic needs at affordable prices.

Neptune: That's right! From food ingredients, to well-made potions and ethers, these little duckies have it all!

Sora: Come over and purchase your needs today, and they promise that your purchase will be made worth it!

Sora ...How did we turn from complaining about sales to promoting another here?

Neptune: Hey, if people are desperate for alternatives, we'll be sure as heck provide one to them! You know what they say about desperation and all that, right?

Sora: I don't know. Anyway! That's all the news we got for you today!

Neptune: But we couldn't just end our broadcast like this!

Histoire: Wait! But...

Neptune: That's why we're doing something a little special for all you readers!

Sora: We are!?

Neptune: Hm-hm! If you leave a comment down below, the author will reply to that comment as soon as he’s able! Sometimes he could go lightning fast. Sometimes he could be as slow as a snail. But rest assured, he WILL react and reply as soon as he can.

Sora: Communication is a two-way street, or so Compa’s grandfather would say.

Neptune: So, leave your thoughts out there and we’ll be happy to hear them...most of them anyway.

Sora: So, what will we do for added segments for the actual show then?

Neptune: Hmmmmmm...how about some topics? Y'know, stuff that some people wouldn't get about our franchises. We talk about them here and stuff.

Sora: Sounds good. So, are we good now?

Neptune: Yup-yup! So, without further ado...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 3: Chapter 2: To Our Surprise (Bewilderment)

Chapter Summary

> Our party's journey begins in the mystical yet estranged Wonderland. It's twists and turns will surely be a world to remember, especially for the team's own guild agent...

Ocean Between – Gummi Ship Highwind

"And so, Neptune and her friends blast off on their epic world-touring adventure!...Anytime now..."

Neptune deflated as she fell back to her seat. Within the Gummi Ship's cockpit are six seats, one for each of the party members. In front contains a large screen used to see further outside the ship and communicate with the ship engineers, a pair of chipmunks called Chip and Dale. Below them contains three rooms, a kitchen for food and meals, a bathroom for hygiene and a clinic for treatments.

"Calm down, Nep" IF called out. "We need to verify our surroundings first. Not to mention our hero here needs a rundown on how to operate this thing."

"Oooohhhhh, but I'm too excited to sit still, Iffy!" the girl in the parka complained. "I want action now!"

"How about this?" Compa came in with a plate of dessert on her hand. "I know you've been hungry since we left, Nep-Nep, so I made this."

"Oh?" Neptune could only gaze at the yellow jelly in front of her. "Well, this is certainly bigger than a pack of crackers, that's for sure..."

Taking a spoon, she took a bite and...

"...!"

...felt as if her whole world began to spin round and round a billion times in joy!

"WHAT...IS...THIS...WONDROUS...THING!?"

"It's pudding, Nep-Nep!" Compa answered happily. "Egg pudding, to be precise."

Neptune slumped down again. "In all my short(?) life, I've never had the pleasure to experience something wonderful...And to think, it was sitting right here before me..."

She then took the rest of the pudding and cradled it like a newborn baby. "Oh, sweet pudding, I will never be ignorant to your kind ever again. I will feast and consume upon you as you desire me to!"

The guild agent could only sweatdrop at the scene in front of her. "She's gone nuts..."

"At least she will be a bit distracted before we get to our destination" Compa commented.

"That was your aim for this?" IF said worryingly.

"Hey guys!"

Goofy called over as Donald went to his seat.

"I think Sora's got a handle of the controls now."

"Great" IF said, in a not-so-reassuring tone. "Just don't crash into any asteroids on the way, got it?"

"Relax!" Sora said confidently as he got to his seat and his hands on the steering wheel. "I've got this. Besides, I've always wanted to steer a boat!"

"Enthusiasm and actual skill don't always go hand in hand, just so you know" the guild agent commented. "Not to mention, we're in outer space, not above the sea, y'know?"

"Now, now, Iffy" the nurse scolded. "Let Sora have his chance here. Who knows, he may actually get really good at this sort of thing!"

"Yeah, you gotta have faith!" Neptune mumbled with her pudding-filled mouth.

"Hey, don't eat the whole darn thing at once!" IF scolded the female Keyblade Wielder. "And don't speak with your mouth full!"

Donald sighed as he shook his head. "This will be a long journey..."

Goofy could only chuckle. Indeed, it will be a long journey, but it's not without their moments of levity, that's for sure...

Ocean Between – Approaching Wonderland

"...And here we are!" Sora called out to the party. "We made it to our first world, guys!"

Neptune woke up from her power nap. "Already!? Wow, the author sure doesn't know how to write space travel sequences, huh?"

"Nep's weird talk aside, what world is this?" IF wondered as she looked to the screen, showing the image of the world they arrived at.

"It looks...kinda weird." Goofy answered.

"How weird are we talking?" Compa dared to ask.

"Well, we won't know until we get in" Sora said with a raised fist.

"Yeah! Let's go!" Donald urged as he pressed some buttons.

"Wait! I need a moment to..."

And in pillars of light, our heroes are warped in their first world...

Wonderland – Rabbit Hole

And what an entrance they made! As soon as they arrived into the world's atmosphere, they are already falling slowly into the ground.

"Well, at least we're falling slowly this time..." Neptune commented as she laid down mid-air.

"Geez, you sure can read the atmosphere, huh?" IF commented as she is falling down like a skydiver.

Compa moaned as she kept a hand on her skirt. "I knew I should've packed different clothes for the travel!"

"Compa, you're wearing what I bought for you and Nep, right?"

The nurse remembered in a jolt. "Oh yeah!"

The guild agent sighed. "Be thankful that the guys are above us, at least"

Sure enough, the boys are falling right above them, with Goofy also laying down mid-air.

The girl with the key giggled. "At least we won't have to worry about flashing the guys in our little adventure, huh?"

"Alley-oop!"

Neptune did a flip as she landed coolly. IF followed by rolling on the ground to stabilize her landing. Compa, thankfully, landed safely, only having a slight tumble.

Sora and Donald followed suit, landing square on their feet. Goofy, however, fell asleep on the way down and tumbled right down as he landed.

"You are way too relaxed for this..." the guild agent complained as she facepalmed. Her nurse friend could only force a laugh.

Meanwhile, a tiny rabbit in a red coat with a pocket watch ran past them frantically.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! I'm here, I should be there! I'm late. I'm late, I'm late! The queen, she'll have my head for sure!"

Seeing the rabbit running past them, the group now has one option.

"Welp, second rule of exploring, ask the nearby locals!" Goofy declared.

"So, let's go go go!" Neptune cheered and the party sallied forth.

Wonderland – Bizarre Room

"Why did there have to be so many doors for one room?" IF complained as they arrived in the next room.

The party then sees the rabbit from earlier entering a small door, which then closed itself.

"You think we could fit in that?" Neptune asked as they approached the small door.

"I don't think we can, Nep-Nep" Compa said. "Do you know any shrinking spells, Donald?"

The court wizard shook his head in shame. "I tried to master it. All it did was shrink everything down to be smaller than ants, and they never grew back..."

"Still, how did he get so small?" Sora wondered.

"No, you're simply too big."

Everyone gasped back in shock.

"It talked!" Donald shouted.

"The doorknob just talked!" Compa panicked. "Guys, the doorknob just talked!"

"We heard you all loud and clear, Compa" IF calmed her nurse friend down.

"Oh, great and noble doorknob!" Neptune pleaded in her hammiest voice possible. "Grant us your wisdom!"

The doorbell yawned. "Must you be so loud? You woke me up."

"Good morning" Goofy greeted.

"Good night" the doorbell yawned again. "I need a bit more sleep."

"Wait, what do we have to do to get small?" Sora pleaded.

"Why don't you try the bottle?"

The doorknob pointed behind him. "Over there"

Sure enough, a once-flattened table set with two bottles suddenly grew, hitting Neptune who ended up behind the rest of the group.

"Ouch!" Neptune reeled back as she rubbed her behind. "My poor butt..."

"That was quite sudden..." Compa commented as she checked on her friend's behind. She's a nurse in training, remember? "You okay?"

The party gathered around the raised table. On top, two bottles, one red, one blue stood near the upper right edge.

"Hmmmmmm..." Goofy inspected the two bottles. "This blue one here's the shrinking bottle, and the red one here's the growing bottle."

"To shrink or to grow..." the girl in the parka loudly wondered. "That is the question!"

"The answer's obvious!"

Donald impatiently took the blue bottle and took a swig at it.

"Hey!" IF scolded the duck. "Don't just drink it out of the blue!"

"I feel...funny..."

And in mere seconds, the duck shrank and shrank, until he is but a smidge on the floor.

"Waaaaaakkkk!"

"Oh hey, it worked" Neptune said plainly.

"Ooooohhhh, tiny ducky!"

Compa picked up the tiny Donald and started cradling him like a doll.

"This again!? Put me down!"

IF sighed. "Well, at least we know this thing actually works."

"So, what's the plan?" Goofy asked.

Sora looked around the room. "Why don't I go look around for a passageway here? Then we can all go from there."

"Sounds like a plan!" Neptune agreed.

"I'll go look with you." IF suggested. "There might be other things around here that could be useful later."

Sora nodded in agreement.

"All right!" Neptune grabbed the blue bottle. "Down the hatch!"

After shrinking, Goofy and Compa followed suit, joining Donald down on the ground.

"Still..." the guild agent looked around the room. "This is one of the weirdest rooms I've seen. A lethargic doorknob. A table with two potions on it. A flat clocktower next to a bed, a stove near a fireplace and a faucet with a flattened jar below."

IF dared to look above, seeing more of what the room has to offer. "And that's not getting into the stuff above us too..."

She then heard a thumping sound. IF turned to see Sora near the bed that is now flattened to the wall, revealing a passageway near the doorknob.

"Huh..." IF said. "Didn't know you could do that?"

"I didn't" Sora replied. "I remembered being scared to sleep along at night because a monster might jump me below the bed or behind my closet when I was younger."

"And you thought they'd come from a door near the wall?" the guild agent asked in an incredulous tone.

The boy could only laugh nervously at the remark.

"Oh well. Good find, nonetheless, Sora" IF praised.

The boy rubbed his cheek. "Thanks. What about you, IF?"

"I found out a lot just from this room, actually" the guild agent sighed. "Why don't we shrink down to the others so I can tell them too?"

A few minutes later, the party was debriefed regarding IF's findings.

"A whole topsy-turvy room!?" Neptune managed to condense into one question.

"That's just underselling it, Nep" IF sighed. "Still, there's a lot to cover in this room alone, but I don't think we can do that right now"

"Let's go chase that rabbit!" Donald declared as the party ran towards the open pathway

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Wonderland – Queen's Castle

The party arrives into an open courtroom guarded by living cards acting as soldiers. In the middle of the room stood a young girl in a blue dress and in front of her, where the podium is, stood a haughty woman wearing a red and black robe and holding a small scepter with a heart.

Running up near the podium was the rabbit from before. Sounding the trumpet, he makes his announcement. "Court is now in session!"

"I'm on trial?" the girl asked. "But why!?"

"Oooooohhhh, a court trial?" Neptune said in excitement. "The outside worlds' getting more and more varied each day, huh?"

"Something about this court trial smells..." IF guessed with scorn. "And I'm not referring to a kind of stench or anything..."

"What's makes you say that, Iffy?" Compa asked.

Goofy chose to answer instead. "Well, that girl over there doesn't seem to have a lawyer and the lady who's actin' as the judge is definitely the queen here."

The rabbit, catching his breath, continues his announcement. "Her Majesty, the Queen of Hearts, presiding!"

"See?" Goofy said.

"Wow, you seem quite smart, Goofy!" Compa praised the dog.

"Color me surprised..." IF managed to say.

The queen opened her eyes and casted her judgement. "This girl here is the culprit. There's no doubt about it! And the reason is...because I say so, that's why!"

"Wow" the nurse said dully, disappointed at the queen's declaration. "Ms. Queen doesn't waste any time, does she?"

"That is not fair!" the girl in the middle complained.

"Well, have you anything to say in your defense?" the queen dared.

"Of course! I've doing absolutely nothing wrong!" the girl defended with her arms crossed. "You may be queen, but I'm afraid that doesn't give you the right to be so...so mean!"

"Ho boy..." IF facepalmed. "She set herself up for that one...innocent or not."

Sure enough, the queen fumed with anger. "Silence! You dare defy me!?"

"Hey guys, shouldn't we go help her?" Sora asked the party.

"Yeah!" Neptune supported. "That girl's clearly losing the trial case here, and my Nep Senses tell me she's completely innocent about her innocence!"

"Well yeah, but the-" Donald started.

"We're outsiders, so wouldn't that be muddling?" Goofy continued.

"You mean meddling!" Compa corrected.

"Yeah, and that's against the rules!" the dog finished.

"Oh yeah." IF was reminded. "You guys talked about the **World Order** and all that stuff, right?"

"Well, yeah, but..." Sora complained.

"Unless we got a good defense case for her, I don't think we can do much for her..." IF stated her logic. "And I doubt we'd want to go around toppling rulers off their high horses, no matter how insane they are..."

"Hence, the World Order!" Donald said proudly.

"The court finds the defendant..." the queen proclaimed. "...guilty as charged!"

The girl could only reel back in shock. This can't be happening to her! She was just a curious girl chasing after a rabbit in this Wonderland and now this happened!?

"For the crimes of assault and attempted theft of my heart..."

This got Sora's attention. Now he knows for certain the girl's innocent.

"Off with her head!"

The card soldiers turned to the defendant, ready to execute her!

"No! No! Oh, please!"

"OBJECTION!"

"Hold it right there!"

Despite their talk of world order, Neptune and Sora barged into the court in the girl's defense.

"Who are you!?" the queen demanded. "How dare you interfere with my court!?"

"Because this trial is bogus!" the female Keyblade wielder declared, pointing a finger at the queen. "Why? Because we say so, that's why!"

"How dare you-"

Sora cleared his throat before the situation escalates.

"Excuse us, but we know who the real culprit is!" the boy declared.

"Uh-huh. It's the Heartle-" Goofy managed to stop and seal his mouth shut before he finished his sentence.

"Good call" IF whispered. "There's a chance the Queen hasn't seen the Heartless yet. Had he continued, the queen would've accused US as the Heartless."

"That's a huge leap in logic, isn't it?" Compa complained quietly.

Sora continued. "Anyway, she's not the one you're looking for-"

"That's nonsense. Have you any proof?" the queen interrupted, impatiently tapping her fingers at the table.

"Uhhh..."

Neptune immediately ran to IF. "Do we have anything, Iffy?"

The guild agent sighed. "This is why we shouldn't be running around in court trials like this..."

And just like that, the girl was locked up in a golden cage.

"Bring me evidence of Alice's innocence!" the queen declared. "Fail and it's off with all your heads!"

"How much do we need?" IF asked.

"Gather as little or as much as you please" the queen said offhandly. "Report back here in three hours or the trial proceeds without you! Now, off my court!"

The party looked to themselves, wondering what to do.

IF, however, breathed a heavy sigh. "This will be quite the conundrum, would it?"

"So, how did you end up in this...bizarre place?" IF asked the caged girl.

"Well, it was a curious afternoon, and I happen to see a rabbit in a suit." Alice answered. "And then, I fell down a great hole and wandered around this...so-called Wonderland ever since"

"Have you met anyone else while you were here?" Goofy asked this time.

"Quite a few, yes" Alice nodded. "There was this sleepy Doorknob..."

"Ah, the great master of our time!" Neptune commented.

"...then this intelligent Caterpillar, and of course, there's the Mad Hatter and the March Hare in their unhappy Tea Party."

"Unhappy?" Donald raised an eyebrow.

"Yet the strangest of them all was the Cheshire Cat" the captive girl finished. "Thanks to his directions, I ended up in this place, and stood on trial for a crime I clearly did not, and could not, do!"

IF gathered her thoughts. "And then you got caught up in a court trial and now locked in a cage."

Alice nodded. "Yes! Although, I have seen some...strange creatures around and about..."

"Do those creatures look like black blob-like ants?" Compa asked.

"Quite so!" the captive girl nodded. "I saw a few around here, yet...something inside me told me to avoid them like the plague."

"That's good to hear" Sora said. "Those creatures are dangerous. Better steer clear of them as much as possible"

"I will take that under advisement!" Alice happily replied.

"What's the holdup!?" the Queen of Hearts interrupted. "Need I remind you that you are all on a time limit!? Or perhaps you wish to take the trial now?"

IF groaned. "Sorry, we need more clues first." She then turned to Alice. "Just stay put, okay? We'll get you out of there, I promise."

Alice nodded in thanks. "Thank you all so much, kind strangers!"

Wonderland – Lotus Forest

"Okay, so we got a little girl named Alice to rescue" Neptune recapped. "But we need evidence to prove she didn't commit heart theft like a phantom thief."

"Right" IF nodded. "She said she doesn't need much evidence, but if we can gather definitive proof, we should be able to free Alice and prove her innocence"

"But..." Sora wondered. "How do we find the evidence we need?"

Neptune hummed, crossing her arms. "Maybe we should go catch a Heartless and cage them up!"

"But we don't have cages, Nep-Nep" Goofy pointed out.

Donald hummed. "What to do..."

Suddenly, Compa yelled, pointing towards a floating...cat head appearing and disappearing around the premise.

The cat head eventually settled near the tree trunk beside them, with it's main body appearing to pick the head up and attach it to his body!

"And here I thought I've seen everything..." IF complained again.

"Who are you!?" Donald demanded.

"Who, indeed?" the cat deflected. "Poor Alice. Soon to lose her head, and she's not guilty of a thing!"

"Yeah, we kinda got that, stripey kitty!" Neptune complained.

"Hey, if you know who the culprit really is, tell us!" Sora demanded.

"The Cheshire Cat has all the answers-but doesn't always tell." the cat answered. "The answer, the culprit, the cat all lie in darkness."

"Wait!"

However, the Cheshire Cat vanished from their sights.

"Where'd he go!?" Compa looked around frantically for any sign of the disappearing cat.

"They've already left this Lotus Forest." the cat's voice reverbed throughout the area. "I won't tell which exit."

"There are four pieces of evidence in all. Three are a cinch to find. The fourth is tricky. Big reward if you find them all."

There are waiting for any more of the cat's riddling advice, but none came.

"Should we trust him?" Donald asked around.

Only for the cat to suddenly reappear! "To trust, or not to trust? I trust you'll decide!"

And then disappeared again...

"I don't do riddle speak, so I can't really say..." IF said in doubt.

Compa shivered. "I'm kinda creeped out by his sudden appearances..."

"But guys" Neptune pleaded. "Think of the reward! It could totally help us on our journey."

"Nep, you shouldn't trust shady folks like that." the guild agent scolded.

"I, for one, definitely don't!" Donald chimed in.

"You guys..." Nep turned to Sora. "Help me, Sora! You're my only hope!"

"Uhhh, well..." Sora scratched the back of his head. "I mean, we could look for more stuff on the way. Not to mention, we still have some time, so..."

"I get ya" the royal knight nodded. "Rule number three of exploration. Leave no stone or chest unturned, a-hyuck!"

"See! See!" Neptune grabbed Sora and Goofy in a double neck brace. "These two get it! We gotta explore every nook and cranny of this dungeon!"

IF sighed. "I suppose. Anyway, we need more evidence if we're gonna do this. Just be prepared for anything, be it from the Heartless or from that snobby queen."

The group in agreement, decided to search around for the pieces of evidence they needed.

The first piece of evidence was located in the nearby meadow. Luckily, it was nearby and only guarded by Shadows and Soldiers (the ant-like creatures and the armored creatures from before), so it was a cinch to deal with them.

"This appears to be some footprints" Compa wondered, lifting a yellow circle with footprints marked on it.

"Certainly tinier than any of us could make" Sora said.

"This will come in handy." IF agreed. "We better hang on to it."

The second piece of evidence is located on a lily pad, near some mushrooms. Jumping up the mushrooms, the party obtained the next piece.

"A pair of antennae..." IF mentioned, lifting the yellow circle that has the aforementioned antennae attached to.

"No way any of us have that as an accessory!" Neptune boasted.

"Looks like we got another one!" Donald declared.

Moving further ahead, they entered through an entryway on top of the giant tree, which caused the group to fall back into the Bizarre Room.

Wonderland – Bizarre Room

More specifically, on top of the currently inactive stove near the fireplace.

"Hey guys, there's the next piece of evidence!" Compa pointed towards the pink box located near the stove.

Opening the box, they saw a small yellow circle.

"A circle?" Sora wondered.

"Not just any circle" IF took a quick sniff. "It has their scent!"

"Wait, those Heartless have scents?" Neptune asked incredulously.

"I don't think we need to know more than that" the guild agent insisted. "No one is insane enough to be a Heartless Biologist."

"Definitely not me!" the nurse shouted for some reason.

"Well, we got three pieces of evidence!" Donald cheered.

"But uh" Goofy started. "how do we get to the fourth piece?"

"It's way up there!" Sora shouted, pointing to the box on top of the shelf near the faucet.

Neptune groaned. "But I don't see a way there!"

"I think I know how to get there..."

The group turned to IF.

Wonderland – Lotus Forest

After trekking back to the Lotus Forest, fighting Heartless, such as Red Nocturnes, floating red moving bells capable of casting fire magic and Large Bodies, bulky soldiers capable of deflecting any frontal assault, they reached back near the giant tree.

"See that opening up there?" IF pointed to an open passage on top, one accessible through some lily pads.

"Oooohhhh, I smell hidden treasure~" Neptune cheered with clapped hands.

"Let's get up there!" Sora declared.

And as they crossed the passageway...

Wonderland – Bizarre Room

"We're falling again!"

Compa and Neptune landed on top of the faucet of the Bizarre Room.

"Nep! Compa, jump to the shelf!" IF warned as she was falling.

Acting fast, the two girls leapt to the nearby shelf. IF and Sora followed suit, leaving Donald and Goofy behind on the faucet due to lack of space.

"Time to nab the last piece of the puzzle!" Neptune approached the pink box.

"What's inside, Nep-Nep?" Compa asked as they inspect the insides.

"It appears to be claw marks." IF noticed.

"Not just that..." Sora lifted the piece of evidence. "Notice this?"

"What, the yellow circle?" Neptune noticed. "What's the deal with all those?"

However, before they contemplate further, Donald and Goofy's loud cries signaled one thing.

"Well, look what you've found. Nice going"

The return of the Cheshire Cat!

"Look-it here, kitty! We got all four treasures!" the female Keyblade wielder boasted. "Even the tricky fourth one! Eat that!"

"Now we can save Alice!" Sora said confidently.

"Don't be so sure!" the cat warned. "She may be innocent, but what about you?"

"What do you mean?" Compa asked worriedly.

"I won't tell. But I'll give you something"

The cat tossed them a peculiar orb. One with the image of a snowflake on it.

"It's a Spell Orb!" Donald cried.

"Oh yeah!" Neptune recalled. "Didn't you give me and Sora one of these before we left?"

"Yup." Donald nodded. "With the ones I gave you, you two can use the Fire spell. That one has the Blizzard spell."

"Oh, one more thing"

Everyone turned to the cat.

"You may have gathered all that is not necessary. However, there within lies one who has lost their home. One who...Drifted here, you can say."

IF and Compa gasped at the mention.

"A Drifter!? Who was it?" the guild agent demanded.

"Why not find out yourselves? It may be worth it or it may not..." But the cat vanished before he could give a clear answer...

"Vanished again..." the nurse complained.

"I'd like to find more about the Drifter..." IF said. "But right now, we need to get back to the court room. We're running out of time."

"Yeah!" Sora agreed.

"Let's go save ourselves a damsel, ladies and gentlemen!"

And with Neptune's declaration, the party rushed to the courtroom, with only three minutes to spare...

Wonderland – Queen's Castle

"Now, show me what you have found."

The party laid their pieces of evidence on the floor in front of them. They then took their place in the jury's podium while IF stood in the defendant's podium.

"Well, that's certainly a lot of evidence, but I'm still not impressed." the Queen of Hearts said haughtily.

"No one asked you..." IF mumbled under her breath.

"Cards! Bring forth my evidence!"

One of the card soldiers brought a pink box of evidence and placed it near the others.

"W-What the...!?" the guild agent mumbled her surprise.

Suddenly, the boxes all compressed into one and after a good five seconds, returned to five boxes standing in a row.

"What was that?" Compa asked with worry.

"Hmm, checking all five would only be a waste of time." the queen complained. "All right, then. Choose the one you wish to present."

"What!? Why?" Neptune asked.

"Because I'll decide who's guilty based on that evidence" the queen said simply.

"What!? After all the trouble we went to collect it!?" the boy complained.

"You know what?" Donald said. "I'm starting to agree with Neptune here. This whole trial stinks!"

Goofy nodded furiously.

"See!" the female Keyblade wielder shouted. "Mr. World Order agrees with me!"

"Keep it down, you!" the duck scolded the female Keyblade Wielder.

"Silence from the jury!" the queen shouted back and then pointed her scepter at the trembling IF. "Now, choose! One box!"

"Hey..." Goofy noticed something odd. "Isn't Iffy...sweatin' a bunch?"

"Don't tell me..." Donald started.

"*Drat! Drat! DRAT!*" IF internally complained. "*I was so caught up in their pace that I didn't think of what to do about this! Any wrong move and I could risk either Alice's life or the World Order! Why is it I slip up when things matter the most here!?*"

"Iffy looks like she needs help!" Compa scrambled through her kit and got a water bottle. "Here, I got some water!"

Tuning out the noises around her, the guild agent went down to the boxes...

"*What do I do? Which do I pick?*" IF thought to herself as she neared the first box on the left. "*This one? No? This one?" She then approached the middle one. "No, what could it be? If I try to check what's inside, then that snob will assume that's the one I picked.*"

"AGGGGHHHH!" the guild agent shouted in frustration. "WHAT DO I DO!?"

Hearing her scream got the party worried...

"IF..." Sora said in sadness.

"Iffy..." Neptune followed.

The queen however, huffed in annoyance. "Would you quit it with the theatrics? We're still in my court here, you know!?"

Meanwhile, Alice looked on the trial, trembling with fear and sadness.

"They're going this far for me..." Alice said silently. "A stranger they never even knew. Compared to the wild residents of this land, they were willing to risk life and limb for one they don't know. I must repay their kindness somehow..."

As IF continued to pace around in frustration, the captive girl took a look of the trial and noticed something odd.

More specifically, at one of the boxes.

"Is that...?"

Thinking fast, she whistled for the jury.

Neptune heard her cry and looked at the captive damsel, who was holding four fingers up.

"Huh?"

Alice then moved her hand down and pointed her four fingers to her right.

She then raised her hand up and down, hoping they would get the message.

"Four...on the right?"

"What's up, Neptune?" Sora asked his fellow Keyblade wielder.

Neptune then whispered what Alice tried to tell them.

"Four...right?"

He then looked at the boxes again. There are five boxes lined up in a row, and if what Alice told Neptune is right...

"Wait, I think I got it! IF!"

The panicked guild agent looked to the jury.

She noticed Sora and Neptune moving their mouths, but they're not making a sound.

"What are they...?"

"What's the holdup?" the queen demanded. "Hurry up and open one already!"

She ignored the ruler's demands and kept looking at the two Keyblade wielders, who kept speaking with their mouths, but not making a sound.

"*They're saying something, but they're not making a sound.* Four...?"

Eventually, the guild agent realized what they're doing!

"They're mouthing a hint..." the guild agent murmured. "Four...to the right?"

She looked at the row of boxes. Starting from the left, she counted and moved to the fourth box on the right, near Alice and the jury.

"This one?" She looked and see everyone nodding at her.

"Are you certain?" the queen asked. "No second chances!"

"*This is what everyone's saying. Better hope this is right...*" IF then took a deep breath. "Yeah. I'm sure of it."

"Now we shall see who the real culprit is." the queen ordered. "Open it!"

Doing as she ordered, the guild agent opened the box, and in a flash of light and confetti, out came...

"Whew! That took way too long, nyu."

...a girl smaller than Neptune wearing a white sailor uniform with a large yelllow...balloon(?) with a face plastered on it to her side.

"Wha...?" Donald said, his beak opened wide.

"The culprit has been revealed!" Neptune shouted out as loud as her white circular eyes was wide.

"She's...the one I sensed?" Alice questioned.

"What is the meaning of this!?" the queen demanded. "I don't recall seeing that one before!"

"That's because you didn't, nyu." the smaller girl answered. "I was having some nice tea with some rude folks when dark creatures decided to prey on poor me, nyu. Feeling danger everywhere, I hid myself in my Gema here and waited for the creatures to go away, but they ripped it up and scattered it across the place, nyu. Thanks for merging all those pieces up, by the way."

"So that's why there are yellow circles in those boxes..." Compa said, pounding her fist on her hand.

Goofy got to thinking. "Do ya fellers think she might'a been the Drifter that cat was talkin' about?"

"Maybe..." Donald replied.

"Okay, but..." Sora started. "What about Alice? Doesn't this at least prove she had nothing to do with this?"

"Alice?" the smaller girl questioned.

"That would be me!" Alice shouted from her cage. "It's a pleasure to meet you, stranger!"

"Greetings to you. I'm Broccoli, nyu" the smaller girl introduced herself.

"Broccoli?" the talking dog asked. "Like the vegetable?"

"Ooooooohhhh, that's cute~" Neptune cooed. "I'mma call her Puchiko!"

"That's a stretch for a nickname, nyu" Broccoli complained, judging by her narrowing eyes.

The queen, however, became more incensed. "You dare bring discord to my court!? Your presence here proves that you have taken my heart!"

"Now that's a leap of logic!" Sora shouted.

"That's what I said earlier!" Compa commented.

Broccoli groaned. "I heard bad rumors about the Queen of Hearts, but to think they are actually true, nyu. This will be a real pain to deal with."

IF sighed. "You tell me..."

"Enough!" the queen yelled. "This conversation proves that you are all in cahoots with the thief. The same goes for Alice as well!"

"Hey!" Goofy shouted.

"This isn't what we agreed on!" Donald followed.

IF groaned. "We didn't even agree on anything. Why did we end up going through this?"

Slamming her fist on the table, the tyrannical queen gave her order. "Guards! OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!"

The entire court suddenly flattened, and a tower with three wooden gears erected in the middle of the room, which one of the guards turned over, causing Alice's cage to ascend high and the red blinds folding around her!

"Alice!" Compa yelled.

"We gotta get her down there!" Sora shouted, summoning his Keyblade.

"Okay!" Neptune followed suit with her own Keyblade. "Donald, Goofy! Let's nep these guards up!"

"Okay!"

"Coming right up!"

The dog and the duck followed the girl into battle.

"IF, mind helping me out here?" Sora asked the guild agent.

"Huh?" IF asked, feeling down.

Goofy blocked an incoming advance from three troopers, allowing Neptune to unleash combo after combo against them.

Compa looked at the guild agent, feeling worried. "Iffy, are you okay?"

Meanwhile, Donald set one of the guards on fire, causing it to spread to some of his compatriots.

IF barely nodded. "Y-Yeah. I-I'll be fine."

"Loosen your shoulders, nyu" Broccoli said, hopping up to her Gema as she massaged the guild agent's shoulders. "If they're too stiff, you'll freeze up a lot, nyu."

IF chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind. Come on, let's get Alice out!"

At the guild agent's urging, the four proceeded to the tower and tried to move the gears down, but they wouldn't budge.

"This...is quite hard..." Compa groaned as she strained her arms to move the wheel.

"Come on..." IF groaned as struggled just as bad.

The queen, however, took notice!

"What are they...GUARDS! Those fools are freeing the prisoner! SEIZE THE-"

However, a stray chunk of ice hit the queen's face hard, causing her to tumble on her stand, and, well...

"W-Woah!" Goofy immediately shielded his eyes from the sight.

"It wasn't me!" Donald pleaded, covering his eyes too.

"Hey hey hey, isn't this supposed to be rated E for EVERYONE?" Neptune complained at the sight. "Why is THIS a viable interaction, developers!? You're setting a bad precedent there, you know?"

"Why do I feel like that's hypocritical coming from her, nyu?" Broccoli wondered.

"Nep...just shut up...and help us already!" IF complained.

Compa looked around to see the guards flailing around at the queen's state of being. "At least the Card Soldiers are distracted!"

"But...I don't think we can move this..." Sora gave up on moving the wheels.

"Then why not just smash it, nyu?" the tiny Drifter suggested.

Sora, Neptune and IF looked at each other, wondering what to do.

"Not the most elegant solution, but..." the guild agent started.

"...We've got no other options now..." the boy with the key readied his weapon.

"...so let's smack this thing good and save our damsel!" the girl with the key followed suit.

Unleashing all their strength into their attacks, they broke the wheels of the tower, causing it to crumble!

"They got it!" Compa cheered.

"Guys! The cage!"

At Goofy's cry, everyone looked to the cage that descended. As it reached the ground, the red blinds unveiled...

"What the nep!?"

...and the prisoner was gone!

"Alice!?" Donald shouted.

"Did she vanish, nyu?" Broccoli wondered.

"What is the meaning of this!?" the queen slammed her fist again. "Guards, find the prisoner or it's off with all your heads!"

The card soldiers immediately scrambled about to fulfill their queen's orders.

"Looks like she's distracted" IF noticed. "Quick, to the forests!"

The party, with Broccoli in tow, ran before the Queen of Hearts noticed or even remembered what they were doing a moment ago.

Wonderland – Lotus Forest

"That...was a close one, guys..." Compa breathed out.

"No kiddin'" Goofy was all tuckered out.

"Hey" Sora started. "Where do guys think...Alice went?"

"Maybe she got kidnapped..." Donald answered with heavy breath. "While we were fighting..."

"How does..." Neptune started. "That work? That cage was too small!"

Suddenly, one of the nearby flowers bloomed, releasing a giant rock that was flung to the borders of the nearby lake(?)

And on top of that rock, the Cheshire Cat appeared once more!

"Oooohhhh, the creepy kitty..." Compa groaned.

"Have you seen Alice?" Sora asked the cat.

"Alice, no" the cat answered. "Shadows, yes!"

"Where did they go?" Goofy asked.

"This way? That way?" the cat said as he swayed his head. "Does it matter? Left, right, up, down! All mixed up thanks to the shadows!"

"Step deeper into the forest to the deserted garden." the cat advised. "You might find shadows in the upside-down room!"

And thus, the cat vanished again.

"Again with his roundabout riddles..." Neptune complained as she scratched her head. "What do you guys think?"

Sora thought for a moment, but then turned to the guild agent. "Hey, IF, didn't you say you saw something back at that tea room?"

"H-Huh?" IF snapped back in attention.

"Are you sure you're okay?" the boy asked. "You've been kinda out of it since the court trial"

"Y-Yeah. Don't worry about me" IF tried to reassure the party. "Anyway, Sora's on to something. That strange room has to house a strong Heartless, and likely Alice's captor"

"But what did he mean by deserted garden?" the court wizard wondered.

"He means the Tea House, nyu" Broccoli answered. "There's a passageway to the Tea House just over this forest, nyu. Let's go through there"

"All right! Our destination is set!" Neptune declared. "Lead the way, Puchiko!"

"Again, it's Broccoli, nyu"

Little do they know that they were being watched, and not by the shadows...

"...Is she really the one?"

Wonderland – Bizarre Room (Past the Tea House)

"Woah, you weren't kidding, Iffy" the girl with the key said in amazement as she gazed to the top. "I could see Mr. Sleepy Knob from here!"

"Still, how do we get Mr. Heartless to come out?" Compa wondered.

"Those"

IF pointed to two lanterns placed on separate tiny tables ahead.

"Oh! We can light those lanterns up!" Goofy exclaimed.

"That will get the shadow to come out for sure!" Donald cheered.

"That should be simple enough..." Sora hoped.

"Really? Such carelessness from a bunch of dunderheads like you." a cocky female voice taunted.

Everyone looked around to find the source of the mysterious voice.

"Uh, Sora, we should talk about jinxes" Neptune said with furrowed eyes. "It's a pretty important topic you need to know"

"What did I do!?" Sora complained, his eyes turning into white circles.

The duck looked up to see something descended upon them. "Look!"

A figure with long white hair, teal eyes and a black battle suit slowly descended to the nearby lantern. She was gazing upon them with a stern look, gripping her large blade on her right hand.

"Woah, who's the lovely Newtype?" the girl with the key asked. "Anyone you guys know?"

"We've never seen her before" the nurse declared.

"Not me..." Goofy thought aloud.

"Nor I, nyu" the girl with the Gema followed.

The woman flipper her hair. "Of course, you all wouldn't know me. This is the first time we've met."

She then turned to the lanterns behind her. "So, you believe you could draw out the Heartless you're after with these? How clever."

"You know something we don't?" IF interrogated the newcomer.

"Not something you need to know now. However..."

The woman turned her gaze to Neptune.

"I wish to confirm something with you." the woman spoke.

"Oh? Do you want to take me out on a date?" Neptune sputtered.

"Huh?" the woman tilted her head.

"Well, I mean, it's not everyday I get asked out, you know. But hey, you're a really pretty gal, so I'll take my chances and go for it!"

"Wha-That's not what I'm asking you!" the woman shouted, annoyed.

"Oh really? Wow, I mean I offered and all, yet you want to remain a lone wolf. So sad..." Neptune deflated.

"Since when did you get that idea!?" the woman shouted again. "And you didn't offer anything!"

Neptune snickered. "Wow, you are so fun to mess with! Your reactions are just a blast to hear!"

"Yeesh. Get a better hobby, would ya?" IF commented.

"This must be how Nep-Nep expresses her love!" Compa said with a smile. "I think"

"Really?" Sora wondered.

"Don't get caught up in their pace, nyu" Broccoli warned the boy.

The newcomer growled. This is so not her day. "I came here to probe your strength, but it seems you think I'm not much of a threat to you, aren't you?"

Everyone looked at her with confused wariness.

"In that case, I'll have to teach you how to treat people like me with respect!"

She readies her blade, and lunges straight at Neptune.

"Nep-whoa!"

She immediately drew her Keyblade and met the stranger's attack head-on.

"Nep-Nep!" Goofy and Compa yelled.

"Woah!" the girl struggled with the newcomer's attack. "She's...really tough!"

"Good thing we took a small break at the Tea House, nyu..." Broccoli commented. "Otherwise, Nep would have buckled already with all that running around you've been

doing."

"Count your blessings, I guess" Donald said, bringing out his staff.

"We should get going while she's distracted." IF suggested. "Compa, make sure Nep's patched up."

"Leave it to me!" Compa saluted as the rest of the group moved to the lanterns.

Neptune repelled the attack and started unleashing combos against the stranger.

"Hiyah!" Upward slash!

"Hah!" Mid-air thrust!

"Is this the best you got?" the white-haired stranger mocked. "Surely you can do better!"

"Hey, I just got started on my journey here, so bear with me on this one, 'kay?"

"Rah!" Rolling mid-air slash!

The attacks barely fazed her!

"You done now?" the woman readied her attack. "Then taste my **Lacy Dance**!"

Rushing up to Neptune, she launches the girl into the air, attacked her with two spinning kicks and ended it with a spinning slash from her sword!

"Ouch!" Neptune cried in pain. "This Newtype's on a whole different level!"

"Hang in there!" Compa immediately got to work patching up her wounds.

"Hmph" the woman looked at her opponent with contempt. "Getting aid from humans. I suppose this is what happens when you don't remember what you're supposed to be."

"Hey, don't look down upon us!" Compa yelled at the stranger.

"I'm not insulting you, I'm stating a fact." the woman spoke dismissively. "So long as you are bound by weaker beings, you will never defeat me."

The nurse growled. She can't stand being insulted! She can't stand her friends being insulted even more!

"Welp, I don't have to!" Neptune got up after the nurse bandaged her wounds. "I just had to make sure you don't get in our way!"

"Bold words from...hm?"

She looked around and noticed that her opponent and the nurse were the only presences she could see.

"Woahahahahahoooo!"

The three looked up to see Goofy locked in battle against three Red Nocturnes. IF and Donald and currently dealing with a Large Body in the lead.

"I got you all, nyu!"

Broccoli threw some healing tea around to keep everyone topped off, but...

"Sora!" Donald called. "You got the lanterns?"

"Almost!" Sora called from one of the lantern stools.

"No, you don't!"

The woman attempts to charge at Sora...

"Sora!"

"Look out!"

"Huh?"

...but something was coming her way.

"**Mekara Beam**!"

It was Broccoli, and she shot laser beams (from her eyes!?) straight at the stranger, pushing her back.

"What even was that!?" the woman complained.

"We got you now! **Cross Combination**!"

Neptune took the opening and slammed the newcomer down hard!

"Now I'll show you! Time for your injection!"

Seeing a chance, Compa brought out her syringe and applied something to the stranger.

"Hrk! I can't...feel my arms..."

The Newtype tried to stand, but tumbled down, losing the feeling in her body.

"What..." the stranger lashed out. "What did you do!?"

"Oh, I just used my **Paralysis Agent** on you. You wouldn't be able to walk right for a bit." the nurse cheekily explained as she chuckled. "How's that for a weakling!?"

Seeing an opening, Sora took the chance and lit up the second lantern.

"All right!" the boy cheered. "I got them!"

"Nice!" IF gave a thumbs up, just as the rest of the group finished up the Heartless near them. "Good work, everyone."

"Not bad..."

The woman who attacked them slowly got up with her legs, the agent wearing off faster than anticipated. "...Distracting me while your comrades got to work. I didn't take you to be sneaky."

"This is called team effort!" Donald boasted. "Learn it!"

"There's only so much you could do by yourself, nyu" Broccoli said sagely.

The woman huffed as she floated up. "I'll take that under advisement. But, I'm afraid that this little skirmish ends now"

"She's going to try something..." IF warned everyone. "Guards up, everyone!"

With such dazzling speed and grace, the Newtype darted across the area, striking down each and every Heartless in the room!

"HAH!" There goes the Soldiers!

"Take this!" Down goes the **Green Requiem** Support (these green floating bells heal others, by the way)

"Away you go!" Goodbye, flock of Red Nocturnes.

"And now..." Her eyes are now set against a group of three Large Bodies that just spawned. "...your end!"

She then slashes through the big-bodied Heartless, but when it seemed like nothing happened, the Newtype snapped her fingers, causing several slashes to hit them, wiping them out for good.

"Holy..." Compa started.

"...Smokes!" Neptune finished.

"Wow" Sora could only gasp in amazement at the destruction the Newtype unleashed.

"See that? That's a glimpse of my true power." the Newtype, who retrieved her blade, boasted as she began to float away. "Now if you realize what's good for you, I advise you to take this matter seriously when next we meet. Otherwise, you will not live our next encounter..."

"Okay~" Neptune waved back at the white-haired woman. "I'll have some pudding ready for you!"

"I can't tell if you are teasing her for the fun of it or are you really...you know..." IF wondered.

"Know what?" the girl with the key asked, tilting her head.

"Nothing" the guild agent shook her head. "Anyway, we'd better get moving. Let's see if that Heartless will spawn right now"

As the Newtype saw the party leave, she had one more thought. "*She didn't seem completely fazed by the threat of my **Infinite Slash**. On the other hand, she said that she just 'started out'. Does that mean she really doesn't recognize that's she's...*"

She shook her head. "*No matter. She's not good enough. If she doesn't even exude an iota of power comparable to our kind, then she's not the one. But...*"

The Newtype placed a hand onto her heart. "*Why does my heart begin to beat so fast whenever I was near her?*"

Wonderland – Bizarre Room (Outside the Queen's Castle)

As the party returns to the part of the room with the table and the doorknob, the Cheshire Cat reappeared on top of the table.

"I see you figured a way to light the way, I see" the cat spoke in his usual roundabout manner.

"That's right, kitty!" Neptune boasted. "Now the boss will definitely appear for sure!"

"Oh yes, the shadows should be here soon" the cat danced as he points his finger up. "Are you prepared? Because if not, too bad."

The cat and the nearby bottles vanished, and something dropped down near the table and jumped over to the other side, revealing it's shape.

With long, black paper arms held on by two short shoulders, four long bony legs and a head with faces, the **Trickmaster** makes it's entrance.

"Who ordered a clown for a boss here?" IF complained.

"I'd hire a whole circus if I could!" Neptune replied.

"Can we save the witty jokes for later!?" Donald complained. "Here it comes!"

Spawning two batons, the Trickmaster began it's attack. It's baton swings were fast, but dodgeable. However, the uneven height gives it an unprecedented advantage.

"I've got this!"

Neptune unleashes an air combo at it...

"Take that!" A downward slash, then an upward slash and then a vertical spin slash!

...only to fall down to the ground.

"Ugh, I can see the problem now..."

"Come on, Nep-Nep!" Compa urged her friend from above the table.

Broccoli is trying to gain some distance, when she noticed the stove emitting smoke.

"Hey, ducky"

Donald looked to the tiny girl.

"Think you can put this stove out of commission, nyu?"

"Why?" the duck wondered.

"Call it my intuition, nyu"

The court wizard nodded, blasting the stove thrice with his newly-acquired **Blizzara** magic to stop the nearby stove.

"Okay, got it!"

"Good, now keep that thing busy, nyu!"

As Broccoli ran off, Goofy and IF are trying to launch fruitless attacks against the tall Heartless, but due to it's height advantage, damage has been sporadic.

IF groaned. "My magic can't reach to him from this height..."

"Gawrsh. We can only hold it back for so long!" Goofy kept his shield up to block incoming attacks.

"Then we gotta come up with a plan!" Sora said as he blasted the Trickmaster with Blizzard spells.

After a while, the Heartless began to converge on the stove, and placed its batons on top of it...

"What's it doing?" Compa wondered.

"Is it trying to..." IF started, then an idea hit her. "I see now! Sora, Nep, Goof! Hit it now!"

Sora nodded. "Gotcha! Come on, guys!"

"Oh yeah!"

"Let's get 'im!"

With focused strikes and critical combos, the trio hit the distracted Heartless from the spot under his legs and brought it down.

"It's down!" Compa called.

"Time for an All-Out Attack!" Neptune rallied everyone around her.

The party of six converged and launched their best attack at it!

"Take that!" Goofy launched himself up in the air, charging at the head like a **Rocket**.

"Here's your treatment!" Compa blasted the Heartless at range with a **Paralysis Agent**, further stunning the enemy.

"Feel the icy chill!" IF chanted, unleashing a pillar of ice against it. "**BLISTERING COLD**!"

"Ready, Sora?" Donald asked the young Keyblade wielder, who nodded.

"**FREEZE**!"

The two unleashed a combined Blizzard attack at it!

"And the finisher! **CROSS COMBINATION**!"

After Neptune unleashed her six-plus-one combo at it, the Heartless managed to get up and in a fit of anger, swung their baton erratically.

"Dodge! Dodge! DODGE!"

In the chaos, the Trickmaster managed to stomp out the table and the chair, leaving the group without any place to get up.

"This is bad!" Donald complained.

"It's going to be way harder to hit it now!" Compa complained too.

"There's gotta be some way to get a hit on it!"

IF looked around frantically, when she found her solution.

"Everyone! I got something special for it!"

Or more precisely, it found her.

"You mean..."

Realizing what it meant, she immediately turned to the group in a panic...

"EVERYONE, DUCK!"

...and pushed everyone down. Anyone who hasn't immediately ducked for cover.

"**MEKARA...BEAM!**"

Broccoli unleashed her mightiest beam attack yet against the Heartless. Unable to bear it's assault, it ends up dizzy and completely weakened.

"It needs one last keystroke, nyu!"

Hearing the tiny girl's cry, IF turned to Sora.

"Hey, mind finishing this off?" the guild agent asked.

Sora gave a thumbs up. "Gladly."

He then ran to IF and jumped!

IF used her hands as an improvised jumping pad, giving Sora extra room to jump higher.

"Goooooooo!"

With Neptune's loudest cheer, the boy landed one last strike against the Trickmaster, sending it spiraling down to it's defeat. As a large heart exits it's body, the tall Heartless is now vanquished.

A loud yawn was then heard behind them.

"What a racket..." It was the sleepy Doorknob.

"How did he sleep through all that fighting?" Compa wondered.

"I wish I could be as half as good as our mighty Doorknob!" Neptune said, praising the Doorknob for it's sleeping abilities.

"How's a doorknob to get any sleep?"

As he let out a mighty yawn, opening it's mouth wide, a light in the shape of a Keyhole appeared in his mouth.

"What is that?" Donald wondered.

"Seems like some sort of keyhole" IF answered. "But to what, exactly?"

As the group pondered about it, the tip of both Keyblades lit up and in swift motion, aimed themselves on the magical Keyhole, emitting beams of light against it. As the growing light that emerged from the Keyhole faded, a loud locking sound was heard as the Doorknob closed his mouth and went back to sleep.

"What was that just now, nyu?" Broccoli asked as she approached the group.

"You hear that too?" Sora asked. "Sounded like something closed."

"Yeah, but..." Neptune crossed her arms in thought. "What did we close, exactly?"

Suddenly, a piece of green fell near them.

"Hey, isn't that one of your gummi ship parts?" Compa asked as she grabbed the fallen piece.

"Welp, this gummi ain't like the others" Goofy answered. "No, sir."

"We'd better hold on to it" IF suggested. "Maybe Cid might know what to do with it."

"Splendid. You're quite the heroes and heroines!"

The Cheshire Cat took the chance to reappear once more on top of the reformed table.

"If you're looking for Alice, she's not here. Off with the shadows, into darkness."

And then the cat faded once more...

"No..." Sora bemoaned.

"Does that mean Alice is not in this world anymore?" Compa asked.

"Doesn't seem like it..." Goofy answered sadly.

"..." IF had a downcast expression on her face.

"Come on, guys!" Neptune rallied the group. "We ain't done on our adventure! If my meta-knowledge is correct, damsels like Alice would usually be taken right at the enemy's stronghold. So, let's keep on going until we get there!"

"Neptune..." Sora's face lit up, his determination restored. "Yeah!"

"Then let's go back to our gummi ship, everyone!" Donald urged.

"Sounds good!" Compa then turned to Broccoli. "What about you, Miss Broccoli?"

"I'm planning to stick around, nyu."

Everyone stopped for a moment.

"Huh? Why?" Neptune asked rapidly.

"There's still quite more to this place that I haven't seen yet, nyu." the tiny girl answered. "Besides, I want to show Alice more of this place as a way to thank her for helping out."

"Oh, Broccoli..." Goofy shed a tear at the act of kindness.

But then, her eyes narrowed as a sinister aura emanated from her.

"...That, and to sabotage that stupid Queen at every opportunity I can, nyu..."

Everyone sweatdropped at her not-so-silent mumble.

"...So much for a pure motive..." Donald mumbled. Compa could only mutter a laugh.

The tiny girl approached IF and gave her a piece of paper.

"Huh?" IF, in her stupor, noticed the paper on her hand.

"It's my contact info." Broccoli stated. "I can't go with you, but I can at least keep in touch. It's what you asked of me back there at the tea party, right?"

IF thought for a moment, but then she remembers. "Oh, right. You even took one of my phones for that..."

"You were complaining so much about it, but your nurse friend here made you relent. Remember?" the tiny girl reminded.

The guild agent sighed, eyeing her now-empty belt. "Yeah, just now. I'm really going to part with these babies, huh?"

"At least for now. Drifters have to stick together, even if we're apart, right nyu?" Broccoli reassured the guild agent. "So, don't worry about me. I can handle myself now that I am familiar with the Heartless, nyu."

IF gave a sad nod. "Sure. Thanks..."

"And don't forget to loosen up, okay?"

The guild agent chuckled. "Yeah, yeah. I hear you"

"Don't forget to write, Puchiko!" Neptune waved their new friend goodbye.

"For the last time, it's Broccoli, nyu!" the tiny girl complained once more.

Wonderland – Rabbit Hole

As the group returned to their first landing zone, Compa groaned in relief. "Good thing we're leaving! I don't think I can stand getting jump scared by that freaky kitty for another second!"

"Hey, this world ain't too bad!" Neptune said optimistically. "Sure, it felt like a werid acid trip here, but we had fun!"

"This is no pleasure cruise, Neptune!" Donald scolded the girl.

"Calm down, Donald..." Goofy tried to calm his friend down.

"..."

IF's pace was slow as the group returned, something Sora and Neptune noticed.

"Hey...IF?"

The guild agent turned to see her two friends, looking at her with worry.

"You doin' okay, Iffy? Got a stomach ache or something?"

She shook her head. "No, it's..."

The rest stopped and went to the sad guild agent.

"Are you okay, Iffy?" Compa asked softly.

"You feelin' alright?" Donald asked.

"It's just..." IF started. "I just..."

She then bowed her head in shame. "I'M SO SORRY!"

"Huh!?"

Everyone else gasped in shock.

"Sorry?" Goofy started.

"For what?" Sora continued.

"For messing up..." the guild agent cried, tears starting to leak out of her eyes. "If I wasn't so careful around the snotty queen, I could've come up with a better plan to save Alice! Instead, all I did was getting pranced around in this weird world with all it's weirdness and I couldn't adapt fast enough! If I were faster, calmer, maybe we could've sprung Alice out without smashing that tower in the first place..."

"IF..." Donald bemoaned.

Neptune sighed. "Iffy, look at us"

She did as instructed, looking at the friends in front of her in spite of her watery eyes.

"I get it. You messed up. We could've done things better. But in my point of view, things could've gotten a lot worse." the girl in the parka started. "Besides, if you haven't figured out what we were saying back at the court, we wouldn't have gotten Puchiko's help. And you trusted me and Compa to keep that Newtype busy while you got Sora to light those lanterns. Face it, if we haven't done that, that Heartless boss wouldn't spawn and that Newtype would've wiped the floor with us."

"Yeah." Sora agreed, scratching his cheek. "Besides, you stuck with me and learned about that weird room more than I did. And without your advice, I don't think we would've gotten all those four boxes. And we definitely would've made things worse for Alice if you haven't reeled us back in."

IF sniffed. "You guys..."

"So, what we're basically saying is, you don't need to apologize to us, Iffy! We're friends, after all! We win or lose together!" Neptune said happily.

"Yeah" Sora nodded. "Friends rely on each other. There's no need for favors or anything like that."

"What they said!" Goofy agreed.

"We rely on you, IF" Donald stated. "So, learn to rely on us too!"

"We're a party, Iffy!" Compa reminded her close friend. "All for one and one for all, right?"

"Everyone..."

IF let the tears and snot flow out of her face, allowing Compa to wipe them off with her handkerchief.

"Look at me. Crying out over something like that. I must look so pathetic."

"Yeah!" Neptune said, putting her hands on the back of her head. "Really pathetic."

"Neptune..." Donald scolded.

"But you were willing to share your troubles with us." the girl continued. "Nothing wrong with that!"

Sora nodded. "So, watch over us, IF. We'll watch each other's backs. It's what friends do!"

"And if you still feel bad about yourself" Compa said, placing a comforting hand on IF's own. "Strive to be better. We'll help each other get better, too!"

IF sniffed, wiping the last snot coming out of her nose. "Yeah. Thanks, guys. Thanks a lot"

As the party headed back, the guild agent felt her chest feeling lighter, as the value of trust enriched her own heart. For a person like her, who kept her feet firmly on the ground, she felt that she has become like the wind for the first time.

A gust of wind that blows the way forward for her friends...

NEPSTATION

Neptune: You're watching Nepstation, the first and only stop for the latest world buzz! Today, we're here with a different guest! Say hello to everyone!

Broccoli: Hello, nyu! My name is Broccoli! Remember, Broccoli! Not Puchiko!

Neptune: Oh, Puchiko! You're such a kidder!

Broccoli: I'm not, nyu!

Neptune: Anyway, since we're live, let's give you the latest news!

Broccoli: Why is she the hostess again, nyu?

---

an image of a castle appeared, with numerous holes appearing in front of it's yard

Neptune: First up, mysterious holes have appeared around a certain castle garden! Latest reports said that the residing family's little girl was last seen around said garden diving into one of said holes.

the image changes to that of a blonde girl with her face obscured by blurs

Neptune: Wherever she may be, we here at Nepstation pray for the swift recovery of said girl.

Broccoli: And an advisory to everyone. If you see something mysterious, do not interact with them without proper advisement, nyu! Curiosity is said to kill cats, you know?

Neptune: Hm-hm! Speaking of cats...

---

an image of a pink striped cat and a scared woman wearing a peach sweater appeared. Her eyes were crossed out

Neptune: There have been recent reports of mysterious talking cats lingering across a strange forest. One is said to be a disembodied head, speaking riddles that drove people mad.

Broccoli: We have an insider from a certain nurse who was walking around the area, nyu. She said 'NO TO FREAKY KITTYS! I NEVER WANTED TO ENTER THIS FOREST AGAIN!'

Neptune: Oof. That weird kitty head sure spooked her something fierce, huh?

Broccoli: That was not even the worst of it, nyu.

Neptune: It wasn't!?

---

a blurred image of a black cat appeared

Broccoli: Nope. There was a case from Witness AK, who said 'This black cat keeps telling me to go to bed early. It's really obnoxious! Also, he insists that he's not a cat, but I really doubt it.'

Neptune: Man, I'd hate to have my late-night gaming sessions be interrupted by something called sleep!

Broccoli: That is terrible for your health, nyu. Just be sure to take a cat nap every now and again, okay?

Neptune: Okay, okay. Enough about kitties. Let's head to our last headline!

---

an image of a messy table, filled with ruined delicacies, appeared onscreen

Broccoli: We have recent reports that a party was recently raided by mysterious card soldiers. When we interviewed the partygoers, they go to say things like 'The Queen is a selfish witch!' and 'We were just having an unhappy time! What did we do wrong?'

Neptune: Wow, are we really discussing about a turf war in this show?

Broccoli: Maybe, but no matter the case, always remember to party moderately, lest all your happiness in the future will all go down the drain, nyu!

Neptune: Uh, I think we're getting off-topic now.

Broccoli: Whatever do you mean, nyu? This show is chaotic, so I may as well lend to the vibe, nyu.

Neptune: Hey, hey, hey! We're a news show, Puchiko! We provide the latest buzz to all the worlds out there! We are trusted and fair!

Histoire: Neptune, we're running out of time. Please wrap it up!

Neptune: Oh, what is this!? A mismanaged award show!?

Histoire: Neptune, please calm do-

WE ARE EXPERIENCING TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES, PLEASE STAND BY

Sora: Okay, so since the host is out, I'll close us out. Let's read some of your reviews first.

Sora: Wait, this script’s for the other site! What am I supposed to read for this one!?

Neptune: I got you, buck-o!

Sora: Gah! Neptune!? Are you okay now?

Neptune: *sighs* Yeah. Sorry for the outburst. Couldn’t help it back there. Anyway, let’s talk about something here.

Sora: What will we talk about?

Neptune: Anything! How about...oh, the **World Order** our royal duck's talking about?

the words World Order appears onscreen

Sora: Okay then, what's so important about that?

Neptune: Well, basically, the Worlds out there have been living in relative peace, each with their set of rules and regulations. Since we're all outsiders, we can't mess around too much in their worlds, be it who rules in it, what laws they established, all that kinda stuff.

Sora: I see...

Neptune: Though as this chapter showed, sometimes you gotta step up the plate, especially when the bad guys like the Heartless show up and start wrecking the place. These guys don't care about the World Order one whit and that's bad!

Sora: *nods* I'm starting to get it.

Neptune: Oh yeah, according to the duck, sometimes it means that we gotta blend in the world so they won't notice we're outsiders at first glance. That's not gonna happen in every world, but it's something to keep in mind.

Sora: So...we're gonna look different in some worlds?

Neptune: Yup, yup! Ooooohhhh, just thinking about how we're gonna look in some worlds is getting me excited~!

Sora: Good to know you're keeping up!

Neptune: I gotta be in this world-touring adventure! It's not everyday I get to travel to places based on Disney films, you know?

Sora: Haha! So, you say! Anyway, that's all from us here at Nepstation.

Neptune: So, from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 4: Chapter 3: Road (Trial) to a Hero

Chapter Summary

> The party's next stop is at the majestic Olympus Coliseum, where dreams of heroism and glory are realized, from wandering Drifters to aspiring adventurers!

Traverse Town – First District

"So, you found yourself a gummi piece, huh?" Cid said, inspecting the green gummi piece Sora and his party found in Wonderland. "Lookin' at a glance, this is no doubt a special thing."

"Think you can get it to work?" Sora asked.

"Could take a while" the engineer answered. "Need to study the thing, check for compatibility, all that techy stuff you won't really get."

"Hey!" the boy felt offended! He's not dumb!

"Well, you got me on that!" Neptune, on the other hand, has little to no shame in admitting her flaws.

"C'mon, Neptune" Sora deflated.

Cid laughed. "Alright, I'll get started on this thing, ASAP. I'll call your guild pal up once I'm done."

"You got it!" Neptune nodded as the engineer went off to work.

"We're back!"

The rest of the party came back. Donald and Compa, in particular carry bags of supplies with them.

"Welcome back" Sora greeted the party. "How'd it go?"

"We got all the supplies we need!" Compa said proudly. "We're good to go!"

"We just got back from Artisan" IF reported. "She handed me more of my old phones she modified in case we run into other Drifters"

"Findin' other Drifters, hmmm" Goofy wondered. "Was that the favor that Artisan asked from you?"

The guild agent nodded. "That's right. She only got one modified before we left last time, and it was a test run of sorts. Once we called up Broccoli, Artisan felt confident that the rest of the modified phones will work."

"You got more than one of them!?" Donald shouted.

IF snickered, turning back to show her belt filled with numerous phones of differing colors. "Behold! My innumerable companions who remained with me even as I Drifted here into the unknown!"

The boys looked in awe at the numerous devices kept nicely tucked around her belt.

"All of those..." Sora started.

"Are yours!?" Donald finished.

"That sure is a lot of 'em..." Goofy commented.

Compa, for her part, just giggled at the sight.

"Look at that!" Neptune guffawed. "Iffy's cellphone addiction is actually helping us big time!"

"Don't call it like that, Nep-Nep..." the nurse scolded the female Keyblade wielder.

"So, what about the gummi part?" the royal wizard asked the two.

"Oh, Cid said he'll examine it" the boy with the key informed them. "It'll take a while though"

"In that case, why don't we head off to another world in the meantime?" Neptune suggested. "It'll be better than waiting around all day."

"Making good use of our time, eh?" IF said, tucking herself into her coat. "Never thought a good idea came from your brain, Nep"

The girl looked proud though. "Hey, I can be smart and think of cool plans if I want to. It's just easier to just swing at things first, y'know?"

"That's an unhealthy line of thought..." Donald murmured as he shook his head.

"But, sure" the guild agent agreed. "Besides, Cid also knows my cell number, so he'll hit me up for updates."

"Yeah. That's what he said" Sora agreed.

"No more complaints?" Neptune pointed forward. "Then let's sally forth, my friends!"

Olympus Coliseum – Entrance

Upon entry, the party took a deep breath as they bore witness to the majestic arena entrance graced by the Greek Pantheon, greeted by the sounds of triumphant horns. The two giant golden statues of gladiators crossing swords gazed down upon the giant door, beheld by painted lightning from above.

"Wow!" Compa said in awe. "This looks like a place above the clouds!"

"It definitely feels like we're up in the clouds" Goofy thought aloud as he looked to the clouds forming just out of the windows.

"An arena constructed above the heavens..." Neptune suddenly started to narrate. "A battlefield where warriors across the land clash for the prestige and favor of the gods themselves! This is the truth of the Coliseum!"

Everyone around her sweatdropped.

"Well, that would be really cool" Sora said, scratching his cheek. "Why don't we go check it out then?"

"Not like there's anything else to do here..." Donald said as the party continued forward.

Olympus Coliseum – Foyer

As they enter the small lobby, they are greeted by the sight of a tiny man with small red horns and a small tail to boot, tidying up a board near the entrance to the arena.

"Um..." Sora attempted to approach the tiny man...

"Good timing" the man said without looking back. "Give me a hand, will ya?"

He pointed to the large square pedestal on the side. "Move that pedestal over there for me. I gotta spruce this place up for the gaaaaaames!"

"What's he on about?" Neptune wondered.

"Dunno, but we may as well help him out" Goofy suggested.

And so, the party tried to move the pedestal out...

"Hrkkkk..." Sora struggled.

And they tried...

"Grrrrr...Move!" Neptune complained.

And they tried...

"Hrrrrrr!" Goofy tried to push

"This thing won't budge..." Donald murmured.

And they kept trying...

"Ooooohhhh!" IF exclaimed.

"Move...please!" Compa whimpered.

But they could not even budge the pedestal!

"It's way too heavy!" Sora reported back to the tiny goat man.

"What!? Too heavy?" the goat man shouted. "Since when have you been such a little-"

But as he turned to speak to his requested, he deflated.

"Oh. Wrong guy. What're you doing here?" the tiny man demanded as he jumped down where he was standing on. "This here's the world-famous Olympus Coliseum-heroes only!"

He ends up power-walking straight up to Donald, scaring the duck back. "And I got my hands full preparing for the games. So run along, pip-squeaks."

His demands were not that well met, judging by Sora and Neptune's pouting faces.

The goatman placed his hands to his sides. "Look, it's like this."

"Heroes come from all over to fight ferocious monsters right here in the Coliseum" the tiny man began his pitch, walking around.

"You got heroes standing right in front of you!" Donald complained as he crossed his arms.

"Yup!" Goofy played along, putting each of his hands on Sora and Neptune's shoulders. "These two are real heroes chosen by the Keyblade!"

"And we're real heroes, too!" Compa chimed along.

"More like heroes in the making, but hey..." IF shrugged.

"Heroes?" said goatman pointed at the two Keyblade wielders. "Those runts!?"

He eventually started laughing out loud, as if he was told a cosmic level joke.

"What's so funny?" Sora boasted. "We've fought a bunch of monsters!"

"Yeah!" Neptune gasped in annoyance. "Besides, have you even seen our stats, goatman!? We're probably WAY stronger than you!"

But he kept on laughing. As he stopped, however, he tries to push the pedestal from before.

"Hey, if you can't even move this..."

And he tried...

"...you can't call yourself..."

And he kept trying, even as Sora and Neptune crossed their arms under the gaze of their companions...

"...a hero!"

Eventually, he got tuckered out from moving the pedestal.

"Okay, so it takes more than brawn." he relented as he got up. "Well, well, let's see what you can do."

Olympus Coliseum – Arena

"The rules are simple, kiddos." the goatman, who introduced himself as Phil, trainer of heroes, stated. "Break all the barrels I placed over there. I'll decide if you've got what it takes based on how fast and how well you runts do!"

"Hoo boy!" Neptune cheered as she rubbed her hands. "This is going to be great!"

"What's gotten you so excited?" IF wondered.

"Don't you know, Iffy?" the girl said. "Training montages are one of the key to success for heroes!"

The guild agent shrugged. "If you say so..."

And so, the training trials began...

Phil's Assessment – Sora

First off, is that kid with the giant key. He seemed to perform well enough. Got the muscle and brains to be clever in a fight and has that competitive spirit, but he's clearly not been out enough to know real danger. And if he has, then he hasn't known enough. He could benefit a lot from my coaching, though.

Phil's Assessment – Neptune

Next up is the other kid in the parka. Unlike the last kid with the key, she's all about muscle and being a big show-off. Despite that, she's actually quite tough as nails. Makes me wonder if she's actually one of the goddesses who fell from Olympus and lost her memory...Nah, that'd be impossible.

Phil's Assessment – Donald

As for the duck, well, he's got the magic know-how for sure. But you'd expect mages to be disciplined and focused. Him? He's a hot-head, plain and simple. He keeps this up, he's gonna roast himself well-done before he regains control, but hey, I don't train wizards, so what do I know?

Phil's Assessment – Goofy

The walking dog...Hoo boy, where do I begin? He's pretty much the personification of clumsy luck. He sets up a plan to knock out six barrels with one, he ends up dealing with ten, along with the crates set on the side. Honestly, I wonder how his party lasted that long with him in their party...or how much shorter they would've lasted without him on it...

Phil's Assessment – IF

Now for the girl in blue. She's pretty much what you call the reliably average package. Decent magic. Good physical prowess. Decent head on her shoulders. You name it. She's got it. Although, those weird chants for her spells can be a bit of a turn off for some people, but if you've got the taste for them, more power to you.

Phil's Assessment – Compa

Last up is the nurse lady...Okay, why does the nurse have to get out to the field!? Shouldn't they normally be staying behind the lines so they can treat the wounded then? And what type of healer goes out there fighting with a large syringe!? Is her head okay? Did she suffer brain damage as a baby? I honestly worry about her state of mind more than her fighting capabilities...

Olympus Coliseum – Foyer

Eventually, the trials ended, and the results...

"Well, you runts ain't half bad..." Phil admitted.

"See!" Neptune boasted.

"Looks like we're headed for the games!" Sora said excitedly.

"Afraid not!"

But they were turned down!

"What!?" Donald said in shock.

"W-Why not!?" Compa demanded.

"We cleared through those training trials, didn't we!?" IF similarly demanded.

"Two words!" Phil even raised two fingers for that. "You guys ain't heroes!"

"Come on!" Sora complained as Donald deflated.

"Yeah!" Neptune also complained. "That wasn't even two words!"

"He said four" Goofy counted the words.

"Five, actually" IF corrected. "Ain't means are not"

"Do we really need to point that out?" Compa said playing the straight man this time.

"Wanna become a real hero?" Phil produced something from his pocket. "Start by mastering this spell."

He then handed it to Sora, the sight of which is familiar to the party.

It was another Spell Orb!

"A lightning bolt?" the nurse noticed.

"Looks like a Thunder spell this time" the guild agent said.

"Okay, enough gawking here!" Phil shooed the party away. "Now beat it! I got games to prepare!"

Olympus Coliseum – Entrance

"Stupid Phil and his stupid games and his stupid standards and his stupid-"

"Nep, complaining isn't going to change things, y'know." IF chided the complaining girl.

"But it one of my DREAMS to become a hero!" Neptune complained to Iffy. "To save people's lives and see their happy faces! To be rewarded with copious amounts of pudding and cheers! Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

"I totally agree!" Sora cheered. "Beating up tough monsters, helping folks out and seeing them happy in thanks! That's what heroes are all about, right!?"

"Those two are completely gung-ho about this, huh?" the guild agent sighed.

"It is good to have dreams and aspirations like that!" Compa said with a smile.

"That's great and all..." Donald started. "But we can't even sign up for the games thanks to that..."

"Stubborn old goat, I got that right?"

Everyone turned around to see a pale blue man in a black rob with a...blue flame for hair approaching them.

"Who are you?" Donald pointed a finger at him.

"What do you want with us?" IF crossed her arms, prepping her qatars silently.

"Whoa, hold your blue balls for a moment there." the strange man spoke rather quickly. "Wait, let me guess. You want to enter the games, right?"

Approaching the pair of Keyblade wielders...

"Well, I got a little something for you!"

...the man produced a ticket on his hand.

"A pass?" Sora skimmed through the ticket.

"Entry to the Pantheon Foundation Preliminary Tournament." Neptune read through the pass. "Up to Seven Entrants Allowed."

"Hey!" Donald jumped in joy. "We can sign up now!"

"Now we can show that goat who isn't hero material!" Compa cheered.

"Guys, I don't think we should just accept gifts from strangers..." IF tried to be the voice of reason. "That guy clearly screams 'suspicious'"

The man in question just shrugged at the remark.

"Aw, don't be such a debby downer, Iffy!" Neptune complained.

"I'm just saying..." IF tried to dissuade them...

"Not listening! Lalalalala!"

But Neptune was having none of it, blocking her own ears in protest.

"C'mon!" Sora rallied. "Let's go sign up for the games!"

"Yeah!" Donald and Compa followed along as the four of them ran back to the Foyer.

The guild agent groaned. "It's like handling a bunch of rowdy children..."

"I know how that feels..." Goofy patted IF on her shoulder. "Times like these, you gotta be patient with 'em and guide 'em through their mistakes."

IF raised an eyebrow. "Speaking from experience?"

"You could say that!" Goofy said cheerily. "Now let's go after them."

The guild agent could only sigh. "Dealing with that girl in particular is going to be grating on my nerves..."

He and IF followed along the rest of the group while the pale blue man watched.

"Sheesh. Couldn't believe I encountered more yutzes' with those keys" he complained. "Not to mention those Drifters too." he sighed. "Well, this would make for a good laugh at least..."

Olympus Coliseum – Foyer

"Hey, how'd you get this?" Phil asked, inspecting the pass.

"Well, you see..." Neptune started but IF slammed her mouth shut.

"Why are you shutting her mouth like that, Iffy?" Compa wondered.

"This deal is shady enough as it is" IF whispered. "If we don't want to leave with these two crying, we gotta play along."

"Can we enter the games now?" Donald asked impatiently.

"Well...I guess so" Phil said. "Nep Team Epic, right?"

"That's right!" Neptune affirmed with gusto.

"Wait!" IF complained. "Are we really going in with that name!?"

"Alright!" Phil ignored her. "We start with the preliminaries!"

"Sweet!"

"Awesome!"

Neptune and Sora high-fived each other.

"Welp" Donald sighed. "That's that"

Goofy just chuckled.

"But first!" Phil suddenly said. "We gotta clean up after the exhibition match coming up. After that, we can proceed with the preliminary tournament!"

"Exhibition match?" Compa asked.

"It was shown on the board outside" IF answered, pointing her thumb behind her. "Rena Bright vs. Cloud Strife, right?"

"Yeah." Phil said. "One of the gods in Olympus organized that match for some reason. Now come on."

Oly*mpus Coliseum – Arena (Exhibition Match)*

"This is Nep Commentaries, coming to you live from Olympus Coliseum!" Neptune announced on the open cone she's holding on, sitting with a table draped in white cloth in front of her. "Today, a fierce exhibition match will be held, requested by the gods of Olympus themselves. I, Neptune, will be commentating on the match today."

She then introduced her fellow commentator. "Right beside me is our super nurse, Compa. Be a dear and say hi to our audience!"

"Hello, everyone!" Compa waved. "I am Compa. I'm training to be a nurse, but please try not to get hurt too bad. I'm not a full-fledged nurse after all."

Elsewhere, on the podium, the rest of the party simply sat as they waited for the match to begin.

"What are those two doing?" Donald asked.

"Nep-Nep did mention she wanted to 'liven up' the match today..." Goofy asnwered.

"Makes you wonder where she got all that stuff..." Sora commented.

IF just sighed. "I just hope those two still have enough energy for our match later today..."

"Now, let's get to our contestants..."

To the left of the arena, a girl with red hair tied to a ponytail by a white ribbon, bright brown eyes, wearing a white tank top draped by a short red jacket and a cyan scarf, and matching short pants and boots as well. On one of her fingerless gloves, she holds a simple longsword.

"On the left, we have a girl ready for her next adventure, a young soul who shines as brightly as the sun. She and her sword are here to deliver some de-licious ul-tra-vio-lence! Give it up for Renaaaaaa BRIGHT!"

The female contestant felt sweat dropping from her head. "I'm not that violent a person, but I will do my best for this match!"

To the right of the arena, a man with spiky blonde hair, blue eyes, wearing a red cape draped all over his person, with black boots and pants as well. Hanging on his back is a bandaged broadsword, larger than the usual variant.

"On the right, we have a man draped in mystery, a soldier who doesn't seem interested in many things. With a Buster Sword that was passed down and an outfit that looks better fit for a coffin-sleeping vampire, he is ready to show his stuff! Say hello to Clooouuuuuuud STRIFE!"

The man looked around the area with general disinterest, bringing out his giant sword. "Let's just get this over with..."

"Let's have a fair match!" the girl bowed in courtesy.

"Alright! Our contestants have exchanged words!" Neptune announced.

"It is almost time for the match to begin!" Compa turned to the goatman on the scene. "Phil, if you would?"

The trainer stepped up inbetween the contestants. "Alright. Remember, this may be an exhibition match, but the winner of this round will participate in the finals of the preliminaries coming up in a while, so do your best out there, ya hear!?"

"Wak!" Donald yelled. "We're fighting the winner after this!?"

"I didn't hear anything about this!" Sora complained. "Did that board say anything about that, IF?"

"It did" the guild agent nodded. "It was a small print there, but it said so."

"Then that means we gotta watch 'em closely, huh?" Goofy wondered.

IF nodded. "If nothing else, we can study who our potential opponent will be and how they will fare against us. Depending on how strong they are, even the six of us could get overwhelmed."

Sora then stared at the arena with great interest. "Then we gotta watch closely, right?"

Donald and Goofy nodded.

"Okay! Ready your weapons, contestants..."

The two contestants readied their weapons as Phil raised his hand...

"...FIGHT!"

The two then charged in, sword clashing against sword.

"And they're off! The match is starting to heat up, folks! Don't walk away from your seats because this may shape up to be the match of the eons!" Neptune said.

After their clash, the two combatants backed off. Rena used the chance to light her longsword with flames.

"Try this on for size! **CRIMSON GALE**!"

"And Rena unleashes her blazing hot attack!" Neptune commentated as the female combatant spun around and unleashed a wave of fire against Cloud.

Bracing himself, he blocks the incoming attack and his sword thrums with energy.

"Here I go..."

Making a short leap, he spun vertically and launched a **Braver** attack against his defenseless opponent!

"Urk!"

"Oof! And she is Staggered!" Neptune felt that one. "Cloud took the brunt of her attack and countered with one of his own! How is she feeling, Compa?"

"She's feeling that one, but she ain't out of the fight yet!"

Just as the nurse said, Rena got up, keeping a tight grip on her weapon.

"Not bad..." the girl praised her opponent. "You are quite tough."

"Hmph" Cloud deflected.

"But I'm not done!"

Rena charged and launched a barrage of slashes, forcing Cloud to parry her attacks.

"And now, this!"

With swift movements, Rena unleashes attacks so swift that Cloud could barely see her!

"**SHADOW STRIKE**!"

"Rena with the comeback!" Neptune yelled. "She's striking her foe with such ferocious speed out there! This must be her fabled sword style!"

"That's right" Compa brought out a piece of paper. "It is her Eight Leaves, One Blade Style, a swordstyle that was being taught here since a decade ago."

Finishing her attack, Rena then launched four rapid strikes at her foe.

"Feel my **AXLE RUSH**!"

"That the best you can do?"

Charging up his sword, Cloud slams it down, unleashing three blue beams in front of him, forcing the female contestant to immediately guard the attack.

"Oh! That's his **Blade Beam** attack!" Neptune shouted as the two contestants continued their fight. "Cloud is giving her no chances to recover!"

"This match is heating up!" Compa commentated. "Will our victor be decided soon!?"

After a series of sword clashes, Cloud looked at his opponent, who is started to feel out of breath.

"..."

"I...still...got one more ace up my sleeve..."

Standing up, Rena took a deep breath, and then, an aura of flame erupted around her.

"**BURNING HEART**!"

"Oh!? Rena is unleashing a powerful aura!" Neptune said. "Could she be prepping her ultimate move!?"

"This is all I could muster now..." the longsword user then wreathes her sword in flames. "This may not compare to my predecessor, but I won't throw in the towel here!"

Cloud readies himself for her last attack.

"**Fifth Form...FLAME SLASH**!"

Unleashing two powerful strikes, Rena steps back and...

"STRIKE!"

...slashes through her opponent, leaving a burst of flame in her wake.

"That was one hot attack!" Compa shouted. "But will Cloud be able to answer back!?"

Rena looked back to see the flames receding, and her opponent's clothes looking a little singed. Even his spiky hair has some ash spots on it!

"That all?"

She looked at him with bewilderment! Even though he took very noticeable damage, Cloud is still able to stand unflinching.

"All right then."

Spinning his sword, he readies his last attack.

"Let's dance!"

Cloud then charges at the defenseless Rena, striking with several slashes, and then ending it with an upward slash towards the sky, throwing his opponent back!

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

After a few seconds of not getting up, the match has ended.

"Aaaaaaaandddd that's game!" Neptune announced as the crowd's cheering intensified. "With a powerful **Ascension**, he has taken the title of Exhibition Match Winner! Three cheers for Clouuuuuuuuuuuddddddd STRIFE!"

Compa, on the other hand, has left the table and proceeded to lift the defeated Rena out of the arena to get her wounds treated.

Neptune took the chance to approach Cloud. "So, Mr. Strife. Any comments from our winner today?"

"Not interested."

Flipping his spiky hair, he turned around and left without another word.

"Dude, that was just rude!" Neptune complained. "Oh well, that'll be it from Nep Commentaries, but stay tuned, because the Olympic Preliminary Tournament is about to begin later today, and yours truly will be there with her cool friends to dominate the competition. Toodles!"

Olympus Coliseum – Foyer

"Here you go" Compa finished bandaging the injured Rena. "Try not to move too much or you'll open your wounds again."

"Sorry about that." the bandaged girl scratched her head with her bandaged left hand. "I was so caught up in the fight that I ended up exerting myself a bit too much."

She sighed. "Guess I'm not signing up for those Prelims like this..."

"Hey there!" Neptune chimed in as she and the rest of the party enters. "You doin' alright?"

"You're the commentator from earlier, right?" the injured girl asked.

"Oh, that was just a side gig" Neptune deflected. "It just sprung up to me in a sec."

"Why does her mind have to be so..." Donald facepalmed. "...random?"

IF sighed. "I've been trying to figure that out myself..."

"Why are you all here?" Rena's eyes bugged out from all the sudden visitors.

"We're here to prepare for the tournament!" Donald answered.

"There is no other place left to prepare but here" Goofy remarked.

"Well, they didn't think to put an infirmary here..." Compa said. "So, I brought her to this room instead."

"Well, all that aside" Neptune turned to the Eight Leaves user. "You were really awesome out there! You didn't give an inch even when your back was to the wall!"

"Haha" Rena chuckled. "I mean, I haven't even finished my training before I got the invitation for the exhibition match, so that wasn't my full strength, I assure you."

"Really!?" Sora asked, surprised. "But you were quite tough out there..."

She chuckled again. "You think so? That other guy's attacks were quite painful..."

"Hey!"

Phil stepped into the room.

"You rookies got five minutes before the prelims start!" he announced in the room. "Better make it hasty. Those weird entrants ain't gonna wait forever."

And then he left to finish arena cleanup.

"Looks like we're up" IF beckoned the party. "Let's not mess this up."

"Uh, we gotta fight that Cloud feller at the finals, right?" Goofy asked.

Neptune nodded. "If what the goat said is true, then yep."

"He's gonna be real tough..." Compa said with worry.

"Aw, phooey!" Donald said. "We're heroes, guys. We can do this!"

Sora pumped his fist. "Yeah! We got this!"

"I'll cheer you guys on from the stands!" Rena said. "You all can do it!"

Olympus Coliseum – Arena

"Okay, what the heck!?"

As the group rested near the stands, IF was raising her voice in complaints.

"No kidding!" Neptune was mad too! "The author skipped our preliminary mob fights! C'mon!"

"I mean..." Compa said. "Those are just mob fights. Unless it's a boss fight, I don't think Mr. Author's gonna write a lot of those..."

"Not that!" IF screamed. "The Heartless! Why are Heartless signed up for this tournament!?"

"Don't look at me!" Phil shook his head. "I check the lists, sure, but the gods above got the final say, and what they say goes."

The guild agent facepalmed. "So, what? They're just gonna let these freaks run amok around here? People could end up getting their hearts consumed by them, for crying out loud!"

"Hey, we get weird monsters like them all the time here in Olympus, like the ogres, the mighty Cerberus, even the bloodthirsty Hydra!" Phil reassured her. "Why, ten years ago, we got a bunch of weird creatures like them signed up for tournaments too. They vanished afterwards, though..."

The guild agent sighed. "That's still way too careless of you..."

"It's how things have been here in Ancient Greece" Phil shrugged. "Sure, people still panic when monsters like those show up, but we're under the protection of the Pantheon led by the almighty Zeus and the gods of Olympus. Not to mention there's other folks who protect us like Hercules, the up and coming hero!"

"There's other heroes like him around here too!" Rena chirped. "Like the legendary adventurer Falcom!"

"Legendary?" Goofy started.

"Adventurer?" Donald continued.

"Falcom?" Compa finished.

"That chick?" Phil's eyes bugged out. "I heard she's been making rounds all throughout Greece before she left beyond the sea. Practically nobody around HASN'T heard about her!"

"That's right!" Rena said proudly. "A proud adventurer who aided those who needed help and has defeated several foes, from monsters to evil warlocks and the like with her own unique sword style! She was a real legend in the making!"

"Wow!" Sora said in amazement. "She sounds so cool!"

"And I'm guessing that the sword style she uses is the one you're practicing right now, right?" IF guessed.

"Haha. Yup!" the girl in the ponytail chuckled. "I heard that the style was taught from a once-impoverished training ground that was about to be closed down. But then she came and offered aid to them. Next she knew, she was teaching aspiring pupils the Eight Leaves One Blade Style. Or so I heard."

"So, she must still be teachin' there, right?" Goofy asked.

Rena shook her head. "She only stayed for a while before she left again. From what I heard, she said that she can't stay in one place for too long. Said she was more comfortable walking around the world as she goes."

"Man" Neptune said. "This Falcom lady's got quite the wanderlust, huh?"

Rena nodded. "That's why I want to get stronger, so I can go around the world like she does!"

"Woah!" Neptune gasped. "The wanderlust sure is strong in this lady too..."

She scratched her cheek. "I sure hope so. Maybe, one day, I'll bump into her and we can tell each other all the adventures we've been through!"

"That's a fantabulous idea!" Neptune cheered. "We're rooting for ya, Falcom Jr.!"

His party nodded.

"Falcom Jr.?" Rena laughed. "Haha! C'mon, I haven't finished my training yet. Still, thanks for the vote of confidence! For that, I'll give you all mine as well! You can win this tournament! I know it!"

Goofy laughed. "With support like that, we can't let her down now, huh?"

Donald nodded. "You bet! We'll be heroes for sure!"

Sora chuckled. "Yeah! Let's win this, guys!"

"YEAH!"

Meanwhile, Cloud looked at his competition as they prepared for the next round.

"They've got quite big hopes, huh..." he muttered to himself. "I'd hate for those to be dashed down..."

He turned around and left the space he was in...

Olympus Coliseum – Arena (Preliminary Finals)

"And now, the final round!"

The party braced themselves as their opponent enters the arena.

"It's all come to this, huh?" IF said, her qatars at the ready.

"We've combed through all the Mr. Heartless' like butter!" Compa boasted, her syringe primed.

"We win this, and we'll become heroes!" Donald cheered, his grip on his staff unloosened.

"One step closer, anyway!" Goofy a-hyucked, his shield still in good condition.

"With everything riding on this, we can't afford to lose now!" Neptune boasted, her Keyblade firm in her hands. "You ready, Sora?"

Sora nodded, his Keyblade at the ready. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Their opponent, the enigmatic Cloud, stopped to stare at his competition for a bit.

"The last round of the prelims is about to begin!" Phil announced as he raised his hand...

"On your marks..."

"Get set..."

"...FIGHT!"

As soon as the match began, Cloud opted to launch dash attacks against the party's two backline members!

"He's aiming for us, Donald!" Compa warned with whitened eyes.

"Just keep running!" Donald yelled as he casts **Fira** spells against Cloud. "Cover us, guys!"

"I gotcha!"

Goofy attempted to charge straight at the caped warrior, but he deftly dodged to the side, causing the dog to stumble and fall.

"Not one more step!" Neptune took the chance to charge. "**CROSS COMBI-**"

But Cloud raised his stance, and deflected her incoming attack with a heavy swing of his own, countering Neptune out of her combo before she could land a hit!

"Hey!" the girl complained. "You can't just block me out of my combos!"

"Then go get help"

Not listening to her complaining, Cloud launches a **Braver** straight at the female Keyblade wielder.

"Aw, crud!"

"Neptune!" Rena cried. "Watch out!"

Before Cloud could land his blow, something shot him from behind. Neptune rolled out of the way as the caped man tried to get up.

"...What the...?"

Cloud could barely try to move.

"I got him **Paralyzed**!" Compa cried out with some yellow liquid leaking out of her syringe. "Hit him now!"

"I got this!"

Sora charged in, unleashing combo after combo as Cloud could barely parry the boy's attacks.

"Now eat this!" the boy then charged his Keyblade with **Fire** magic. "**FLAMES**!"

"Ghhhh!"

"INCOMING!"

Cloud looked to his right and suddenly found himself heavily pushed by a charging dog with a shield!

As he is backed into a corner, he finds himself surrounded by Sora, Neptune and IF, all attempting to attack him.

"I'm not done!"

He then charged up with an aura of red electricity, sending his attackers back!

"Uh-oh!"

"Not good!"

"Everyone, brace yourselves!"

Cloud's assault was relentless. Thanks to the power boost, he floated around like a bat searching for prey, striking against anyone unlucky to be in his path.

"This is not good..." Rena commented gravely, as she saw the party being mowed down one by one by the empowered warrior.

Phil's own nervous nail-biting isn't really helping either...

"This is bad..." IF muttered, keeping her guard up as she sees Compa being chased around, and Donald is already KO'ed. Sora and Neptune are already running out of breath from all the running and dodging as well. "He's going to pick us off at this rate..."

As she was busy contemplating, her opponent flew to her back, ready to strike.

"Shoot!"

"Time to go"

However, someone came in and blocked the hit, sending the both of them back.

"You okay?" It was Goofy, his shield looking all scratched up.

"Barely..." IF said, looking all beat up. "Sorry about that..."

Eventually, the caped man landed, seeing his competition on varying states of duress. This fight is just about over...

"Is that all?" Cloud charges up his Buster Sword, determined to end this fight. "Then allow me to put the **Finishing Touch**..."

"Not yet..."

Sora, using his Keyblade as an improvised stand, slowly gets up. "A hero...never gives up...not even 'till the end..."

Hearing this struck a small chord within the lost soldier.

"*Embrace your dreams*!"

"He's...right." Neptune, following his lead, stood up, tumbling a bit. "Heroes...ain't quitters. So...I'm not quitting now..."

"*You better not cry again, got it?*"

Eventually, one by one, the rest of the party gets up, ready to fight him again.

"Why...?" Cloud asked vainly. "Why do you keep standing? You're beat!"

"That's...because..." Compa started.

"...We're gonna be..." Goofy continued.

"...True Heroes!" Donald finished.

"...And heroes..." IF declared. "Would never...leave others alone..."

"*You'll come and save me, right?*"

Cloud shook his head, putting his all into his attack...

"Grrrrr..."

...But his moment was interrupted when a giant black paw stomped him into the ground.

"What the...!?" Rena shouted, noticing the giant monster on the arena.

The beast, with three heads, large teeth and menacing red eyes, let out a loud roar, ready to feast on it's prey.

"The Cerberus!?" Phil cried. "What's it doing all the way out here?"

Elsewhere, the man with blue flame snickered. "Well, them's the brakes, kiddos. Enjoy the little slaughter show, cuz I know I will!"

The three-headed beast attempted to lunge straight at the exhausted party...

"N-Nice Mr. Doggy..." Compa panicked.

...but their assault was stopped when a large, muscular man arrived at the scene, holding it back with sheer muscular strength.

"Herc!"

It was Hercules, the reigning champion, himself!

"Phil, get them out of here!"

"You heard him, kiddos!" the trainer urged the exhausted party.

"Let's go!" Rena shouted at them.

The party turned around and ran away, but as Sora neared the foyer...

"Where's Neptune?"

He then turned around and saw her running back for the unconscious Cloud!

"What are you doing?" Hercules asked the girl, still holding back the giant dog.

"Getting this guy out, duh!" Neptune attempted to lift the downed soldier on her shoulder. "Urk! If only he wasn't so big..."

However, she felt her shoulder lighten a bit. She turned to her left to notice Sora coming back to help her by lifting the unconscious Cloud on the other end.

"Need some help?" Sora grinned.

Neptune returned the grin. "Right back at ya!"

Walking fast, the two fled the scene with their competitor in tow.

"Those two..." Herc shook his head. "That was reckless of them...but still..."

The resident hero readied his stance, determined to defeat the terror in front of him.

"Least I don't have to hold back!"

Olympus Coliseum – Foyer

"Who was that?" Goofy asked Phil

"That was Hercules" the trainer managed to answer.

"The legendary hero himself?" Rena muttered. "What brings him here?"

"He wanted to go watch the matches, but he got called by his father Zeus over at Mount Olympus..." Phil answered.

"So, guy went over to see his pops, huh?" Neptune barely said, gasping for air.

"Wait, but Zeus is supposed to be the ruling god of this world, right?" Compa asked, treating Cloud's wounds.

"That's right" Donald answered.

"Which means that Herc over there's a..." IF thought aloud.

The boys bugged their eyes out over this revelation. "A GOD!?"

"Wouldn't you all believe it? Guy was as tough as a twig when I first met him..." Phil reminisced. "But now, he's gone the distance and became a local celebrity by beating up monsters like that on the regular."

"Wow!" Sora's eyes bugged out in amazement. "Now that's awesome-sauce!"

"Right!?" Neptune's own eyes were starry.

The guild agent sighed. "Nep's influence on Sora is starting to show now..."

Neptune did a couple of stretches before heading for the arena. Sora followed suit.

"Hey!" Phil shouted. "Where are you two twerps going?"

"Helping the hero out, obviously!" Sora said with a pumped fist.

"If we're gonna be heroes, we better learn from the best in the field, right?" Neptune grinned.

"So, let's go!"

And thus, the two ran off to the arena.

Donald sighed. "One of these days, those two will be the end of us..."

Goofy chuckled, getting his shield ready while the court wizard has his staff primed.

"Still, we can't let them any more injured than they already are!" Compa declared, her syringe ready for action.

"Agreed" IF sighed again, readying her qatars. "Besides, our match was interrupted. I don't think those two appreciate that little fact."

Phil could only feel a migraine coming as the rest of the party nonchalantly left for the arena.

"Why are they going out there like that!?"

Rena, however, chuckled as she thought back to the words they said. "A hero never gives up, no matter the odds, huh?"

She looked to the unconscious soldier. "I wonder if those words sparked something in you too..."

Olympus Coliseum – Arena

"Geez, is it me or this boy a lot tougher than last time?"

Hercules gazed upon the mighty Cerberus, readying a mighty dark breath attack, when...

"Stop right there!"

"We're taking you down!"

Sora and Neptune returned to the arena, their friends in tow.

"You guys!?" Hercules' eyes bugged out in surprise. "What are you all doing here?"

"What?" Neptune tilted her head. "We thought we could help you out a bit."

"A hero always extends a helping hand, right?" Sora said.

Hercules could only smile at the aid. "Appreciate it!"

Phil joined from the stands. "Alright, kiddos! I got only two words for ya! ATTACK!"

The Cerberus roared, advancing at the group slowly as it's three heads unleashed fireballs.

"He's shooting fire at us!" Compa shouted.

"Start bouncing them back at him!" IF instructed.

"You got it!" Neptune answered, wielding her Keyblade like a baseball player. "Time to batter up!"

One of the fireballs made it's way to the female Keyblade wielder, but she was primed and ready...

"FORE!"

...to deflect it back at the right head.

Sora and Goofy followed suit, deflecting it's fireballs back at the right and middle heads respectively.

"It's working!" Compa cheered.

But the celebrations stopped short as the Cerberus opted to bite in a frenzy.

"Eeeep!" the nurse screamed. "Mr. Doggy is getting angry!"

"Tch!" IF muttered. "Compa, get a shot ready! Goof, Nep, Herc, keep us safe. Donald, Sora, with me!"

The party got into formation, with three of them at the vanguard, and the rest of them at the rear. The rear guard readied their combined attack.

"Ready?"

With two nods, the rear guard unleashed a powerful lightning attack.

"O great gods, unleash thine anger from above...!"

"**THUNDER**!"

"**FURIOUS LIGHTNING**!"

The continuous roars of both thunder and beast rang throughout the arena. In the chaos, Cerberus stopped its biting frenzy as their mouths were filled with darkness.

"Oh no!" Hercules panicked. "It's going for a dark breath attack!"

He then charged forward to the beast!

"Herc!"

The legendary hero then jumped and grabbed the middle head, jamming it's mouth shut.

This, however, gave the beast an opening, as the other two heads stopped channeling darkness and attempted to attack Herc!

"No, you don't!"

Just as their bites are about to hit the hero, the Cerberus' attack was stopped by two swords-wielding fighters!

"Rena!"

"Cloud!"

"What are you waiting for!?" the caped soldier shouted.

"We got them! Attack now!" the young adventurer-to-be urged.

"You heard them!" Sora called his party. "Let's get him!"

"RIGHT!"

Compa leads the charge this time, firing off a powerful shot from her syringe.

"Mr. Hercules, please move!"

Hearing the nurse's request, he complied, but not without leaving a bruise on the giant dog's middle head.

"You should cool off, Mr. Doggy!"

The middle head is hit by the nurse's **Frozen Treats**, reeling from the coldness dealt to it.

"Time to get serious!" IF charged at the right head, held back by Cloud.

"Go for it!"

The blonde soldier hopped away, letting the guild agent unleash her fury right at the dog's right head!

"**HEAVEN DEMON**!"

A fury of ten quick slashes performed mid-air was unleashed by IF, bringing the right head reeling back as well.

"Let's get him, Goofy!" Donald shouted, mounted on the royal knight's shoulders.

"Full speed ahead!" Goofy charged forward with his shield, aiming for the left head.

"All yours!"

Seeing the incoming assault, Rena moved away, allowing the royal knight to bash the left head hard!

So hard, that he ended up knocking off Donald off of him...

"Gotcha!"

...But this was all according to their improvised plan, as the court wizard unleashed another **Thundara** spell straight against all three heads!

"It's down!" Cloud called as the beast fell down from the combined assault.

"Finish it, guys!" Rena cheered on.

Hercules looked to the two Keyblade wielders beside him. A young boy to his right and a young girl to his left.

It almost felt nostalgic for him, when he trained alongside a Keyblade Wielder and a once-fledgling adventurer a decade ago.

If only they could see him now...

"You guys ready?" Herc asked the two on his flanks.

"Ready!" Sora nodded.

"Whenever you are!" Neptune cheered.

Without another word, the three charged against the downed beast and unleashed their mightiest hits against it, defeating it once and for all.

"..."

The beast's three pairs of eyes closed as it fell into unconscious, signalling the heroes' victory!

"We did it!"

"Shalalala-lalala!"

"Now that's how it's done!"

Elsewhere, the man with blue flame is seen holding in his anger.

"I can't believe those louts could still stand up and beat that mutt!" he shouted. "Okay, Hades, calm down. You just need another plan. A better plan. One that will tip Zeus' little boy down his high pegasus for good. You just need to think better. Yeah, that's it."

His voice reverbed around the dark passageway as he retreated to the Underworld.

Olympus Coliseum – Foyer

"And thus, by the royal decree of Zeus, The God of Olympus, I dub thee junior heroes and confer upon thee full rights and privileges to participate in the games. Further-"

"Woahwoahwoah!" Neptune suddenly shouted, interrupting Phil's declaration. "What's the meaning of this!?"

"Yeah, what do you mean 'junior heroes'!?" Donald followed, similarly upset.

"You rookies still don't understand what it takes to be a true hero" the trainer snapped back.

"Even though we nearly won the prelims AND took down Mr. Doggy?" Compa asked sadly.

"Well, we are still exhausted from all that" Sora answered sheepishly.

"Not to mention, the prelim finals was technically interrupted" IF followed.

"Still, I don't get why Cloud decided to throw the match like that" Rena wondered. "He went to them, told Phil the match was theirs and when I asked the reason why, he just up and left."

"So, uhhhh" Goofy started. "What does it take to be a hero?"

"Well" Herc answered. "That's just something you'll have to find for yourselves. Just the way that I did"

"So, do we have to take journeys of self-discovery to find the answer or what?" Neptune wondered.

"No problems!" Sora exclaimed with a pumped fist. "We'll just start by proving ourselves in the games! We'll worry about that afterwards!"

"'Cept there ain't gonna be any games for a while" Phil rained on their parade. "Gotta clean up the mess that Underworld Hound left behind first."

"Well, poo!" the girl in the parka complained.

"That's alright" the boy, on the other hand, didn't mind. "We need to take a break anyway. We'll just come back once the mess is all cleaned up"

The party all left as the hero waved them goodbye.

"So, Herc" Phil asked his ward. "Think those runts will make hero material?"

He chuckled. "I'm sure. They just gotta go the distance and not lose their way."

"It ain't gonna be that easy, that's for sure" the trainer shook his head.

"Hey, it wasn't for me either" Herc boasted. "And look where I am now"

"Yeah, yeah, I know"

Olympus Coliseum - Entrance

"So, you sure that you'll stay behind, Rena?" IF asked the young adventurer, to which she nodded.

"Yeah. I told myself that I'm not going anywhere until I'm strong enough to leave and face the outside world" Rena answered. "Sorry about that."

The guild agent sighed. "No worries. We kinda expected you'd say that."

She then lent her a phone, an orange one.

"What's this?" Rena wondered, staring at the phone on her hands.

"It's a communication device" IF answered. "You can use that to keep in touch with us, even off-world."

"Really!?" Rena exclaimed. "That's really convenient."

"We're only to give these to fellow Drifters" Compa said. "Since we're trying to establish a communication network."

"So don't show that thing off to everyone else, got it!?" Donald said in a scolding tone. "Or else, the World Order will be compromised!"

The adventurer-to-be sweatdropped. World Order? "Um, sure. Whatever you say."

"He's serious about that." the guild agent rubbed her forehead. "Not to mention, we can't have other people steal or study our way of communication, so take extra care of that thing, got it?"

"Of course!" Rena raised her right hand. "I swear, on my pride as an adventurer-to-be!"

"Awwwwww, you can trust her, Iffy!" Neptune elbowed IF lightly. "She won't break your precious phone by accident!"

"Hey, accidents happen and it is REALLY hard to part with my babies, you know!?" IF complained.

"C-Calm down, Iffy" Compa tried to calm her guild friend down.

As the two began their usual tirade and the poor nurse stuck playing mediator, Sora noticed someone sitting near the entrance.

"Hey, Cloud" the boy called out to the brooding soldier. "Are you doing all right?"

"You don't look too good..." Rena said. "Should I call Compa?"

Cloud raised a hand. "It's fine. I'm just..."

The two tilted their heads in confusion.

"Say, I've been wondering" Sora asked. "Why did you go along with that weird fella anyway?"

"The one with blue flaming head you guys mentioned?" Rena asked, to which Sora nodded. "That guy seems like bad news though..."

"You don't have to remind us..." Sora deflated. "IF's been on our case about that ever since..."

Rena could only manage a laugh at that.

"I'm looking for someone" Cloud answered Sora's question. "Hades promised to help"

"Hades?" Goofy wondered.

"Must be the weirdo who gave us the pass" Donald answered.

"I tried to exploit the power of darkness" Cloud continued as he stood up. "But it backfired."

He looked up to the Olympian skies.

"I fell into darkness and I couldn't find the light."

"*Let him go!*"

"*I can't believe it...*"

"*We looked up to you, man!*"

"*What happened to your honor!?*"

"*You'll...be fine...Cloud...Tell Aerith and Tifa...I'm sorry...*"

"You'll find it"

Sora's words snapped Cloud out of his reverie.

"I'm searching too"

"For your light?" Cloud asked. Sora nodded.

"And not just me" the boy turned to Neptune, who is currently being chased around by IF after teasing her one too many times.

"You too, huh?" Rena mumbled.

The caped soldier then tossed an orb to the young Keyblade wielder, one with a red sword symbol on it.

"Don't lose sight of it"

He then made for the door and opened it...

"Hey, how about a rematch sometime?" Sora asked as he waved Cloud goodbye. "Fair and square, no dark powers involved!"

"I want one too!" Rena declared. "I'll get stronger and beat you too! To reach for my light! So please get stronger so you don't lose your way too!"

"Hmph" Cloud flipped his hair. "I'll think about it."

He then left the premises, continuing on his path.

"Hey! What's up over there?" Neptune approached the group, seeing the orb Sora has on his hands. "Woah, is that a free gift? Do I get one too!?"

"C'mon on, Nep" IF sighed. "Besides, that orb looks like a Skill Orb. I think only Sora can use that one though."

"No fair!" the female Keyblade wielder whined. "I want one too!"

"There, there, Nep-Nep" Compa patted Neptune's head.

As the party continued to talk among themselves, Rena could only smile as she looked up to the sky.

"Everyone's heading out on their own adventure..."

She then closed her eyes as she recalled something. Something someone once said to her when she was young.

"*Embrace your dreams. No matter what happens, protect your honor as a hero. That's something a fellow once said.*"

"Embrace your dreams...and never lose sight of yourself in pursuit of that dream, right Adele?"

NEPSTATION

Neptune: You’re watching Nepstation, the one stop shop for all your tournament needs! That’s right! We, at Neptstation, was there, LIVE, as we witnessed the Preliminary Rounds for the Pantheon Foundation Tournament, and for today, we have an aspiring contestant as our guest!

Rena: H-Hi there! My name is Rena Bright! I’m honored to be here today!

Neptune: *chuckles* At least you handled your nervousness better than my co-host from two shows ago!

Sora: Hey! I’m improving!

Neptune: Shush! You’re not onscreen! Anyway, let’s get the load down on the upcoming tournament, shall we?

Rena: Oh! Okay!

---

a logo saying Pantheon Foundation Tournament appeared onscreen

Neptune: See, this here tournament’s made in celebration of the Greek Pantheon, said to have freed the world of the grip of the tyrannical Titans who once ruled with an iron fist

Rena: Indeed. It’s said that the humans who lived in that time have suffered much under the reign of the Titans. However, the gods, led by Zeus, rebelled with many of his fellow gods and goddesses and brought down the Titans, leading an era of relative peace and prosperity.

Neptune: And what a time it is! The world’s been relatively peaceful as I’ve heard from several witnesses!

Rena: True, but the threat of giant monsters and such continue to plague the commonfolk. The gods, unfortunately, cannot do much themselves in the world, lest they destroy it unintentionally or end up becoming the next Titans.

Neptune: Which is where we go to our next topic. Heroes!

---

an image of a certain hero flexing his muscles appears onscreen, although it is blurred

Rena: That’s right. Recently, there has been a surge of potential humans who have gone out of their way to improve the livelihoods of their fellows, but none more so than the likes of monster-slaying heroes!

Neptune: That’s right. One in particular, said to be the son of Zeus himself, shocker, has been making lots of headlights. His trainer P the Goat, has this to say.

P the Goat: What can I say? The champ’s made the distance and is now a bona-fide hero now! Zeus even made the stars shape like him to prove it! Though, of course, I’m not gonna slack off and let him rest on his laurels. So long as the monsters continue to roam across Greece, the champ’s gonna keep fighting.

Rena: Striking words from the goat himself! I gotta keep up if I wanna be as good!

Neptune: And we at Nepstation will be rooting for you, dear guest!

Rena: Haha! Thanks a lot!

Neptune: And now, a word from our sponsors!

---

an image of several products, from sneakers to cup holders with the image of Greece’s hero, is then shown onscreen

Neptune: Have you ever unsafe? Ever wished to have your hero watch your back as you roam the streets? Well now, you can! With these Air Hercs, you will feel as if you are the hero himself! In addition, we are throwing in Herc Holders to hold your drinks and these Herc Action Figures so you too can flex your muscular might! Get this package deal for 7777 Munny today!

Rena: Limited offers are only available until the end of the Pantheon Foundation Tournament, so purchase now or you will be smite down by Zeus himself!

Neptune: Woah! Laying it thick on the threats there!

Rena: Sorry! That is what the prompt says!

Neptune: *sighs* Anyway, that’s all for the news today! Now for our closing segment!

Sora: So, what’s our topic for today, Neptune?

Neptune: Hmmmmm, what about our own party, Sora?

Sora: Us?

Neptune: Yup!

an image of the party with the words Nep Team Epic appears onscreen

Neptune: As you can see, we are a party of six that’s going around the worlds, busting Heartless while we go looking for missing people in our lives, or in my case, my missing identity.

Sora: Your identity?

Neptune: Hm-hm! I am a certified amnesiac, meaning I don’t know a lot about myself other than my name.

Sora: Wow...I didn’t know that.

Neptune: Hey, it’s nothing to feel pity for. You’ll never know. Maybe my old life (if I had one) was probably miserable or terrible that I’d rather forget about it. But hey, I gotta at least know what I was and all that stuff.

Sora: I see...

Neptune: Anywho, we’re getting off-course a bit. So, basically, Donald and the Goofster there are trying to find their best pal, the King, while Compa and Iffy are findin’ Drifters to establish a network while diggin’ up clues in regards to their shared amnesia.

Sora: And I’m here to find my best friends Riku and Kairi! If you two are there, please hit us up here so I’ll know where you are!

Neptune: Wow! Way to use the program right, buck-o!

Sora: I mean, we can say what we want! I may as well say it!

Neptune: Careful, Sora. I nearly got censured last time, remember?

Sora: Gack! I’ll...be more careful next time.

alarm bell rang

Neptune: And, oops! We’ve ran out of time today! We’ll continue this topic tomorrow with the roles and strengths of our party next!

Sora: Alright. This has been Nepstation, and from everyone here...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 5: Chapter 4: Having a Wild (Monkey) Time

Chapter Summary

> Our party's trek takes them to a world filled with lush greenery. However, an argument and a reckless attempt at breaking it caused the party to crash-land into the world. As tensions rise among the party, a certain nurse-to-be deliberates her role in the worlds and her hopes for the party...

Ocean Between – Approaching Deep Jungle

"World ahoy!" Neptune yelled as the party approached the next world, a vast jungle surrounded by the bounties of nature.

"It's so green!" Compa said in awe.

"Hey, do you guys think the King might be down there?" Goofy wondered.

"Nope" Donald answered impatiently. "Let's head for the next world!"

"Wait!" Sora stopped for a moment. "Riku and Kairi could be down there!"

"I don't care!" the duck replied. "Let's just go!"

"Oh, come on!"

"No means no!"

"Would you two give it a rest?" IF sighed, pinching her nose. "I get that you're impatient, but arguing's not gonna find who we're looking for faster!"

"Let's land here already!"

"I already said no, Sora!"

"Guys, please..." Compa tried to break the fight.

"Ooooooohhhh!" Neptune said in amazement as she neared a flashing red button. "What does this button do?"

Impulsively, she pressed the button, causing the ship to veer out of control.

"W-What in the?" the nurse said worriedly as she tumbled.

"NEP, WHAT DID YOU DO!?" the guild agent yelled.

"I dunno!" Neptune shrugged. "We weren't getting anywhere, so I just started pressing that shiny button!"

"I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU, NEP!"

"This isn't good!" the royal knight exclaimed.

"This is why we shouldn't have gone here!" the court wizard yelled.

Thankfully, the Gummi Ship was equipped with an emergency evacuation protocol, which forcefully ejects it's passengers in cases of sabotage, intentional or not.

Which leads them to...

Deep Jungle – Treehouse

"WOAH!"

"WE'RE FAAAAAAAALLLLLLLLLLLLING!"

"Brace for impact!"

Loud thuds and smacks were heard at the seemingly empty treehouse. Thankfully, the wood on the ground was sturdy, so the trio who fell into it managed to survive their fall.

"Ow man, that hurt..." Sora muttered, feeling pain on his behind. "Everyone okay?"

Compa groaned. "Yessy. Though I think my butt would say otherwise..."

"That stupid Nep..." IF shook her head in frustration. "There are better ways to break up an argument..."

"So...where are we?" the nurse wondered as she stood up and looked around. "Looks like some kind of abandoned treehouse..."

"I'd like to get our bearings around first" the guild agent stated. "It'd be pretty upsetting if we ended up in a place without an exit..."

Sora huffed. "Man, if Donald hadn't gotten angry, then we would've..."

IF felt a tick go off in her head. "THAT'S IT! Listen here, young man!"

The Keyblade wielder immediately yelped as the angered guild agent loomed over him like an angry mother.

"I get that you're impatient and worried about your best friends! But you didn't have to throw a fit like that, you know!?"

Sora tried to plead. "B-But..."

"NO BUTS, MISTER!" But IF was having none of it! "Thanks to you and that duck and that...Nep, we're now separated in the middle of the freakin' jungle and I'm about to be at my wit's end here! So, save your excuses!"

"Iffy..."

The guild agent let out a big sigh. "Let's just look around first, okay? Once we meet up with the others, we'll figure out where we all stand on this."

She then began to walk away as Sora attempts to reach out to the guild agent in vain.

"Everything's falling apart now..." Compa mumbled to herself. "Will our party stay together after all is said and done?"

Deep Jungle – Clearing

Meanwhile, Neptune was sitting on top of a flat rock, while Donald and Goofy are resting on the ground nearby.

"Gawrsh, I hope Sora and the others are okay..." Goofy said worriedly.

Donald, on the other hand, is having none of it. "Ah, who needs Sora!? We can find the King on our own!"

"Hey! No more of that talk, ducky!" Neptune said angrily. "If you're not taking Sora, then you can count me out too!"

"What's the big idea!?" the court wizard complained.

"Didn't your King say you need us Keyblade wielders to help find him?" the girl reminded. "Well, if you're not taking him, you're not taking me either!"

"What's with you!?" Donald shouted in anger.

The girl sighed.

"Listen, I get that you're worried about your King and all that" Neptune started. "But, right now, we are travelling to many unknown worlds. We don't know who to expect and how bad the Heartless are in each of 'em. Do you think they could fight them off all by themselves!?"

"W-Well..." Donald tried to fight back, but couldn't give an answer.

"Basically, what I'm saying is, we should all stick together! Remember, we're all a party here! A party that sticks together, wins together, or something like that!"

The duck was caught speechless. Never in his whole life did he expect something meaningful to come out of Neptune's mouth like she did, but here she is.

"Okay, I'mma scout out a little." the female Keyblade wielder hopped off the flat rock. "Stay put now, you hear?"

As she headed off, Donald was left to his thoughts, unaware that a small gorilla left an orange block by his side.

Deep Jungle – Climbing Trees

"IF..." Sora sighed. "I messed up, didn't I?"

Compa gathered her thoughts for a bit. "Honestly, I think we've all been anxious. Ever since their King vanished and your islands disappeared, we really wanted to see if everyone's doing okay."

"Yeah, but..." the boy with the key said.

"I'm sure they'll turn up somewhere" Compa tried to reassure the young boy. "Even if they're not here, we can still keep this world safe from the Heartless."

"Right..." the boy didn't really feel reassured, that's for sure.

"If anything, I think Iffy's the one with the most to worry about here"

Sora raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yeah. You know that Iffy and I are Drifters, right? Well, we are kind of a special kind..."

The boy crossed his arms. "Special? Like with Artisan?"

"Yessy...For one, we don't remember what our home world even is."

"Really?"

Compa shook her head. "Worse yet, we can't even recall anything else in our lives before we Drifted. Only a few details."

"Oh...Like?"

The nurse thought for a moment. "Like simple wants and stuff. Even things like who our families are. I do remember having a grandpa and I was studying in nursing school."

"Yeah, and IF remembers being a member of a guild."

The nurse nodded. "But the thing is, we can't remember things like which guild she belonged to, what nursing school I've been studying in or even what the name of our home was in our world. Things like that."

"Then...does that mean..."

Compa nodded. "Yessy. Arty, Broccoli and Rena don't remember much either. Believe me, Iffy and I asked them. And I think...Iffy's been agonizing about it ever since."

The two then looked to the guild agent, who is looking around the greenery for another passageway.

"She does...?" Sora asked.

The nurse nodded again. "She does. At least when she thinks I'm not looking at her. I could imagine her thinking how awful it was for one like me who still remembers who her family was, or how people like you still have friends you can recall and find out there, or even Nep-Nep, who's looking for Histy. Compared to us, I think Iffy had no one like that for most of her life."

"Even though she was in a guild?"

"She probably treats them like good workmates. Not exactly friends, but good company nonetheless."

"..." The boy crossed his arms in thought for a moment.

The two looked ahead to see the guild agent, still scouting ahead admist the leafy environment.

"You see, that's a big part of why I decided to come." Compa admitted. "Sure, Nep-Nep is really adorable and I want to help her, and I want to help you find your friends and Donald and Goofy their King. But most of all, I want to be there for Iffy since she's been by my side for as far as I can remember. I want her to see that I cherish her and want to help out with her problems, no matter how small they are."

"Compa..." Sora chuckled, scratching his cheek. "You really are a good person, huh?"

"Oh, shucks" Compa feels a bit embarrassed. "If anything, you're just as good, Sora."

"Come on" Now it was the boy's turn to feel embarrassed. "I'm not that good."

"Yes, you are!" the nurse cheered. "I know that if, by some chance, we find your friends first, you'd stick around and help us find ours. It's just in your nature, Sora."

"That so?" Sora teasingly said, only to have an epiphany. "Oh!"

"Hm?" Compa suddenly said. "You look like a lightbulb lit up above your head."

"I think I get why Donald's mad at me now!"

"Really? What is it?"

"HEY! What's the holdup!?"

Their conversation was interrupted by IF, who called them over. "C'mon, I found another exit! Let's go!"

"Mind shelving this conversation for later?" Compa asked the young boy, who nodded.

"Sure!"

As the two ran over to the guild agent, a man suddenly swung in between them and landed right at the middle of them.

"Ah!"

"Woah!"

"Who are you!?"

The guild agent raised her qatars in defense. The man, sporting wavy brown hair and wearing nothing but a brown loincloth, eyed both parties while maintaining a defensive stance with his spear.

"You."

"Huh?" Sora muttered. "You mean us?"

"Why on home ground? Hunter?"

"Hunter?" IF wondered. "What's he on about?"

"Um, we're not enemies, for sure" Compa attempted to negotiate.

"He's right. We're friends here" Sora nodded.

"Friends?"

The strange man looked between both parties for a while, before he relaxed his stance.

"Here be sacred ground. Home to gorilla tribe."

"Gorilla tribe?" IF raised an eyebrow.

The man nodded. "Tarzan. Raised by gorillas. Tarzan home."

"Sure..." the guild agent just nodded along. "So, you're Tarzan, and you're raised by the gorillas here. Did I get all that right?"

Tarzan nodded again.

"Hey, if Tarzan lives here, that means he knows the lay of the land here, right?" Compa said with starry eyes.

"He could, but judging by how's he's raised, I'm not sure he could articulate it for us." IF scratched her head.

"Maybe he knows where our friends are?" Sora wondered.

"Friends?" Tarzan asked.

The boy nodded. "First off, there's Riku. He's wearing yellow and blue and has silver hair. Then there's Kairi, she's wearing white and purple and has red hair."

"Then there's King Mickey!" Compa chimed in. "He's bigger than your average mouse, from what I hear."

IF sighed. "C'mon guys, are you sure he could answer those questions? Besides, shouldn't we ask him about our immediate companions."

"They'll be fine!" Sora said confidently. "Neptune is tough. And Donald and Goofy are no slouches either!"

"Are you sure you're not being deflective there?" the guild agent raised an eyebrow.

The boy shook his head. "Besides, I've...come to realize some things and...I wanna clear the air with everyone too."

"Sora..."

IF looked at Compa, who only nodded with a big smile.

Tarzan started to mumble something. "Friends here"

"What did he say?" IF said, confused.

"Do you know where they are!?" Compa asked.

The ape-man nodded. "Come. Tarzan take you to Jane and then, to home ground."

He then grabbed a nearby vine and swung away.

"Is he expecting us to swing after him?" IF wondered.

"I don't know..." Compa whined. "I can be quite clumsy. The vines will likely break before I could jump over."

"Then I'll go after him!" Sora took a nearby vine and begun swinging. "You two find another way to catch up!"

"Way to make this hard for us..." IF mumbled. "Alright! But you better not fool around, ya hear?"

"I won't!"

Deep Jungle – Cliffside

Neptune, in the meantime, took to exploring the nearby area.

"Hmmmmmm, no one or nothing interesting in sight..." she said, scanning around the area. "Should we call this a bust? Hm?"

"...goo..."

Her attention then turned to see a small blue blob with a dog face on it hopping up and down.

"...goo"

"What's this? It looks cute...and rare, too..."

"Dogoo!"

When the blob noticed the girl, it started to hop away!

"Hey, come back!"

She pursued it to the edge of the nearby cliffs, where it stopped on something...unusual.

"Dogoo..."

"Don't worry, little guy. I won't hurt you..."

"Goo!"

The strange blob however, began to hop away in a flash.

"Aw man, am I not friendly enough? What was the little guy looking at, anyway?"

She approached the thing near the cliffs, which on closer inspection turned out to be...

"W-Wha...?"

Covering her mouth, she saw a spotted leopard lying on the ground, seemingly dead with it's mouth exhibiting an unusual purple glow.

"Oh no...Is it...?"

As she wondered about the state of the animal, she suddenly felt something piercing her left hip!

"AH!"

As she felt sharp pain through her hip, she tumbled and coughed loudly.

"What in the..." Her vision began to blur and her balance was loosening by the second. "Ah!"

She then fell to the ground, clutching her wounded hip as she writhed in pain.

"Haa-hahahaha!" a loud villainous laughter rang through the area. "I cannot believe you fell for a simple bait like that! How far has your kind fallen!"

Neptune tried to look up, her blurry eyesight noticing a tall, purple...something looking down upon her. "Who...are..."

"Well, you won't need to worry about a thing anymore"

The figure raised her weapon against her, ready to deal the decisive blow!

"Once you're out, I'll take what's mine and once I take her's too, I will achieve what I desired! Farewell, C-!"

Only to be interrupted by sudden gunfire, forcing the witch to pull back from the gunfire!

"Neptune!"

"Nep-Nep!"

Donald and Goofy raced to the downed Keyblade wielder, with the latter carrying her and the former readying his staff against the purple lady.

"Tch! The King's lackeys..."

Her gaze turned to the sole entrance, where a man with a hunting shotgun, no doubt the one who made a shot at her, was primed against her. Below him, is the strange blue blob from earlier.

"A dogoo? I thought they have gone extinct with the fall of..." the witch shook her head as she took three steps back. "Well, it doesn't matter. If she's this weak, that means she's not ready yet. I can take my time until then. Savor this moment while you can, fools!"

She then vanished in a haze of purple smoke, her vile laughter ringing across the area.

"Haa-hahahaha!"

"Blasted witch..." Donald bemoaned. He then looked to the female Keyblade Wielder. "How is she?"

"Nep-Nep's not looking too good..." Goofy said with worry. "We gotta help her, and fast!"

"Then let us take her to Ms. Foster" the man who accompanied them suggested. "The girl looks poisoned. Maybe she has some medicine with her that can help."

"Sure thing!" Goofy agreed, and then whistled to the blue blob. "Come on, boy!"

With no other option, the Disney Duo, carrying the unconscious Neptune, followed the hunter back to his camp. The blue blob hopped after them as well.

"H-His...ty... "

Deep Jungle – Camp

Meanwhile, Sora and Tarzan arrived at a peculiar camp.

"Hey!"

IF and Compa managed to catch up with them as well, albeit a bit out of breath.

"Guess we should...challenge someone...to a round of...Hoppin' Hippos, huh?"

"I'm sure a game like that...doesn't really exist..."

Tarzan guided the trio to the nearby tent, where a woman wearing explorer's gear is busy setting up a camera.

"Oh, Tarzan, you came back!" the woman noticed.

"Excuse us, but are you Jane?" IF asked.

"Yes, that is who I am" the explorer nodded. "DId Tarzan tell you that?"

"Yessy!" Compa exclaimed.

"That's good." Jane nodded in relief. "That means he's getting better at speaking more humanely."

"Does this have to do with him raised by gorillas?" Sora asked.

"Indeed" Jane nodded. "When my father, a fellow explorer, and I first met him, we couldn't really believe it. In time, we got him to soften up to us, and we helped him in learning our ways again. In turn, he helped us in our research of the local wildlife here."

"That's interesting..." IF muttered. "Does this have to do with the gorillas he was talking about..."

"Why, yes!" the researcher answered excitedly. "For you see..."

"Move it! Move it!"

However, they were interrupted by the arrival of newcomers.

"Injured incoming!"

Compa's face tensed up at the last part. "Where's the patient!?"

Bursting into the tent are two familiar figures, along with a poisoned girl and a strange blue blob.

"Donald?"

"Goofy?"

Compa, however, gasped loudly at the poisoned girl. "NEP-NEP!? What happened to her!?"

"We dunno!" Goofy exclaimed. "Some witch came in and attacked her!"

"Set her down here!"

With Jane's guidance, Neptune was set down in a makeshift bed within the camp tent, the sick girl breathing heavily as poison filled her system.

"This fever..." Compa checked her patient's sweating head. "She's burning up fast."

She then immediately zipped down Neptune's parka, causing the guys in the party to look away quickly.

"Hey!"

"We're still here!"

...Thankfully, she's still clothed underneath the parka. Still...

"We'll just be waiting outside!"

The guys and IF, along with the blob, immediately retreated to the outside while Compa continued her diagnosis.

"Nothing wrong on this end..."

Seeing where the likely problem is, Compa slowly turned Neptune around, causing the sick girl to lay down facing the bed itself.

She then slowly lifter her patient's clutching right hand out of her hip...

"This stab wound...!"

Inspecting the wound, she noticed an unusual purple hue around it.

"No doubt about it, this is poison."

"Perhaps an ointment and some medicine might be just the thing she needs." Jane suggested.

"Yes, that would be best" Compa produced her handy first aid kit. "I'll treat the wound with what I have for now. Can you tell Iffy and the others what we need?"

"Of course! My father is familiar with this type of poisoning. I'll check his notes right now!"

As Jane left the tent, the aspiring nurse looked at her poisoned friend.

"But...can I really save her? Me, a person who can't even remember if she passed nursing school or not?"

"I..." Neptune struggled to say. "...It...hurts..."

"Nep-Nep..." she clenched her fists. "Please hang in there..."

Deep Jungle - Camp

Back outside the tent, Sora and the others are waiting for Compa to finish her diagnosis, when Jane exited the tent.

"How is she?" Sora asked.

"Not well, I'm afraid." Jane answered. "Your nurse friend is treating her wound for now, but she needs ointment and medicine to fully cure the poison. And right now, we don't have the necessary ingredients for them."

"What can we do?" Goofy asked in a panic.

"What do you think?" IF nearly exclaimed. "Go find the ingredients needed for the ointment, of course!"

"But where do we even look for those?" Donald wondered.

"I can give you a list of ingredients to search for." Jane informed. "Thankfully, our time here in the jungle has given us a good look at what ingredients we can find here."

"Then please get to it!" IF said as the explorer returned to the tent. "We can't let Nep die here!"

"Tarzan help too" the ape-man offered. "Convince gorillas to search"

"That would be great!" Sora sighed in relief. "But we hate to impose."

Tarzan shook his head. "Friend, in danger. Tarzan want help friend"

The guild agent smiled. "Then we'll take you up on that offer. Thank you, Tarzan."

Jane exited the tent with a piece of paper on hand. "Here's the list of things we need! Tarzan, can you make out some of the words here?"

The ape-man looked at the list for a while, then nodded.

"Tarzan memorize. Will ask gorilla to help"

"Good" Jane then lent him a pencil. "Can you cross out what you and the gorillas can find? That way, the others here can narrow their search better."

Nodding, Tarzan took the pencil and neatly crossed out some of the ingredients on the list.

"Woah."

"He crossed out a lot of 'em!"

"Well, there's still one thing we can search for, though."

"Tarzan go!"

The ape-man then left for the gorilla's home grounds for aid.

"Then it's up to us to find the last ingredient, then!" Sora declared. "Honey Sap, right?"

"Yup!" Goofy nodded. "Let's get goin'!"

"Y-Yeah" Donald said awkwardly.

"Good luck, guys." IF said. "I'll stay behind and keep the camp safe from the Heartless. Goofy, watch over those two."

"Aw, I think they'll do fine!" the royal knight said in confidence. "Right, fellas?"

"Uh, yeah" Sora said, awkwardly rubbing his head.

"Sure..." Donald looked away in shame.

IF sighed, grabbing the impatiently hopping blue blob. "Just be sure to get back with the honey sap in one piece, okay? We all have a lot to talk about"

"Right..." Sora and Donald said in shame.

Deep Jungle – Climbing Trees

"This must be the place..."

Sora, Donald and Goofy arrive at the closed area near the treehouse, which is where the Honey Sap can be found.

However, it has recently become a den for two new breeds of Heartless. The **Powerwilds** and the **Bouncywilds**, two monkey Heartless each specializing in their own modes of attack, the former melee, and the latter ranged.

"Sora, was this place filled with monkeys the last time you came here?" Donald asked.

The boy shook his head. "Nope. We just met Tarzan here and that's that."

"Welp, there's tons of them now" Goofy said.

One of the monkeys overheard them and alerted his comrades of potential danger.

"Looks like we got a fight" the court wizard said, priming his staff.

"No time like the present" the royal knight raised his shield.

The Keyblade wielder summoned his weapon. "Let's get rid of them and grab that honey sap!"

"Right!/Right..."

Charging forth, the trio split up to deal with the numerous monkey Heartless monkeying around.

"Get back here!"

Goofy charged after a group of three Powerwilds, only to slip on a banana peel left behind by a Bouncywild.

"Ouch! Gawrsh, that hurt..."

"Goofy!"

Donald immediately diverted a **Thundara** spell against the four monkeys, saving his friend.

"Thanks, Donald!" Goofy gave his fellow companion a thumbs up in thanks.

Donald followed suit and then, returned to the fight.

He pursued a Powerwild, who is being supported by four Bouncywilds above with their slingshots out and ready.

"Outta way!"

And so, he started blasting them with **Fira** magic, taking them out in quick succession.

"That'll teach them!"

His jubilations were cut short when he felt a nut hit his head.

He turned around to see three Powerwilds, one of which taunted him by spanking his behind.

"Why you!"

His temper taking hold of his decisions, Donald Duck charged at them, only to slip on another banana peel! Are those monkeys careless or what!?

"Ack! Not good..."

The three Powerwilds, backed by a Bouncywild now surrounded the duck!

"Could we really find the King without them? Or am I just over my head?"

Just as the monkeys are ready for their combined assault...

"No, you don't!"

...Only for their hopes to be dashed through, literally, thanks to a Keyblade wielder and his newly acquired **Sonic Blade** technique.

As for the Bouncywild? Well, she said her last prayers when a shield was thrown at her like a boomerang.

"Donald!"

"You okay?"

"Goofy, Sora..."

He looked to see his two friends, relief evident in their faces.

"C'mere. I'll help you up."

The sight of Sora extended a hand to him caused the duck to have a flashback to a simpler time when he and two others were vying to be the best musketeers they can be.

"*No need to be so scared, Donald! C'mere. I'll help ya up*."

Accepting the aid, Donald managed to stand up.

"Is that all the Heartless?"

"Yeah." Sora answered as he points to the tree in the middle of the area. "Turns out they were gathering around this weird purple fruit thing attached to that tree over there."

"Really?"

"Yup. Once Sora and I took care of it, it started raining some honey sap, so I gathered some up while Sora rushed over to save you."

"Oh..."

The duck looked to the boy, who only smiled.

"Why, Sora?"

The boy raised an eyebrow.

"Why did you save me there? We had a fight, remember?"

Sora chuckled a bit. "We were, huh? Listen, about that..."

He then bowed his head in apology. "I'm sorry!"

"Huh!?"

The duck couldn't hold back his surprise. Why would he apologize for that?

"Listen, I miss my best friends. I really do. But...that doesn't I'm leaving you two out to dry!"

"W-What do you mean?" Donald managed to say.

Sora hung his head down. "You guys said you need my help to find your King, right?"

The duck nodded.

"And you are worried that, if we found Riku and Kairi first, I wouldn't be around to help you guys, right?"

"Huh!?" Donald blanched at that.

"Sora..." Goofy muttered.

Sora shook his head, waving his hand off. "That's ridiculous!"

Both cartoon animals yelped at the Keyblade wielder's sudden shout.

"Look, I know I have the Keyblade and all, but I don't have all the answers, and neither does the Keyblade, really. But that's why we're on this journey together, aren't we? And you know what I think? I think we should be helping each other out. Way I see it, you're helping me find Riku and Kairi and I'm helping you two find your King. Even if we managed to find my friends first, I'd still be out here helping you two find your King."

He then looked to his two friends, his smile never fading. "Isn't' that what friends do? Helping each other out?"

"Sora..."

Sora let out a goofy smile, placing his hands behind his back. "I'm still learning the ropes about all this, and I'm still not sure about many things, so, mind helping me out too?"

Donald sniffed. He was actually holding back some tears, brought upon by the boy's heartfelt pleas.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I was so worried about King Mickey that I'd do anything to bring him back! I'm sorry for doubting you, Sora! I'm so sorry!"

Sora then hugged the duck as he cried. Goofy, in turn, hugged both of his friends as well.

"Yeah. I'm sorry, too. I guess we're all worried, huh?" the boy remarked.

"Don't feel bad, guys." the royal captain reassured. "We're all pals here! All for one and one for all, remember!"

The three friends looked at each other, their resolve renewed.

"Yeah! Let's save our friends together!" Sora declared.

"Yeah!" Donald agreed.

"Together!" Goofy affirmed.

The trio jumped up and clapped their hands together, their bond renewed and strengthened.

Deep Jungle – Camp Tent

IF returned to the tent to see Compa still watching over Neptune, who managed to sleep a bit soundly, if a bit noisy with her snoring. The blob is also close to her, keeping watch.

"How is she?" the guild agent asked her friend.

"She's just sleeping for now" the nurse replied, never taking her face off her patient. "I patched the wound a bit, but we really need the ointment and the medicine so she can get better."

"I see..."

IF took a seat on the floor as she sighed.

"This has been a mess, huh..." she muttered.

"No kidding" Compa entertained, turning around to face her friend. "Who would've thought we'd arrive in a gorilla jungle of all places?"

IF let out a small laugh. "Certainly not us. Then again, compared to the topsy-turvy room and the coliseum managed by literal gods, this world seems pretty regular by comparison."

"You think so?" Compa tilted her head, letting the hopping blob on her as the nurse pats its head.

"I think you're just used to all the weirdness we've been having lately" the guild agent shook her head.

"Aren't you?" the nurse asked.

"I mean, someone here has to keep everyone grounded" IF remarked. "I doubt even the duck could keep the weirdness out forever."

It was silent for a while, as the guild agent let out another sigh.

"That stupid Nep..." IF looked to the now-asleep Keyblade wielder. "Why does she have to be so like...that?"

"Like, how?" Compa dared to ask.

The guild agent sighed again. "Like, we could've broken the argument like regular people, but no, Nep had to start pushing buttons out of nowhere to get our attention, and now, we're down here and until those two reconcile, I doubt we'd ever leave here!"

The nurse thought for a moment. "Maybe she felt that was the only way to get their attention?"

"You think?" IF raised an eyebrow. "It makes me think she's a big brained player in a game of chess, and that, to me, does NOT describe Nep at all."

"She could be smart or dumb" Compa started. "But Nep-Nep will always be Nep-Nep to me"

"And how would you describe her, exactly?"

"Well...she's super adorable and irresistible!"

"Okay, what else?"

"What else?"

"Like..." IF sighed. "...how would you put her in one word?"

"Well...if I could describe her in one word, aside from pudding, that would be happiness!" Compa replied.

"Happiness?"

"Like, she tries her best to keep everyone around her happy. The way she says the silliest things, does the most absurd things, she wants people to laugh and smile even in dark times like these."

"..." IF hummed at the answer. Could she really be anything but that?

"...Don't...fight..."

The two, plus the blob, looked at the struggling girl, seemingly talking in her sleep.

"Nep!"

Compa shushed the panicking guild agent. "She's still sleeping. She must be having a dream."

"...Sora...Donald...please stop...fighting..." Neptune managed to say in her delirious state.

"Is she talking about their feud?"

"...If you two fight...you won't be...happy...Goofy will stop...smiling...Compa...will keep worrying...Your friends...will stop being happy..."

"Nep-Nep..."

"...If...fy..."

IF stood up and rushed to Neptune's side.

"I'm here, Nep!"

The girl slowly turned her head to her friend, her eyes half-opened.

"...I'm...sorry...I...don't know...how to break...them up...I just..."

"Just...what?"

"I...just want to...see everyone smiling...I don't...like it when...people get sad...or in trouble..."

The guild agent tried to fight back her tears. "Then why...why did you do what you did? Answer me, Nep!"

"...When...people get sad...I get sad...I don't like...sadness..."

The sick girl's lips curled into a smile. "But...when everyone smiles...I smile too...People are...at their brightest...when they smile...that's why I..."

Silence took over the tent again, as the sick Neptune went back to snoring.

IF sighed once more. "...That dummy...She had to go and do that...for such a childish reason..."

She then felt something wet touching her cheek.

"Huh!?"

She immediately looked to her left, seeing the blue blob gazing at her while panting.

"Trying to comfort me, huh? Sorry about that"

Compa tapped her friend on the shoulder, offering a handkerchief.

Taking it, she wiped the tears that were beginning to flow out of her eyes. "I guess you're right on the munny, Compa. That girl really does everything for our happiness, huh?"

The nurse nodded.

"That was still too reckless of her...but I guess I got some stuff to rethink over now." the guild agent said, looking up. "About myself, about Nep...about all of us, really."

"May I give some advice?" Compa said.

"Let me guess, from your grandfather?"

The nurse nodded again.

"There are certain things in this world that you simply cannot understand. If you can't, then just simply accept it. Accept that the fact exists. Accept that there are things in this gosh-

darned world that we could never comprehend, no matter how hard we think about it."

IF chuckled. "Don't overthink things, then. I guess you have a point. I have been overthinking a lot of things lately."

Compa nodded. "Good to hear..." She then turned her gaze at Neptune, with a forlorn expression.

One IF clearly noticed. "So, what about you?"

"Hm?"

"Something's clearly eating up at you, judging by your face" the guild agent observed.

The nurse chuckled sadly. "So, you noticed?"

"C'mon, Compa" IF said. "How long have we already known each other?"

"As far as I can remember" Compa answered. "Which isn't really much..."

"Right" IF nodded. "So, talk to me. What's ailing you, Ms. Nurse?"

Compa had to chuckle at that remark.

"Well, it's just...I wonder if I'm good enough at...anything else, really"

IF raised an eyebrow at that. "What brought this on?"

"I mean, look at you all!" Compa started to speak. "Nep-Nep and Sora are Keyblade Wielders. Donald and Goofy are Royal Guards. And you, Iffy, are a Guild Member. All of you out there are cool and amazing and everything!"

She sighed. "And then there's me. Poor, lovable Compa who can only keep everyone patched up, and nothing else. Just somebody someone watches over and holds everyone else back to keep her safe like a damsel..."

"Hey..." IF tried to answer as softly as possible. "Is she worried about the fact that she keeps getting targeted in battle? That does seem to happen a lot to her...Don't put yourself down like that. You are more than that, Compa."

"And what is it!?" Compa yelled as she stood up in anger, tears fell from her eyes. "Sure, cooking and nursing people is what I can do, but what if I fail? What if one day, I ended up cooking up a really bad dish and everyone stopped looking forward to my food next time? What if, one day, something like this happened and I couldn't find a cure in time? Will I be able to look myself in the eye and say you did the best you could, when you haven't even figured out what the problem or solution even is!? And what if, one day, something happens to me and I can't watch over you all anymore!? Tell me, Iffy! Tell me!"

IF was flabbergasted at her friend's response. "You've been holding this in for a while now, huh..."

The nurse sighed, sitting right back down. "Maybe...this is too much for me...Perhaps I should just..."

"...You can...do it...Compa..."

The two girls turned to Neptune, who started speaking again.

"...There's...no one else...out there...like you..."

"What do you mean, Nep-Nep?" Compa cried as she looked onto her sick friend's half-lidded eyes. "What else can I do here? Can I really do what I set out to do? Me, a failure who couldn't even remember if she passed nursing school or not?"

"...It's better...to try and fail...than to not do...and regret it...y'know?"

As soon as she said her piece, she fell asleep again.

"She's right" IF said. "Compa, you kept our whole group together as much as you are able. Sure, you kept us fed and patched up, but more than anything, you kept our hearts just as healthy just by being with us. Heck, I'm sure the reason Sora's able to meet Donald in the eye is because of something you told him, right?"

Compa tried to say something, but kept silent to let her friend finish.

"Sure, you can't remember much of your past as I do, but that didn't stop you from doing what you can. And this here might be way above your paygrade, but the fact that you were willing to take the first step to getting the stuff needed for the medicine is already proof enough that you want to do this, no matter what."

"Do...what?" Compa asked.

"Helping Nep get better, that's what."

Compa's eye widened in shock. "*She's right. When I heard Nep-Nep was poisoned, my body and mind moved on their own. No, it's more accurate to say my heart moved before I could fully consider the risks. Deep in my heart, I knew I wanted to save Nep-Nep. I knew I wanted to keep everyone fed and happy the only way I know how.*"

The nurse chuckled. "Maybe you're right. No, you're absolutely right. I know what I want to do and I'm going to do it! I will save Nep-Nep!"

IF smiled. "There we go. That's the Compa I know"

Compa giggled. "Thanks for that, Iffy. And...sorry for blowing up at you all of a sudden..."

The guild agent shrugged. "I'm guessing you have those problems locked up in you for a while, huh?"

The nurse nodded.

"Eh, don't worry about it." IF reassured. "I have stuff I wanted to let out too. So, if you're ever feeling down, even if it's something silly or serious, just tell us, okay? We're here for you, Compa."

The nurse looked to the guild agent, who sported a good smile.

"Just as you were there for me."

"Iffy-poo..."

Silence filled the tent for a while, until the blob licked Compa's cheek.

"Woah!" Compa giggled. "You wanted to cheer me up, too? Thank you very much!"

IF smiled at the sight of her nurse friend, looking like a butterfly that long grew out of it's cocoon.

A truly beautiful sight for her...

"Move it!"

"Why would you drag me here like this!?"

Suddenly, the two heard noises outside.

"What's with all the racket out there?"

Deep Jungle - Camp

IF went out of the tent to see Sora and Donald with their weapons out, poking a man with his hands tied by rope while Goofy is holding onto a pouch of honey sap.

"Keep moving, you!" Donald demanded.

"I swear to you, I did not mean to shoot at it!" the man pleaded

"What's going on here, boys?" the guild agent asked the returning party with folded arms.

"See this guy here?" Sora answered, poking the man with the tip of his Keyblade. "He tried to shoot a defenseless gorilla while we were out looking for the honey sap"

"It's here, by the way!" Goofy said, proudly showing the bag that contains it.

"That's good!" IF exhaled in relief. "Now we just need to wait for Tarzan..."

Suddenly, they heard rustling leaves coming to their direction, and then, Tarzan landed in the area, holding a large basket above his head.

"Speak of the ape and he appears..." the guild agent looked in surprise.

"Ingredients...here" the ape-man patted the basket on his head. "Tarzan heard. Clayton hunt gorilla?"

"I-It's not what you all think!" Clayton, the hunter, pleaded. "T-There was a snake coming close to that poor thing and I thought I could take it out and save it's life, but..."

"Quit lying!" Sora poked the hunter again. "You were clearly trying to shoot at them!"

"You big palooka!" Donald followed suit with his staff.

"Just let me say my story!" the hunter continued to plead.

"Enough!"

Jane rushed to see what the ruckus is all about. Needless to say, she's NOT happy at all.

"I have already have it to here with you, Clayton!" the woman said angrily. "You not only lost sight of my father, but now here you are, hunting these poor animals for sport when we're here for RESEARCH!"

"Ms. Foster, please!" Clayton pleaded...

But Jane has had it! "No! I will not have it! Leave!"

Clayton did as he was told and left to the nearby clearing, though not without silent anger.

The explorer sighed. "I swear, he's getting more erratic by the day..."

"I'm guessing he's been at that for a while now?" IF guessed.

"Unfortunately..." Jane confirmed. "Mr. Clayton has signed up to be our bodyguard, but it seems all he's ever thought of is hunting the wildlife here, especially the gorillas."

She sighed. "I wonder if my father made the wrong choice with this..."

"Jane?" Tarzan said, looking at the explorer.

She smiled, pointing to the open area at the tent's left. "Sorry about that, Tarzan. Can you set the ingredients over there? I'll get Compa and we can start making the antidote."

Tarzan nodded with a grunt. Goofy also followed suit with the bag of honey sap.

As Jane left to get Compa, the two went to work on making the antidote.

Meanwhile, Sora, Donald and IF rested in the tent as they watch over the still-sick Neptune. The blue blob danced around the trio as they sat down.

Deep Jungle - Tent

Eventually...

"It's done!" Compa cheered as she held the...medicine(?) in her hands.

"Compa, that's pudding..." IF pointed out.

Jane cleared her throat. "Well, we figured that Neptune may not accept the medicine in it's current state, so Compa here suggested we mix it in with her favorite food. That's why the pudding is like this."

"Like having your kid eat their veggies without seein' them, right?" Goofy exclaimed.

"That makes sense..." Donald muttered.

"And the ointment?" Sora asked.

Jane shows a black and green container. "It's right here. Please excuse us while we get her treated."

"Okay, sure." Sora said as he stood up and left.

"Come here, you!" Donald grabbed the dog-faced blob and left the tent with the others.

"Will this work?" Jane asked Compa one more time.

The nurse exhaled and then nodded. "It has to! I'm not a certified nurse yet, but I will save Nep-Nep! I must! I won't hide from my own heart anymore!"

Deep Jungle - Camp

Back outside, IF spoke to the boys.

"I see you boys are getting along better this time."

The trio looked to each other and then back at IF.

"Really?" the guys all asked.

"Really." the guild agent nodded, taking note of their shared response. "It's like, you guys work well now. I guess I got worried for nothing, huh?"

"Well, about that..." Donald started.

And then, Sora and Donald bowed to IF.

"We're sorry!"

"Huh!?" the guild agent was taken aback. "What brought this on?"

"Well..." the boy started.

"We didn't want to cause any more trouble with you guys..." the duck continued.

IF let out a happy sigh. "Geez. Didn't take that long for you guys, huh?"

"Well, we've been thinking about some things and..." Sora started.

"...figured out we were just anxious about some things..." Donald continued.

"...but we had it all cleared out at the end of the day!" Goofy finished with his signature chuckle.

"You're getting along alright if you're finishing each other's sentences right there." the guild agent pointed out.

"Come on!" Sora blushed.

"Did you have to point that out?" Donald covered his face in embarrassment.

Goofy simply laughed at the scene to show his happiness at his friends now getting along.

"Well, I got some stuff I want to clear out too..." IF mumbled.

"NEPTUNE'S BACK, BABY!"

Sure enough, they were interrupted when an energetic cry rang near the tent. One coming from a recently recovered girl wearing a parka.

"Nep-Nep, please don't move too fast! You're still recovering!" Compa cried from inside the tent.

"Come on, Compa. I'm as right as rain now! Besides, some sun is just what this Nep needs!"

As she stretched, her gaze fell upon the rest of her party members.

"Heya guys!" Neptune approached them. "Wazzup!?"

Yet her only answer was nothing but stares.

"Uh, guys, you in there? Hello?"

Suddenly, she was grabbed and hugged by the boys of their party.

"Neptune!" Sora shouted.

"You're okay!" Donald said in relief.

"Welcome back, Nep-Nep!" Goofy greeted.

"Woa-hoa!" the girl exclaimed. "Slow down, fellas! I'm still kickin' here. Haven't tripped any death flags, you know?"

"We've been worried sick about you, Nep" IF shook her head. "Of course they'd glomp at you first chance they get."

"Aw, thanks, you guys." Neptune thanked the boys. "What about you, Iffy?"

"Me?" IF raised an eyebrow.

"You look like you want to tell me something, so spill!"

The guild agent gulped and cleared her throat. "Well, you see...I've been thinking about stuff and..."

"Hm?"

"...I'm sorry...for blowing up on you..."

Now it's Neptune's turn to raise an eyebrow. "Huh? Sorry? For what?"

The guild agent became flustered. "What do you mean, for what!? Remember, back at the gummi ship?"

The female Keyblade wielder thought for a moment, then a lightbulb lit up in her head. "Oooooohhhhh, that!"

She gave a light chuckle as she placed her hands behind her head. "I mean, we were just having our usual barbs, right? The usual back and forth?"

"You...You...!" IF's face began to emit steam. "If you're going to do something stupid, at least tell us, got it!?"

"Woah!" Neptune yelped. "What's gotten into you, Iffy? Did you hit your head hard when you fell into this world?"

IF groaned. "I can't believe this! Was it just all in my head!? How can this girl be so...so...HER!?"

The boys could only laugh at the situation before them.

"I'm glad we can all hang out together like this again..." Compa muttered. "It makes all the pain my heart went through worth it. I'm happy we can all be together again..."

However, their moment of peace was interrupted when Tarzan rushed into camp in a panic.

"Tarzan?" Jane called out. "What's the matter?"

"Clayton!" Tarzan gasped. "Clayton hunt gorillas! Had help."

"Oh no!" Donald cried.

"What help?" IF asked.

Just as she did, several Heartless, mainly Powerwilds and **Blue Rhapsodies**, icy-blue variants of the Red Nocturnes, spawned across the camp!

"That help" the ape-man quipped, bringing out his spear.

"Since when can people call out Heartless!?" the guild agent wondered aloud.

"No time for that!" Sora repelled an incoming attack from a Powerwild. "We gotta get to the gorillas!"

"RIGHT!"

With the team reunited, they repelled the Heartless assault and rushed to the gorilla's aid.

Deep Jungle - Cliffside

The gorillas gathered in one place, as their home grounds were overrun by wild and unusually aggressive monkeys. Leading them is the foul human who tried to murder one of their young.

He pointed his shotgun at them, ready to take the shot.

"NO!"

"CLAYTON NO HUNTING!"

However, cries from two more humans, a boy and a girl stopped him. Yet all the hunter could do was stare at them without a word.

"Clayton!?" Sora called out.

"Not Clayton!" Tarzan then mumbled something incomprehensible. "Not Clayton!"

The hunter then raised his hand, and all of a sudden, the cliff behind the gorillas exploded, causing the simians to panic, running behind the party.

"Please get behind us!" Compa cried out to the panicking gorillas. "Don't worry! We won't hurt you! I'll even treat your wounds!"

As this happened, Clayton jumped up and hopped onto...something that seems to be moving...and unseen.

Tarzan, angered at the hunter's brazenness, attempted to charge at him, only to be knocked back. A loud unusual roar was heard as well.

"What did he just hop onto?" Sora wondered.

"It's likely something invisible..." IF pointed out. "Thankfully, Clayton himself isn't invisible, so it'll be easy to track their movements..."

"Then let's not waste anymore time!" Neptune shouted, raising her Keyblade. "C'mon, gang! We've got gorillas to save!"

"Says the girl who was out cold for almost the whole trip..." Donald complained.

"But she's got the right energy for the job." Goofy complimented.

Sensing prey, the invisible monster lunged at the party, causing them to move away.

"It's not just dumb, but also loud!" the guild agent noticed, channeling flames into her qatars. "Keep your eyes and ears open, people! And watch out for gunfire!"

Wasting no time, Clayton fired a round on the defenseless Compa.

"Eeep!"

Thankfully, Goofy came in and blocked the shot.

"Thanks!" the nurse thanked her friend.

The royal guard responded by raising his thumb. "No problem-o!"

Donald took the chance to channel ice into his staff.

"Time to freeze!"

He unleashed a mighty **Blizzara** attack at the creature, which dealt some damage to it.

"I'll follow up! **DEMON FLAMES**!"

A pillar of fire ignited below Clayton and the invisible creature, leaving it open to attack!

"My turn! **CROSS COMBINATION**!"

Neptune rushes in and performs her six-attack, seven-hit combo, sending the invisible beast flying up and back down to earth.

"All yours, Sora!"

"Here goes!"

Charging up, the boy unleashed his **Sonic Blade** attack, a rush of seven quick and powerful dashes against the enemy.

Under such combined assault, the invisible creature roared, revealing itself as an oversized green chameleon with two huge eyes.

It is called the **Stealth Sneak**.

"RAAAHHHH!"

Seeing an opening, the ape-man let out a loud bellow and charged at the hunter, bringing him down to earth and separated from the revealed lizard.

"Whoa!" Neptune shouted. "Look at the ape-man go!"

"Stay focused, Nep!" IF scolded the girl. "Now that those two are separated, we have to take them down fast!"

"Hey, Mr. Lizard!" Goofy taunted the Stealth Sneak, the oversized chameleon Heartless. "Over here!"

Rather than a physical assault, the giant lizard opted for a ranged attack, shooting slow beams from his eyes at the royal knight.

"All charged up?" Goofy asked the nurse behind him as he is busy deflecting the blasts back.

"*I can do this! I can do this!* Ready!"

Compa readies her shot and aims at the giant lizard.

"A little poisonous treat, from Nep-Nep to you!"

Firing her **Poison Agent** square at his mouth, the Stealth Sneak began to phase in and out of reality as the poison settles into him.

"How's that!?" Compa cheered. "Iffy! Nep-Nep! Mr. Lizard's all yours!"

"Nice job, Compa!" the guild agent charged up her blades. "Ready, Nep?"

Neptune flashed a V-sign with her fingers. "Ready as I'll ever be!"

"**HEAVENLY COMBINATION**!"

Neptune unleashes five slashes, with the fifth sending the poisoned chameleon up into the air.

"All yours, Iffy!"

"There's no escape for you!"

Jumping up, IF proceeds to slash the Heartless ten times in quick successions and followed that up with a heel kick, sending the lizard down!

"And now!"

"The finisher!"

Charging their weapons, the duo unleashed a mighty slash that pushed the creature back.

"We're so awesome!"

"You did great, Nep!"

Meanwhile, Sora and Clayton are clashing in melee combat. In the clash, it has become very clear that the hunter is no match for a human opponent, especially in close combat.

As the hunter tried to use his shotgun to hit the boy from a certain angle, Sora proceeded to block it. Anytime Clayton tried to shoot at him point-blank, Sora raised his Keyblade in defense, blocking the attack.

"Sora!"

Hearing the cries, Clayton pushed the boy back and attempted to take a shot at Donald.

"RAHHHHHHHH!"

But his shot never came, as Tarzan led a furious charge against the hunter, distracting him from his intended target.

"You okay?" Donald continued rushing to his friend, helping him up.

"Yeah"

As the two looked to the now distracted Clayton, they saw a golden opportunity.

"Ready, Sora?"

The boy flashed a grin.

"Yeah!"

The two charged at Clayton as Donald imbues his friend's Keyblade with Fire magic.

Sensing their attack, the ape-man grabbed Clayton and threw him to the side, right where Sora is charging in.

"Thanks, Tarzan!" Sora shouted. "Hah!"

He then launches Clayton up in the air with a blazing strike.

"Another one!"

"Hiyah!"

As Sora jumps up to deal the next blow, Donald switches to Blizzard magic, causing Sora's attack to hit with chilling precision.

"And one more!"

Now the court wizard switches to Thunder magic, giving Sora the strength he needs to sends Clayton down once and for all.

"You're through!"

This was their new Combination Skill, **Elemental Slam**!

Clayton attempts to get up, but finds himself near the tip of Tarzan's spear.

"Over"

But the hunter was having none of it, attempting to shoot the ape-man in front of him despite his weakened state.

But the Stealth Sneak from earlier fell down on top of him, leaving Clayton's panicked screams to resound through the cliffside.

Once the creature stopped moving for good, a large heart erupted out of the creature, and both it and it's former master faded away into nothingness.

"Farewell..."

Deep Jungle – Waterfalls

"Oooohhhh, why did Mr. Gorilla have to throw us up like that?"

As Compa complained while rubbing her sore behind, the party recalled the previous moment with clarity.

"Kerchak rough" Tarzan stated. "Give thanks."

"Meaning?" Neptune asked.

"It must be his way of thanking us" Jane explained. "As thanks for saving his kind from Clayton and whatever befell him."

"By allowing us in his home ground?" IF quipped. "Sure, that's one way to express your gratitude."

"Hm. Whatever could've happened to him to be able to summon that Heartless?" Goofy wondered.

Tarzan then said something again.

"What did he say?" Donald asked.

"Dunno" Sora confessed. "I heard him say something like that before we fought Clayton"

"Well, one thing's for sure" Neptune chirped as she puts her hands in her parka's pockets. "While we're having a rough time, Jane-y here got a safe and blissful ride from Mr. Ape-Man here."

This got the explorer blushing. "W-Whatever do you mean?"

The ape-man also looked away with a flushed face.

"Oh, if you know, you know." She then continued walking as she put her hands behind her head. "To usssss, one family~"

"Great..." IF facepalmed. "I guess that near-death experience gave Nep a knack for singing..."

Compa could only laugh at that remark.

Eventually, they arrived at their destination, a large green tree with a glowing blue center surrounded by blue butterflies.

Tarzan muttered something again, but no one understood it.

"This is your home?" Sora wondered. "But that means..."

The ape-man raised a hand, causing the boy to stop. He then placed the hand next to his ear, beckoning his companions to listen.

"Huh?" Goofy wondered as he did the same.

"What are we supposed to listen to?" Neptune asked.

"All I hear is the waterfalls, though" Compa remarked.

"Yes" Jane agreed as she let the excited blue blob down. "The sounds are echoing all the way here."

Tarzan mumbled again. "Friends here. See friends."

Jane slammed her fist against her palm. "Oh, now I get it. He's been trying to say 'heart'"

"Like, friends in our hearts?" Compa raised an eyebrow.

Neptune gasped. "Does that mean Histy's right inside me!? Can you hear me, Histy!?"

The guild agent sighed as she bopped Neptune up on the head. "She didn't mean that literally, you goofball."

"Heart..." Tarzan managed to say.

"Oh" Sora's expression became downcast. "So that's what it meant..."

"Friends, same heart" The ape-man said. "Clayton, lose heart. No heart, no see friends. No heart. No friends"

"So that explains what happened to him" the guild agent figured. "He lost his heart to darkness in his desire to hunt down gorillas. That's why he ended up attracting the Heartless like he did..."

"Well, don't give up!" Donald encouraged the crestfallen boy. "Our friends are still out there!"

"He's right" Compa nodded. "As long we believe in them, and keep going on, we will find them out there. Riku and Kairi. King Mickey. Histy. We have to keep believing in them and never lose heart. Or we will never see them again..."

"Man, that's deep, Compa..." Neptune said, feeling very impressed.

"Did your grandpa say that?" IF wondered.

The nurse shook her head. "But I know he would tell me something like that. I know that in my heart now. That's why I wanna keep going with you all. It's what my heart tells me to do, and I don't wanna back out on it now."

"Hear, hear!" Goofy cheered.

"You said it!" Neptune chirped.

Sora, Donald, and IF nodded.

"Dogoo!"

Even the blue blob bounced in agreement!

Soon, the blue spot began to glow brighter. Sensing something special, Sora and Neptune closed in on the spot, which revealed the world's Keyhole.

"Shall we?"

"Let's"

The duo summoned their Keyblades and locked the world's Keyhole, causing the blue butterflies to disperse as it did.

And it dropped another green object in the process!

"A gummi!" Donald exclaimed.

"But it's sure not the King's..." Goofy deflated.

"Maybe not, but this looks a bit like the last one we got." IF grabbed the gummi piece. "I'll call Cid and see if he's done analyzing the last piece we got."

"Good idea." Sora nodded, then turned to the King's companions. "Come on, guys! We still got other places to look into! We'll find the King, don't worry!"

Donald and Goofy looked at each other and then nodded at Sora.

"Yeah!"

"Riku and Kairi, too!"

"Hahaha! You said it!"

Neptune sighed in relief. "Isn't friendship great?"

Compa giggled. "It sure is, Nep-Nep. I'm happy for you, you guys..."

IF smiled. "You can say that again"

Tarzan closed his eyes. "Sora. Friends together strong."

Jane nodded. "You said it."

?????? ??????? - ??????

Meanwhile, Maleficent and four of her cohorts convened as they have witnessed the fall of Clayton and the Stealth Sneak, an event that took them by surprise.

"What drew the Heartless to that world?" the man with the snake staff questioned.

"The hunter lured them there" Maleficent answered. "It was his lust for power that lured them there, but it seems the bait was too tasty for his own good."

Her gaze turned to the purple hag to her left. "Isn't that right, Arfoire?"

The purple witch chuckled. "Indeed. He was so obsessed with hunting down those simians that he would stoop to leaving his charge to hunt them. Although, I have given him a little push."

"My, you're certainly a sneaky one, aren't you dear?" the tentacle lady teased.

"He had his desires set from the get-go." Arfoire shrugged. "All I did was accelerate the outcome"

She snickered as she recalled the look on Clayton's face when she revealed the gorilla's so-called hiding spot. The elation. The desire. The bloodlust...

The bag of bugs laughed. "Yeah. He got chomped instead!"

The man with the snake staff approached forward, the dim light illuminating his features. "A weak-hearted fool like him stood no chance against the Heartless. But the children are a problem. They found one of the Keyholes."

"Two, to be precise" Arfoire mentioned offhandly.

"Oh?" Maleficent said.

"Could this be the work of your little spy, Arfoire?" the man wondered.

"Indeed." the old lady nodded. "My...collaborator saw the Keyhole for herself in another world. Sure enough, it was sealed shut by them as well. Shouldn't you be concerned?"

Maleficent scoffed at that as she conjured an image of the party on the small table in front of her. "Fear not. It will take them ages to find the rest. Besides, they remain blissfully unaware of our other plan."

"Yes, the princesses..." the man with the snake staff mentioned.

"Those who are said to be pure of heart, untainted and unbeholden by darkness..." Arfoire said.

"Oh? Are you interested in them, dear?" the tentacle woman asked.

"Hardly" the purple witch scoffed. "I have a different aim, and that...so-called Neptune is one of them."

"Are you certain that leaving her be was a wise choice?" the man with the snake staff questioned. "In time, the girl will become too strong for you"

Yet the purple hag remained overconfident. "Unless she recalls what her true power is, she will never reach my level! I can take my time with her while I...do some research while aiding you all."

The bag of bugs laughed again. "I never knew you'd be quite the gambler yourself!"

"I have already obtained two of their powers by now. One is already close at hand and the remaining one is still too weak." Arfoire said, clenching her fist at the sight of her victory. "I need only wait for the right time before I can fulfill my ambitions!"

"Quite confident, aren't you?" Maleficent remarked. "But do be wary. Overconfidence in the darkness will destroy you"

"I'll keep that under advisement, as a fellow witch." Arfoire scoffed off. "Now, about those princesses..."

"Yes, they are falling into our hands, one by one..."

She then motioned to her right, revealing the kidnapped Alice!

"Speaking of which..."

NEPSTATION

Neptune: You’re tuned in live to Nepstation, where all shall know the discoveries of the world!

Donald: *sighs* So this is what we’re starting with, huh?

Neptune: Come on, my fine-feathered co-host! You gotta liven up the party here!

Donald: Why are we even doing this?

Neptune: Because we gotta give the readers something to look forward to before the next chapter comes out! You know our franchises are infamously known for LONG waits before

the next big game, right?

Donald: *scoffs* How should I know that!?

Neptune: Anyway, let’s get on to the news!

---

an image of a dogoo surrounded by three gorillas appear onscreen

Neptune: A new animal has been discovered in the vast jungles. Explorers are curious to know what type of animal this even is.

Donald: According to recent findings, this little blob is known as a dogoo. A slime creature with the face and mannerisms of a dog. So far, only one of these creatures were found, leaving explorers baffled as to their nature.

Neptune: Whatever the case may be, it’s pretty clear that this poor critter may be the last of it’s kind. It’s always sad to see animals get driven to extinction...

Donald: It is. We should always take great care of them, for they deserve to live just as much as people do!

Neptune: Agreed! Now that that’s done with, let’s move on to our next topic!

---

an image of an apeman sharing bananas with a gorilla is shown. The two figures however are blurred

Neptune: Man and apes. Do they have more in common than we first believed?

Donald: Well, it is said that the first humans evolved from apes...

Neptune: And yet, few of them are still living as apes while more and more humans dot the world. I wonder how that happened...

Donald: Civilization happened, Neptune. Civilization.

Neptune: Uh-huh, and for civilizations to thrive, they need a large number of residents, which leads to our next topic!

---

a blurred image of a duck and ape appeared, with a big heart on the background

Donald: WAK!

Neptune: Interspecies attraction!

Donald: What do you think you’re doing!?

Neptune: Hey! I've seen how that little one looked at that person. I'd say we're bound for a new type of species at this rate!

Donald: No, we are not! That is not happening!

Neptune: Can you say that for sure?

Donald: Yes! Daisy would kill me if she ever learns about this!

CRASH

Histoire: What is going on there!? Uh, madam duck! Please, calm down...

?????: DO-NALD!!!

Donald: WAK! I'm outta here! *runs away*

Neptune: Welp, I guess that answers that question. Guess the talks about forbidden romances will have to be settled another time! Anywho, get back in here, buck-o! We've got stuff to look over!

Neptune: Okay! Now that we're here, let's continue yesterday's topic!

---

an image of the party with the words Nep Team Epic is displayed onscreen

Sora: Last time, we talked a bit about us, right?

Neptune: Yup. We told everyone here about our goals and such. For today, let's talk about our roles in the party.

Sora: Roles?

Neptune: The things we mainly do in our party and such! Let's start with the star of this chapter, our lovely nurse-to-be, Compa!

---

an image of a chibi Compa is shown onscreen

Neptune: As our resident nurse, she takes good care of our group, be it with good meals, experienced first aid treatments and even financial management!

Sora: I was quite surprised to learn she's good with numbers. I'm...not good with those...

Neptune: You gotta keep up, buck-o! Numbers are pretty important in RPG's! Anyway, since she's our lifeline, her healing's top notch. Her medicines come quick and easy, and as we go on, she'll have more varied medicines.

Sora: Really?

Neptune: Hm-hm! Regen Medicines. Panacea Medicines. Medicines for your allergies. She's got a lot of 'em! So, please appreciate your caretakers, guys! They're literally the reason you haven't died yet!

Sora: Of course! Moving on, let's talk about IF!

---

an image of a chibi IF is shown onscreen

Neptune: Iffy here's a guild agent. That means she's quite experienced in all sorts of jobs before she joined up with us!

Sora: Those really came in handy for us. It was thanks to her directions that we haven't felt lost yet...

Neptune: Yup-yup! Iffy's the coordinator and negotiator of our group. With her instructions and cool tactical mind, she guides our party to victory!

Sora: No one here's more reliable than our IF. Now then...

---

an image of a tiny Donald and Goofy appears onscreen

Sora: Donald and Goofy here are sent from another world to look for their King. Donald here's the Court Magician while Goofy's actually the Royal Captain of their world's guard. Pretty cool, huh?

Neptune: Oh! Fun fact, did you know that Donald's actually quite the veteran back in the day?

Sora: Really?

Neptune: Yup! You wouldn't know it at a glance, but this duck's fought wars before he became a magician. So, when it comes to battlefield smarts, the ducky's got it all...

Sora: Wow...

Neptune: But...despite what it looks like here, while the duck's all about that 'World Order' and stuff, the Goofster there's actually pretty smart!

Sora: For real!?

Neptune: For real! I heard he even got straight A's in his college exams, or so some sources tell me. Our dog's not dumb, he just doesn't use his brain a lot.

Sora: That's interesting...

Neptune: Between the ducky's mystical magics and the Goofster's stalwart defenses, nothing can get past these two...

Donald: SOMEONE HELP ME!!!

Neptune: Except for matters of love. They're totally helpless against that.

Sora: Ahahahaha...

Neptune: And now, for the coup de grace of this presentation.

---

an image of a chibi Neptune and Sora appears onscreen

Neptune: That's right! It's us, the Keyblade-wielding hero and heroine of this tale! The front-line fighters of the group! The faces that define Nep Team Epic! That...is us!

Sora: Uhhhh, so, what else do we talk about regarding us?

Neptune: Well...for starters, I'm more of a physical fighter than a magic-type of gal.

Sora: You know what? I just noticed you never even used the magic we've been getting lately? Why's that?

Neptune: Well, that's because, unlike you, Mr. Jack-of-all-Trades, I...cannot use magic...

Sora: Huh!?

Neptune: For some reason, I cannot seem to shoot out a fireball or whatever. No sparks of lightning. No shards of ice. Nothing.

Sora: Hmmmm....

Neptune: But! I can use our newly-acquired **Cure** magic properly, at least!

Sora: That's good. As for your other magics...maybe you should try using magic in a different way...

Neptune: How?

---

alarm bells ring

Neptune: Ack! We're out of time again!

Sora: Don't worry! I'll tell you later. We can even have Donald and IF help us out!

Neptune: Whew! You sure saved my bacon there! Thanks, Sora!

Sora: Don't mention it!

Neptune: Remember, folks! Leave comments. Give kudos. Subscribe. Bookmark. All that good jazz and everything!

Sora: So, from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Donald: PLEASE! SOMEONE HELP ME!!!

?????: YOU’RE NOT GETTING AWAY!!!

Chapter 6: Chapter 5: Hand (Unity) in Hand

Chapter Summary

> As our party returns to Traverse Town and does odd job requests, they bumped into friends, old and new, but these friends hide more than what they seem...

Traverse Town – Waterway

"Ah, there he is!"

From the figure's sights, she sees a man dressed in black practicing swings with his Gunblade.

"Off training by yourself?"

Leon stopped for a moment to see Aerith, sporting her usual toothy smile.

"Obviously" Leon got back to swinging his blade. "News from the front?"

"Got to two more worlds" the woman in pink answered. "Met a Drifter in one and sealed a Keyhole while getting another gummi in the other."

The man stopped for a breather. "I see. They're making good progress."

"Well, when you got people like those and a drive like theirs, it seems nothing can get in their way" Aerith remarked, bringing out a water bottle. "The Keyblades can only get them so far. Catch."

Grabbing the water bottle, Leon takes a drink from it. "Even so, things will get more difficult for them as they proceed. From what we saw, the worlds ahead are closer to where the Realm of Darkness is. Or to be more precise..."

"Where our home was, huh?" Aerith's expression became forlorn.

Leon looked at her. "Are you still doing alright? I know we still haven't made any progress looking for them since they disappeared, but..."

The woman in pink shook her head. "Don't worry, I'm still..." She sighed. "Okay, I'm still worried, even though it's been years since I last saw them. What about you?"

Leon closed his eyes and sighed heavily at the remark.

"You too, huh?" Aerith winced in sympathy. "Last we heard, she was running back to evacuate some folks. Next we heard, the world's fallen to darkness and an evil fairy went and made it her lair of doom." She sighed. "Oh, joy."

"All the more reason we need to build up our strength." Leon said, getting back to training. "We can't let Sora and Neptune bear the burden on their own forever, especially in a matter that directly concerns us."

"Hear, hear." Aerith cheered, then a lightbulb lit up on top of her head. "Say, I got an idea. One of the worlds they traveled to has a Coliseum in it that hosts tournaments."

Leon stopped again. "I think I know what you're getting at."

"Think about it, Squall!" the woman in pink kept going. "A free-for-all tournament, no-holds-barred against trained warriors and mystical creatures. No better place to get stronger than there!"

"It's Leon" The man sighed again, pinching his nose. "I'll think about it. Last thing we need is getting in trouble with Merlin or Donald about 'World Order' again..."

Aerith brushed the complaint off. "It'll be fine! A little break here and there won't be TOO much trouble. Besides, the Heartless broke the Order when they swarmed into our home, so I say why can't we do the same, even if only a little?"

"Whatever" Before Leon got back to training, he had one last question. "Speaking of trouble..."

Aerith turned to Leon with a loud hum.

"What do you think about Neptune?"

The woman in pink thought for a moment. "That amnesiac girl wearing the parka, right?"

Leon nodded. "You've heard her story, right? Regarding this 'Histy' and her search for her. Neptune believes that she holds the answers to her identity"

"Well..." Aerith started. "To be honest, by itself, it sounded too good to be true, but then she mentioned that 'Histy' was being held by an evil witch."

"Think she's being held by the same one?"

"Maybe. Or she could have other witches in her employ" Aerith's head lit another lightbulb. "Actually, that may be the case"

Leon stopped his swinging. "How so?"

"Arty told me something when she was called by IF recently" the woman in pink replied. "Apparently, Neptune got poisoned by a purple hag"

The man groaned. "Another one of her cohorts, then"

"Most likely..."

Leon sighed as he facepalmed. "Just when things couldn't get more complicated..."

Traverse Town – Empty House

"Hello~?" Neptune cried out into the house.

"Who in the worlds would be living in a place like this?" IF wondered.

"But Cid said we had to deliver the book here" Goofy said, showing said book, which has no cover page on it.

"Well, what else are we supposed to do while waiting for him to finish modifying the gummi parts we found?" Donald questioned.

"Good question..." Compa wondered as she held the blue blob they found from the Deep Jungle. "I was wondering what we're going to do with this little one here..."

She gently poked it's cheeks, earning excited panting from the dog-faced creature.

"Well, take him to someone else!" the duck complained. "That's the last time I'm taking in a pet that isn't Pluto in our ship!"

"Oh, come on, ducky!" the nurse fought back. "Mr. Dogoo wasn't that bad! He only broke a couple of plates and glasses from the kitchen!"

"Tell that to our broken sink!" the royal wizard shouted.

Goofy is doing all he could to keep the angry duck restrained, lest he squash the dogoo for it's wild nature.

"That reminds me" the guild agent said, turning her attention to the blob. "That old hag called him a do-goo, right?"

The walking dog nodded. "She said something about their kind bein' extinct or somethin'..."

IF then stared at it further, as if inspecting it like a priceless artifact.

"Something the matter, Iffy?" the nurse asked her friend.

"Hmmm" IF thought aloud. "I feel like I've seen this type of creature before. Maybe it used to live in our world."

Compa started to think too. "Maybe we should ask Arty about it later. And if she's got space for a pet like this one."

"And fast!" Donald agreed. "What do you think, Sora?"

But Sora was busy staring at space...

"There's something about this musty place..."

Or at least, what everyone else believed to be empty space.

"Woah, who's the cutie pie over there, Sora?" Neptune asked, noticing the girl walking around the empty hut.

"It reminds me of the secret place back home, where we used to scribble on the walls. Remember?"

Sora reached out to the girl, with red hair, blue eyes, a white shirt and a purple skirt, talking to him.

"Kairi?"

"Huh?" Neptune stared at the girl in front of them. "This is one of your BFF's, Sora?"

"Sora?"

"Nep-Nep?"

The two Keyblade wielders turned to their companions (plus the dogoo), who looked at them with worried expressions, then they looked back again to find the girl gone, as if she vanished from plain sight.

"What were you two doing?" the duck asked.

"DId you see her?" Sora asked the group, still feeling stupefied.

"See who?" the nurse tilted her head.

"You know?" the girl in the parka raised her hands in protest. "That cute red-haired chick that was walking in here just now?"

IF raised an eyebrow. "There wasn't anyone else here. If there was, I would've heard them already."

The boy turned to Neptune with a worried expression. "But you saw her, right!?"

The girl nodded furiously. "Heard her too!"

"You sure you two didn't see a ghost or something?" IF wondered.

"She's not a ghost!" Sora protested quite loudly, causing the guild agent to yelp.

"I may joke a lot, but my eyes and ears don't lie" Neptune protested as well.

"Okay, okay. Sorry for assuming..." IF apologized.

"But, then, who was it they just saw?" Goofy wondered. "Was it really Kairi?"

"Who knows?" Donald shrugged. "But staying here won't find us our answers."

Sora sighed in exasperation, but then felt a hand on his shoulder.

"You heard them, buck-o! We gotta keep moving. Besides, if I was able to see her a bit too, that means she's still gotta be out there, right?"

The boy turned to Neptune again. "You really think so?"

She nodded. "You just gotta believe!"

He nodded with a chuckle. "Yeah. Just...believe..."

Traverse Town – Third District

"Man, when I heard the name 'Merlin', I thought I was gonna meet a flighty pretty boy who can grow a garden of flowers wherever he goes..." Neptune said aloud, walking with her hands behind her head.

"Geez, what brought that on?" IF quipped, earning a shrug from the girl with the key.

"Still, it's a relief that we have someone who we can seek magic advice to!" Compa said with a smile as the dogoo in her hands barked.

"Not to mention that new gem we just got!" Goofy declared. "Right, Sora?"

The boy nodded, bringing out the gem.

"Leon gave us that gem and now thanks to the Fairy Godmother, we can use it's power now!" Compa recalled.

"A powerful ally will come out if you call upon them..." Donald recalled. "I wonder who will come out of this one?"

The guild agent turned to the square. "One way to find out..."

Upon saying that, two Soldier Heartless spawned.

"Oh-ho!" Neptune cheered as she summoned her Keyblade. "Convenient enemy spawns!"

"Time to try out our new friend, Sora!" Compa cheered, allowing the dogoo to jump away while she brought out her syringe.

"Okay..." The boy began to channel energy into the gem "Give me stre-"

When all of a sudden, the Soldiers were wiped out in a single slash!

"Woah!" the girl with the key gasped. "I didn't know we get someone that OP!"

"Uh..." the boy with the key stopped channeling. "I didn't even get to finish yet..."

"Then who was that?" the nurse asked as the dogoo jumped back into her hands.

"There you are, Sora! What's going on?"

The attacker was a young boy with silver hair, wearing a yellow tank top and blue pants. He was wielding a strange sword with a bat's wing for a blade and a mysterious blue eye near the handle.

"Riku!"

Sora, overjoyed to see his best friend, goes and stretches his cheeks playfully.

"Hey, hey! Cut it out!" Riku lightly pushed his friend's arm away.

"I'm not dreaming this time, right?" Sora asked.

"Well, we're all seeing him right now, so..." Compa wondered as she stared at the newcomer.

"Yeah, he's definitely not a mirage this time" IF said.

"I hope not. Took forever to find you, you know?" Riku said, fixing his hair.

"Well, I'd say we're already making good progress!" Neptune chirped. "We found one of our pals and he's NOT a trick of the eyes this time!"

Riku then looked at the girl in the parka standing next to his best friend. "And you are?"

"I'm glad you asked, stranger! I am Neptune, a fellow Drifter like yourselves! I am here to help him reunite with you and the apple of both your eyes while searching for someone myself!"

Riku rolled his eyes. "Really?"

"It's true!" Sora nodded. "Neptune and these guys have been helping me look for you and Kairi. Have you seen her?"

Riku shook his head. "Haven't found her since we left the islands. Isn't she with you?"

Sora groaned. "No..."

"Well, don't worry" Riku said, trying to make him feel better. "I'm sure she made it off the island, too."

He then walked past the party and looked up with his arms raised. "We're finally free. Hey, she might even be looking for us now."

As Riku kept talking, a Shadow Heartless spawned behind them, ready to strike!

"We'll all be together again soon. Don't worry. Just leave everything to me. I know this-"

He stopped when he heard a strike behind him. Sora, with Keyblade in hand, has taken out the Shadow behind them.

"Leave it to who?" the boy with the key boasted, slinging his weapon to his shoulder.

"Sora, what did you-"

"I've been looking for you and Kairi, too. I wasn't gonna sit around and twiddle my thumbs while you guys were out there, too!"

Neptune nodded furiously.

"So then" Riku crossed his arms. "What have you been doing?"

Neptune cleared her throat. "If you'll allow me..."

"We've been visiting so many places and worlds, looking for you!"

Neptune deflated. "Hey! Don't steal my thunder, buck-o!"

IF sighed. "Just shut up, Nep"

Compa sweatdropped. "Though we haven't visited too many worlds as of yet..."

"Really? Well, what do you know? I never would've guessed..." Riku's reply came out...stilted, almost forced, really. Something IF took notice.

"Oh, and guess what? Sora and Neptune here are Keyblade wielders!" Goofy boasted, patting said wielders on their shoulders.

"Who would've thought it?" Donald stomped, crossing his arms.

"With someone like those two, definitely not me." the guild agent shook her head.

"Hey!" Neptune shouted in offense.

"What's that mean?" Sora followed suit.

"So, this is called a Keyblade?" Riku asked, somehow managing to snatch his best friend's Keyblade.

"Huh?" Sora checked to see that his Keyblade was indeed out of his hand! "Hey, give it back."

But Riku hopped back, causing Sora to stumble as he continued to inspect the weapon.

"Jealous, huh?" Neptune boasted. "That weapon is legendary. It's thanks to them we can fight off the Heartless as we did."

"Really?" Riku said offhandly, then tossed the weapon back to its owner. "Catch"

"Whoa" Sora caught it. "Okay, so you're coming with us, right? We've got this awesome rocket! Wait 'til you see it!"

Riku thought for a moment. But before he could give an answer, a loud sound resonated throughout the district.

"Nep-wha!?" Neptune yelped as she and everyone covered their ears.

"That sounded like a bell!" Goofy said as he ducked, feeling the ringing from his sensitive ears.

"Where did it come from!?" Donald looked around frantically for the source, but couldn't find it.

After a good ten seconds, the sounds stopped, and everyone recovered their bearings.

"It stopped..." Compa looked around as she unplugged her ears.

"I heard there was a bell tower in this town..." IF said. "But I didn't think it'd be THIS loud..."

"Riku!"

Upon hearing Sora call his best friend, they noticed that he was gone!

"Where'd he go?" Goofy wondered.

Neptune groaned. "Don't tell HE was a ghost too!?"

Donald shook his head. "Nuh-uh. We all saw him and he replied to us. Riku was real, all right."

"And we just met up with him too..." Compa said, the dogoo on her arms whined with her comment.

"Well, at least I know he's okay" Sora said, putting his hands on his back.

"Will he be alright against the Heartless, though?" Goofy asked.

"Did you see that slash he did?" Neptune said with confidence. "I'm pretty sure he's quite tough"

"Yup" Sora nodded. "Toughest among us in the islands."

IF was humming aloud, as if absorbed into her thoughts.

"What's the matter, IF?" Donald asked the guild agent.

She sighed. "It's nothing. I'm just wondering about the bell that just rung a while ago."

"Why don't we ask Arty?" Compa suggested as the dogoo jumped excitedly. "She might know something."

IF nodded. "Yeah. We were gonna ask her about this little guy here anyway. May as well. Besides, I need someone to confide to about Riku, more precisely the jitters I felt around him..."

And so, the group headed off to the nearby empty house where Artisan is sheltered. All the while, Riku hides in a nearby corner watching them leave.

"You've got some company there, Sora...And I thought the three of us were inseparable..."

Traverse Town – Second District

Meanwhile, in the ever dark streets of the Second District, a lone girl, wearing a blue dress, with red eyes and black hair tied in twintails, looked around the place.

"To think I lost him here..." she said to herself. "I worry about what that witch would tell him. Probably more lies of the sort"

She then paced back and forth as she expressed her thoughts aloud...

"Still, this Refuge World is thriving, far more than the others did. I heard that the people who used to live in..."

...Unaware of her growing audience of six approaching her...

"...Then there's the Keyholes that lead to the hearts of each world. If left open, the Heartless will enter them and consume the world, casting them to the darkness..."

"Um..."

"...But then there are the Drifters who arrived in other worlds, potentially upsetting the balance. This is troubling..."

"Hello?"

"...But THEN there's the fact that there are people like me out there, and the first one I found turned out to be such a complete buffoon! She doesn't even recognize her own power or mine! I thought for sure something must've sparked in her mind when she..."

"Should we...bug her?"

"...Anyway! At this rate, the worlds will be consumed, and I still don't know if gathering the..."

"I dunno. She seems busy..."

"...would even help return things back to the way they were. Should I take matters into my own hands, when I don't even know much about myself or the worlds around me?"

"I got just the thing..."

The black-haired girl sighed. "Perhaps I should just keep a low profile for now. Who knows if I'll ever bump into-"

"Gotcha!"

The girl yelped as she felt two hands hugging her from behind.

"Gotta catch 'em all!"

"What the!? How? I don't even...!"

"Geez, you were out here, chatting yourself up, you didn't even catch on that you have an audience here! Are you, by chance, a loner?"

Her eyes widened at that proclamation. "A loner!? Who are you to call strangers you just met a loner!?"

She turned to see the accused and noticed a purple-haired girl in a parka. The sight caused her no great deal of surprise...

"N-N-N-N-"

"Hi there, beautiful!"

She jumped back at the sight of the small girl. "What are you doing here!?"

The other girl flashed a smile, pointing to the area above the gizmo shop. "Well, we're here to go check out that fancy bell tower up over yonder. You heard the bell rang a while ago, right?"

"O-Oh, yes! Absolutely!" The black-haired girl nodded furiously. "My ears were still ringing after the noises stopped. It was disorienting..."

Another girl, wearing a sweater, approached them. "Do you need some medicine for that?"

The black-haired girl shook her head. "Oh no! That won't be necessary. I'll live"

The sweater girl hummed. "If you're sure..."

"C'mon, guys!" the duck, who can talk, apparently, shouted. "What's the holdup?"

"That bell's not waiting for us, y'know?" the human boy in the group followed.

"Wait!" the girl in the parka said. "I got me a brilliant idea!"

The girl in the blue coat sighed, already knowing her idea is going to be dumb. "Well, get on with it."

"You gotta have faith, my friend!" she then turned to the black-haired girl. "Why don't you come with us, stranger? You'll be much safer with us!"

Needless to say, this threw the black-haired girl out of a loop. "Huh?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Nep?" the girl in the blue coat complained. "There's bound to be dangerous Heartless on the way, and we can't afford to bring a defenseless civilian with us"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that"

The black-haired girl revealed a rapier sheathed on her left hip.

"I know how to defend myself. Besides, I am curious about this world I ended up in."

The parka girl nodded approvingly. "See? Ms. Loner here can defend herself."

"And would you stop calling me a loner!? I get the feeling that's what you're gonna keep calling me from now on..." the black-haired girl complained.

"Okay, then" the parka girl chirped, looking at her with her hands behind her back. "What's your name, then? Mine's Neptune, by the way!"

"Couldn't we just have the introductions instead of this banter?" the black-haired girl sighed, before introducing herself in earnest. "Call me Noire."

"Hi there!" the sweater girl greeted. "I am Compa. I can tend to your injuries!"

"Are we really going through with this?" the girl in the blue coat complained, and then sighed. "Fine. Call me IF"

"I'm Sora!" the boy called himself.

"Donald Duck" the duck in blue introduced himself.

"And I'm Goofy!" the walking...dog(?) chuckled.

"Neptune. Compa. IF. Sora. Donald. Goofy" Noire went through each of their names. "A pleasure to meet you all!"

"Same here!" Sora cheered. "Now let's get going!"

"YEAH!"

As the group headed out, IF tapped Neptune's shoulder.

"What's up?" the female Keyblade wielder asked.

The guild agent shushed her. "Are you sure it's a good idea to bring her with us? We don't know a lot about her..."

Neptune chuckled. "It'll be fine, Iffy! Besides, my Nep Senses are telling me that this gal's someone special. I just know it!"

"Special, how?"

Nep just shrugged. "I dunno, but I can feel it in my heart, y'know?"

The two looked to the newcomer, seeing her mingling with their party members.

"Besides, she looks fun to tease!"

IF sighed. "You better not let her hear that. Fine, just make sure she's well-adjusted with our group, okay?"

Neptune bounced. "You got it! I'll train her, feed her, pet her and everything! Noire~"

As she bounced after her new friend, IF was left alone to her thoughts. "Still, the fact that Riku just...vanished out of thin air and now this lady who seems to recognize Nep somewhat, judging by the expressions she made when she saw her. Not to mention her specific choice of words..."

The guild agent looked to Noire, who is currently trying to get Neptune off her arm as she clings to her. "Still, she might know something we don't. It may be worth to prod her mind on something assuming she's not as defenseless as she says she is."

She then catches up with the rest of the party on their destination...

Traverse Town – Gizmo Shop

"Wow! Look at all the tech in this place!"

The group enters the Gizmo Shop within the bell tower in order to find the passageway onto the bell.

"The gears here are making my head swirl..." Compa said, trying to shake the dizziness off.

Noire hummed. "This place seems...how do you call it, retro?"

"Doesn't seem much different from our world's Gummi Garage" Goofy stated as he rubbed his nose.

"You guys mentioned a ladder leading to the bell tower here, right?" IF asked the Disney Royal Guard.

Donald nodded. "It's just at the other side of this place. We placed it down, so we just have to climb up there."

"Alright, but stay on your toes" the guild agent warned the group. "You'll never know when Heartless will show up"

"In a place this small?"

As if to answer Sora's question, a small group of Shadows appeared in front of him, causing the party to bring out their weapons.

"Dude!" Neptune shouted. "What did I say about jinxing!?"

"Uh..." Sora stammered, feeling stupid. "Sorry?"

"Never mind that!" Donald quacked. "Let's get them!"

Meanwhile, a group of Soldiers appeared behind Compa!

"There's more over here, too!"

"I got'em!" Goofy charged over, tackling the ambushing Soldiers.

"Get back, Compa!" IF urged the nurse, readying a spell.

While the party split into two to deal with the surrounding Heartless...

"Of course, leave the defenseless civilian all by her lonesome here..."

...Noire is left in the middle of the shop to deal with an emerging Large Body, who is readying to jump!

"Noire, jump!"

The girl smirked. Despite Neptune's declarations, Noire already thought ahead and leapt up to avoid the Large Body's shockwave...

"Woah..."

"Heh"

...and landed right behind the bulking Heartless, taking a few stabs at its exposed back with her rapier.

"Now for the coup de grace..."

The twin-tailed girl wreathed her rapier in a purplish-glow and readied her killing blow...

"**POISON FENCER**! HA!"

...and stabbed the Large Body with her technique, leaving it disoriented as it's life slowly ebbed away.

"Heh" Noire smirked. "Told you I can handle myself!"

"That's great!" Donald shouted. "We're just about done here!"

"Same here!" IF called. "Someone, take it out!"

"I got it!"

Sora rushed to the downed Large Body...

"HAAAAAAAHHH!"

...and took it down with a leaping strike!

"Alright!" Sora cheered. "Nice work, Noire!"

Noire flipped her hair in thanks. "Naturally."

Her attention is then turned to the girl in the parka, who is just...gawking at her in suspense...

"...!"

...which caused her to respond by dashing towards...

"Nep-wha!?"

...the group of Soldiers that were about to attack her from behind!

"What are you doing!?" Noire scolded the girl. "Stop gawking and fight, Neptune!"

Neptune only laughed as she rubbed her head. "Sorry. I...uh...just couldn't help but gawk at how cool you were back there, y'know?"

The twin-tailed girl's cheeks flushed at the girl's remark, keeping her face in front of her foes'. "J-Just stay focused, won't you!?"

"Oki-doki!"

And look at that! A group of Blue Rhapsodies and **Yellow Operas** (yellow bell Heartless that produces lightning) appeared right behind Noire!

"In fact, watch this!"

Noire turned around to see Neptune charging against the appearing Heartless with her Keyblade wreathed in flames!

"**BLAZE BREAK**!"

Down goes the Blue Rhapsodies! "And now, for another!"

She unleashed a slash of frost against the Yellow Operas!

"**FROST CRUSHER**!"

And then, a group of Red Nocturnes appeared!

"**THUNDER BLITZ**!"

And Neptune fried them with a Thunder-enhanced attack!

"He-he!" She snickered. "How's that? I can be creative with my magic too!"

Noire snorted with a smile. "So, you can pay attention after all..."

Neptune turned her attention to the group of Shadows emerging in front of her.

"C'mon!" Noire urged her new companion. "Let's take it to 'em!"

The girl with the key nodded. "Okay!"

"Will those two be okay?" Sora wondered.

"I admit I'm a little worried..." IF said. "But with skills like that, I think they'll be just fine"

"If anything, Noire seems more reliable than Neptune in a fight" Donald snarked.

"Now, now, Donald..."

Before Compa could scold the duck for his comment, more Heartless surrounded the party.

"Let's make this quick" IF ordered. "We still got a bell to get to!"

"Right!"

Once the party made short work of the Heartless, they proceeded forward to the bell tower...

Traverse Town – Second District (Gizmo Shop Bell Tower)

"Say, Noire" IF approached the newcomer.

"Oh, IF, right?" Noire asked. "What is it?"

"I need to ask you something. Do you remember anything about your home world?"

"My...home world?" Noire thought for a moment, but it seems nothing came to her mind. "No, I don't think so"

"Nothing faint?" the guild agent pressed her for answers. "Like an image or what life you had there or anything?"

The black-haired girl shook her head. "Not a thing."

IF sighed, facepalming. "So that makes you the same as us, then"

"The same?" Noire raised an eyebrow.

"She means that we might share the same home world." Compa cut in the conversation. "There are Drifters out there who don't remember a lot of their home world."

"Drifters?" Noire asked.

"Basically, people who lost their home worlds and washed up elsewhere" IF summed up. "Me and Compa and even Nep there are Drifters"

The three looked to the aforementioned girl, who was cheering the boys on as they formed up a line to smash through the wooden barrier in front of the bell tower.

"What makes you three different from other Drifters?" the black-haired girl asked.

"The common thread being that we don't remember anything about our home world" the guild agent answered. "Sora over there remembers his home world well enough, but us? Not much"

"So that's why you're asking me about my home world..." Noire muttered. "Does that make me a similar case to the three of you?"

IF and Compa looked at each other for a while, and then the bell rang again.

"Gah!" IF groaned.

"Owie!" Compa protested.

"Sheesh!" Noire turned her attention to the four remaining party members, one of them in particular has her hands on a string. "Warn us when you're going to do that!"

"Sorry!" Sora yelled at them. "We're gonna ring again in a bit!"

"How long is a bit?" IF wondered as she regained her bearings. "Anyway, that makes you the same as us and a couple of others, Noire."

"You think so?" Noire asked, bracing herself for another bell ringing. "Just because we all don't remember our home world doesn't exactly mean we share the same one."

The bell rung a second as Noire finished her sentence.

"True" IF nodded as the bell finished ringing. "But a collective case of amnesia like that is clearly uncommon. I can understand forgetting due to trauma, but this is clearly out of the ordinary."

Compa nodded. "We've met some Drifters around the worlds just like us. They seem fine for the most part, but if you ask them about where they once lived, they cannot recall a thing."

"Really?" Noire raised both her eyebrows.

The nurse nodded. "Really"

"That's part of the reason why we're travelling with Nep there" the guild agent continued. "Artisan, a fellow Drifter like us, confided to us that the person she's looking for may have some answers for our dilemma too."

"Neptune's looking for someone?" Noire said a bit aloud.

"Yesiree!" Neptune answered suddenly, causing the twin-tailed girl to yelp. "I'm on a quest to look for the one who saved me, somewhat"

"Somewhat?" Noire raised an eyebrow at that.

"You see, when I first woke up, I was in a vast void of blackness, with nothing and nowhere found in every corner of my eye. As I wandered around, wondering what I should do, a heavenly voice called out to me and guided me out of that empty place!"

Noire continued to be doubtful towards Neptune's narration.

"However, she told me that she was held captive by an evil witch, and so, to repay her for letting me experience the world outside, I promised I'd save her. That's why I'm here travelling across worlds with Sora and the others."

"Hmmmmm..." Noire took the time to process everything the parka girl said. "...I see"

"What about you, my twin-tailed friend?" Neptune looked to her new companion. "What's your story?"

"Honestly, not much" Noire answered curtly. "I don't think it's worth telling you..."

"C'mon, what's the harm?" the parka girl brushed off. "If we're going to know each other, we'd at least learn a bit of each other's background, y'know?"

"Huh..." Noire looked at Neptune with a bit of surprise. "That's unusually smart, coming from you."

"D'awwwwww, you talk as if you know me so well!" Neptune said cheerily despite the choice of words. "That's rather adorbs of you!"

"Sheesh, you're going to be the end of me one day..." Noire sighed, letting her flushed cheeks settle down.

"*She's only spilling as much as she claims as she knows*" IF thought to herself. "*But judging by her words earlier and the way she fought a while ago, she's clearly a lot more than she presents herself. If my theory about her is right, then...*"

"*Dealing with her is quite excruciating...*" Noire thought to herself. "*Still, getting to know them and assessing how much they know is quite the experience. I'm surprised they prodded me with less questions than I thought. Maybe they didn't hear me, or are they just playing dumb like I am? No, that can't be, but I can feel that IF's eyes on me like she's waiting for me to do something. Ugh, why did I have to do this?*"

However, the bell rung a third time before Noire gets to entertain Neptune's question or finish her train of thought.

"...That makes three, huh?" IF said, opening her ears.

"Wonder what changed?" Compa wondered.

"Look there!"

Noire pointed to the fountain located below the district. As it turned, it revealed the world's Keyhole!

"Hey, isn't that..." Neptune started.

"Yep. No mistaking it" IF nodded.

"It's the Keyhole!" Compa cheered.

"Well, yeah..." Noire said. "That's what it looks like. Is there something different about this keyhole?"

Neptune chuckled. "Quite special, my not-so-lonely friend. For you see, that there leads to the heart of this very world!"

"The heart?" Noire asked. "Worlds have hearts?"

"Apparently, they do" IF answered. "According to Leon, these Keyholes are a passageway into a world's core."

"And because they are left open and exposed, the Heartless can get in there and destroy it!" Compa continued.

"Which is why Sora and I have to lock these holes shut to keep the worlds safe from further harm or something!" Neptune finished.

"...Interesting" was all Noire was able to say. "And how do you two do it?"

Neptune chuckled. "Watch and see!"

"*Still not croaking, huh?*" the guild agent thought to herself, keeping her eyes on their new party member. "*I'm surprised the others haven't even caught onto the fact that she knows more than she lets on. Still, they wouldn't be this trusting of someone like me if they weren't.*"

As the party headed back down to the Keyhole, IF finished up her line of thought.

"*Better just let her reveal her secrets when she's ready. I'd rather not destroy what little trust we're building up with her already. Besides, if I'm right, she may be a good source of intel on the other side...*"

Traverse Town – Second District (Near the Keyhole)

"Keyhole AHOY!" Neptune yelled happily as the party nears the aforementioned Keyhole.

"Oh boy!" Donald exclaimed excitedly.

"Let's get this thing locked up!" Goofy looked to the two Keyblade wielders. "You two ready?"

Neptune brought out her Keyblade. "Ready as we'll ever be!"

"Hopefully, this will be done quick and easy..." Noire hoped.

"Um, Noire..." Sora scratched his cheek. "I don't think you should say that..."

The black-haired girl raised her eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"Because..."

Before he could finish, a familiar set of purple armor suddenly dropped in unannounced in between the party and the Keyhole!

"...that tends to happen..." the boy finished.

"Darn it, Noire!" Neptune yelled at the newcomer. "Did'ya have to jinx us!?"

"H-How is this my fault!?" Noire panicked, drawing out her rapier.

"Worry about that later!" IF drew her qatars. "Get ready!"

"Hold on!" Sora brought out a familiar gem. "I got an idea!"

Seeing the gem, Neptune's eye glinted. "Oooooohhhh! Is it finally time!?"

"Time for what?" Noire asked.

"Summon it! Summon it!" Compa cheered.

"You can do it!" Donald also cheered.

"Summon what?" Noire asked.

IF sighed. "Just keep your guard up while you watch, okay?"

Sora then channeled his magic into the gem. "Give me strength!"

As he twirls his Keyblade around and released a stream of energy, a proud lion was summoned forth to his side. His name is **Simba**.

"A lion?" Neptune deflated a bit. "Really?"

"Oooooohhhhhh~" Compa, on the other hand, cooed at the majestic sight. "Isn't he so fluflly?"

"Hold on!" the court wizard exclaimed. "He seems to be empowered by the gem. Sora, help him out!"

Sora nodded. "Got it!"

Channeling his energy into his Keyblade, the lion also readied himself, hunching back slightly as he readies an attack.

"TOGETHER!"

Just as the familiar Guard Armor finished assembling itself, Sora released the stored energy, which along with Simba's **Proud Roar,** dealt monstrous damage to the Heartless and caused all its parts to disassemble immediately.

"Woah!" Neptune was now amazed. "That's one powerful roar! Are lion howls usually this strong?"

"Dunno" Goofy shrugged. "But it sure helped out a lot there!"

"Should we charge now?" Compa asked her guild friend.

IF furrowed her eyes at their prey, noticing something unusual. "Hold on..."

The downed Guard Armor immediately got up and reassembled itself!

"Oh, come the nep on!" Neptune complained.

Suddenly, the Guard Armor started to shake again.

"It's going to attack again!" Noire warned. "Sora, can you do that thing again?"

"Uh..." Sora started. "About that..."

The party then noticed that the summoned lion is gone!

"Where did Mr. Lion go!?" Compa whined.

"Guess you couldn't keep him around for long after that big attack, huh?" Neptune guessed.

Noire groaned. "We'll just do this ourselves! Let's get him!"

"Wait!" IF urged everyone, halting everyone in their tracks.

The shaking armor began to shift. Its metallic feet folded their calves while they changed positions with the hands. At the same time, the torso inverted, causing its larger underside to hold the head, which now unveiled its armor, revealing a set of yellow eyes.

No longer were they facing the Guard Armor, now, they are facing the inverted and more powerful **Opposite Armor**!

"Geez!" the parka girl complained once more. "And I thought we left all the topsy-turvy stuff in Wonderland!"

"This thing's seems tougher than the last one. But if it's anything like the last one..." IF then warned everyone. "Remember, team! Aim for the hands and feet first! Isolate the torso and we got this in the bag!"

"But..." Compa moaned, recalling a bad memory. "What if the chest starts spinning crazily again? I don't want a repeat of what happened last time..."

"I could try to catch for cues. Just keep your distance in the meantime." the guild agent insisted. "Alright then, guys. Let's do this!"

Charging forth, the team of seven proceeded to do battle against the menacing armor.

"So, how tough is this thing?" Noire asked Donald and Compa, who are attacking the inverted hands.

"It was quite tough when we last fought it" Compa said as she blocked an incoming attack.

"Not to mention we just met each other back then..." Donald replied, channeling magic into his staff. "But now..."

Compa's syringe was now charged with powerful magic thanks to Donald. "We're an official party! That means our teamwork is better than ever!"

"**TREATMENT BLASTER**!"

Combining **Fire, Blizzard and Thunder** magic into the contents of the syringe, their Combination Skill allowed Compa to fire a huge blast of condensed magic power, taking out one of the feet and almost taking out the other one.

"I got it!"

Noire immediately rushed in and struck down the remaining foot with her own attack.

"**PARALYZE FENCER**!"

Not letting up, the twin-tailed girl launched a barrage of strikes against the torso, ending it with her technique, leaving the armor stunned.

"That should keep it busy for a bit..." Noire then looked to the rest of the party dealing with the hands. "How are you all doing?"

Neptune was flailing around as she keeps jumping up to attack one of the hands. "So-so, I think! How about you, buck-o?"

Sora, on the other hand, was busy blocking hits from the other hand. "Same here!"

"Then we better step things up a notch!" IF hopped back, charging up her magic. "**FURIOUS LIGHTNING**!"

The lightning spell jolted the hands, inflicting them with Stun!

"Now, boys!"

Hearing her call, Sora and Goofy jumped up and struck down the weakened hands, taking them out of the fight!

"Just one left! I got this!" Neptune then dashed for the exposed torso. "**CROSS COMBI-**"

But then, the Opposite Armor's remaining body part began to glow red, emitting a powerful aura that pushed the party back!

"What in the...!?" Sora cried, bracing himself.

"That's not nepping fair!" Neptune complained at her technique being interrupted again.

"It's definitely getting desperate now!" IF warned everyone.

"*This aura...*" Noire looked around and above. "*This must be her doing...But where is she!?*"

The Opposite Armor turned around vertically, aiming its larger end against the ground as a swell of energy was gathering on it.

"What's it doin'?" Goofy asked, covering behind his shield.

"Is Mr. Heartless charging up?" Compa wondered.

"This is bad!" Donald cried, covering his head. "Take cover!"

The Armor then started blasting several large blasts of energy around the whole area.

"How is that thing charging up so fast!?" IF wondered, taking cover behind the nearby staircase.

"Boss design like that should only exist in the end or post-game!" Neptune complained. "Hacks! I call hacks!"

"...That's pretty much her MO, alright..." Noire mumbled to herself. "But where is she?"

"Shouldn't we do somethin' about that?" Goofy shouted.

"And get blasted into oblivion?" IF argued back. "No frickin' thanks!"

"But if we don't get out there, Mr. Heartless will destroy the whole district!" Compa yelled, noticing the damage around the Second District, judging from the broken walls, shattered windows and the presence of debris.

Broken debris? Destroyed homes? As Sora heard these words, images of his island being overrun by Heartless and the last of his world being swallowed by darkness began to fill his mind, causing him to gasp heavily...

"But what do we do?" Donald cried.

No! No more! No more homes will be destroyed today! Not now! Not ever!

Sora tightened the grip of his Keyblade as he controlled his breathing. "I'll go"

"Huh?"

"I'll stop it!"

Before the rest of the party could respond, Sora already left and charged straight at the enraged Armor.

"Sora!" Goofy called out.

"That idiot!" IF shouted. "Shouldn't he wait until we have a plan!?"

"And he's all out MP, too!" Neptune screamed.

"So are we!" Compa bemoaned. "I knew we should have bought items beforehand!"

Two of the shots missed the Keyblade wielder, but a third shot was able to hit him square in the face.

"SORA!"

He was severely pushed back, but he got back up again, and readied another charge.

"No...Not yet..." Sora told himself loudly. "I can't let everyone down...I can't let this town be destroyed, just like with my island!"

He charged again, but another shot hit him again, causing him to fall.

"Sora..." Donald said, his face evident with worry over the reckless boy.

"Oh Sora..." Compa said, her face also filled with worry.

"This is too much..." Noire couldn't bare to keep waiting. "*I swear, when I get her, I will...*"

Despite being knocked back again, Sora, who was clearly beat from facing numerous blasts from the empowered Opposite Armor, got back up again.

"Gotta...keep fighting..."

As he got up, he was about to stumble down!

"Gotcha"

But he felt someone grabbing his arm and slung it over their shoulder.

"C'mon, buck-o! You don't have to fight this OP thing all alone, y'know?"

Sora looked up to see his fellow Keyblade wielder, with her ever-bright smile plastered over her features.

"Sorry about that, Neptune"

She then raised her Keyblade and casted a **Cure** on her fellow wielder, letting him stand up straight.

"Feeling better?"

Sora, however raised an eyebrow at her. "I thought you said you're out of MP?"

"That was Compa" Neptune corrected. "And...uh, I had enough for that one Cure. Got no more in the tank..."

However, their short moment of reprise was halted by the whirling sound of energy.

The Opposite Armor fired another blast straight at them!

"SHOOT!" IF screamed.

"SORA!" Donald shouted.

"NEP-NEP!" Goofy called out.

"GET OUTTA THERE!" Compa cried.

...but seconds before it hit them, it was slashed off, causing the projectile to split off into different directions.

"Giving up already?" a familiar voice said. "C'mon, Sora. I thought you were stronger than that!"

The duo couldn't believe their eyes! In front of them are two familiar figures, one who even came back at the last moment!

"Riku!?"

"Noire!"

Before they could celebrate this reunion, the enraged Armor prepares another shot.

"There's no time!" Noire beckoned them. "Neptune, are you with me?"

Neptune grinned. "Got a plan?"

Noire grinned back. "Only the best one! *As much as our broke selves are able to manage...*"

The girl with the key then stepped forward. "Then I'll follow your lead, Noire!"

The black-haired girl then turned to the boys. "You two follow up after us. Got it?"

The two boys nodded.

Sensing that the Armor is about to fire, Noire gave the signal.

"GO!"

The four of them charged right into the incoming blast!

"*Three...Two...One*! NOW!"

Just seconds away before the blast hits them, Neptune and Noire swung their blades against the shot...

"Time to taste...your own...MEDICINE!"

...and deflected it right back at it, disorienting it!

"YES!" Neptune cheered.

"Now, boys!" Noire shouted.

"Ready, Sora?" Riku called out.

"You bet!"

At Sora's response, the two boys jumped up...

"HAAAAAAAHHHH!"

...and sliced down the Heartless, causing it to fizzle out...

"Look out!"

...and explode in a blast of light, releasing it's captive heart in the process.

"The noises stopped..." Donald said.

"Is it over?" Compa wondered.

Goofy and IF peeked out to see Sora and Neptune, looking exhausted from the fighting.

"Yup! They're okay!" the royal captain cheered.

"Those two, I swear..." the guild agent sighed in relief.

Meanwhile, Neptune approached Sora, who was holding on to a Spell Orb with a twister etched onto it. It was an Aero Spell Orb.

"Man!" the girl shouted. "That was totally awesome! Nice job, No-"

But upon looking around, she noticed two people missing from their little group.

"Oh c'mon!" Neptune grumbled. "Not only did Riku show up and vanished at the last second, but now Noire's gone too!"

Despite the situation, Sora smiled. "They'll be alright. Like I said, Riku's tough, and I'm sure Noire's tough too"

Neptune noticed that Sora's smile was strained. Still, she responded. "Just gotta believe, right?"

Sora nodded, and together, they sealed away the world's Keyhole.

"We did great today, right buck-o?" Neptune asked the boy.

"Yeah..." Sora said as his sight began to blur. "We did...great..."

And then, after the fierce battle had ended, he passed out...

Traverse Town – Third District – Vacant House

"...Ugh..."

Slowly opening his eyes, Sora found himself lying in a lone bed in a strange house.

"...Where am i?"

"Look who's awake!"

He turned to see Yuffie waiting by his bedside.

"Yuffie?" Sora asked the ninja. "What are you doing here?"

"Watching over you, duh!" the ninja responded. "Leon and Arty are here too!"

She jerked her thumb to the two, the latter holding on to the stray dogoo, who were near the door.

"You're awake" Leon said as he and Artisan approached him.

"That fight must've taken a lot out of you, huh?" Artisan wondered, letting the dogoo out as it bounced to Sora.

"Guess it did" Sora chuckled. "Where's the others?"

"Off shopping for supplies" the woman with horns answered. "No doubt buying food to celebrate your brave victory today!"

"More like this kid's being a reckless idiot" Yuffie shook her head. "He literally went all 'YAAAAAAAHHH' against that armor and keep getting blown back like a moron. If those guys haven't shown up, you might not be even BE here right now..."

Sora chuckled weakly, petting the dogoo. "Sorry about that. I just...didn't know what to do. I just knew I had to do something to defend the town."

"And we're grateful for that" Aerith said as she entered the house. "But that doesn't mean you have to be so reckless like that."

"Yeah! What she said!" Yuffie nodded. "Besides, who's gonna save your friends if you're gone?"

"My friends..." Sora's eyes widened. "That's right! Riku! Where is he?"

"Gone" Yuffie replied curtly.

"What do you mean, gone!?" Sora replied vehemently. "He was right there with me!"

"Precisely that" Artisan tried to smooth over. "According to Yuffie, your friend indeed showed up and helped you. Then, while the Heartless was exploding, he took that twin-tailed girl with her and vanished."

The ninja nodded furiously.

"Gone again..."

Sora laid down again, covering his eyes with his arm.

"Wasn't he just peachy a while ago?" Yuffie wondered.

Leon hmph'ed in response. "Guess he must have held it in for a while now..."

"Hey..." Aerith approached the boy. "...I know what's it's like, losing friends out there. I had three friends back in my childhood. Two guys and a girl. One day, we were out and about, doing business as usual, when suddenly, one of my guy friends found something weird and wanted to check it out, bringing the other guy friend along. When they didn't come back for the night, me and the other friend got worried, so we went around looking for them. Next thing I knew, I woke up, and they told me that other friend of mine have disappeared too."

"Aerith..." Yuffie said with a sad expression. Artisan closed her eyes as well.

"And of course, shortly after that, the Heartless came to our world and terrorized it. We then fled in Cid's Gummi Ship and landed in this town, where we stayed for almost a decade." the flower girl sighed. "And the rest is history..."

Sora looked up to the ribbon-wearing woman. "Did you ever find them?"

Aerith shook her head. "We tried and tried, but there have been no sightings of them, so far. Still, I don't want to give up. I want to believe that they're still out there, Drifted into other worlds, waiting for someone they know to come pick them up."

"For that long?" the boy muttered. "You must really believe in them, huh?"

Aerith giggled. "Someone's gotta do it. Though among the four of us, one of the guys was always the optimist. I try to be that too among us here."

"Hey!" Yuffie complained. "What does that make me!?"

"You're...more of a greedy fingers kind of gal" the flower girl responded, waving her fingers. "Always keeping an ear out for rare treasures and the like."

"T-That doesn't explain everything!" Yuffie complained as her cheeks reddened, which caught the dogoo's attention. "Ahhhhh! Down, boy, down!"

"You get what's she trying to say, don't you?" Artisan asked the Keyblade wielder, who nodded.

"Yeah. Riku and Kairi are still out there. I know Riku will be alright. But now, I just need to find out about Kairi and Donald and Goofy's King and Histy too. If they're okay, then they'll be out there in another world or two. I just gotta believe that they'll do fine before I get to them, right?"

"That's the spirit!" Aerith cheered, drowning out the noises of the ninja and the dogoo.

Traverse Town – Third District (Outside)

"Look at him, my dear..." Maleficent spoke to Riku. "Surrounded and cared for by strangers he just met. Your 'friend' certainly has found better company these days, hasn't he?"

She then loomed closer to the silver-haired boy. "You see now, plain as day. He cares for that new company far more than you..."

Riku scoffed off at that. "Why do I care about this?"

"You need confirmation, do you not?" the evil witch asked. "It's rather fortunate that Arfoire requested a favor from you, allowing you to probe further into his state of being. Mutual benefits, no?"

Riku scoffed again. "He can keep that company. As far as I know now, Kairi's the only one I can rely on now"

"And we're looking into her state of being right now" Maleficent reminded. "Remember, we're doing something for you in exchange for doing some favors for us as well."

"And I prefer to keep the distance between us that way" he said coolly. "Last thing I need is someone to betray me like he did..."

The evil witch chuckled sinisterly. "Did Arfoire's little spy approach you one day? I'm certain that is something she would say, though given that I have yet to actually meet her, I could be wrong."

For a third time, the silver-haired boy scoffed.

"I don't care"

Traverse Town – Third District – Vacant House

"Don't forget about the Keyholes" Leon reminded the boy. "The more Keyholes you seal, the less worlds the Heartless will take. That, in turn will ensure that Maleficent's web of influence won't spread further than it already did."

Sora rubbed his head. "No pressure there"

"Hey, if it helps" Artisan suddenly said. "It may even lead you closer to that witch who poisoned Neptune"

"Witch?" Sora asked.

"Oh yeah!" Yuffie, who now has the dogoo held in her arms, suddenly remembered. "You mentioned a purple witch before, right?"

"Yeah" the woman in the white cloak nodded. "IF told me about that over the phone."

"I think I saw someone like her in the Second District a while ago!"

Everyone looked at the ninja in surprise.

"When was that!?" Sora demanded.

"That was when you were fighting that Heartless protecting the Keyhole" Yuffie answered. "Purple lady? Big hat? Large tome? Very old? Yup, definitely looks like a witch!"

"Then I guess she's gone after the fight, huh?" Sora said, crossing his arms in thought.

The Great Ninja sighed. "Unfortunately..."

"Wonder where she went..." Aerith wondered. "And what her aim even is with all this?"

"Considering that she targeted Neptune before" Artisan thought aloud. "I can guess nothing good..."

"Regardless" Leon smoothed over. "Just keep looking around and do what you do best, Sora. You will find what you seek as you go."

Sora slapped his fist in agreement. "Yeah. We got this!"

Traverse Town – Third District (Watch Tower)

"What is the meaning of this!?" Noire shouted to the old lady in front of her. "Why did you make that Heartless go berserk like that!?"

"Whatever do you mean, Noire?" Arfoire looked away with nary a shame. "And I even made sure that boy of Maleficent's would stick around a bit more to bail you out, too..."

"And guess what? He bailed on us after the fact! Besides, I noticed the aura around it." the black-haired girl said with a growl. "Heartless usually never gives out auras like that. I knew for myself since I defeat them around the castle for training."

"And at one point, I ended 'upgrading' one of them during your patrols, which caused you to unleash your true power, the Hard Drive Divinity, isn't that right?" the old witch sneered.

The girl furrowed her eyes at her. "So that's your game, then? You were hoping to make me transform in front of them."

Arfoire chuckled. "Not quite. It is your own fault for concealing your power from them."

"Shut up!"

Noire pointed her weapon, which transformed from a rapier to a black-and-blue Keyblade with medium-length blade and a logo named 'LS' as it's edge. It's keychain is similar to that of Neptune's Keyblade, except the crystal's color is black.

Sensing the empty threat, the witch chuckled again. "To be quite frank, I was hoping to draw Neptune to the edge with this stunt, but those buffoons accompanying her would prove quite the problem. Not to mention, that dull boy whom the Keyblade has chosen..."

"You're still gauging if she's a CPU!?" Noire yelled at her. "I already tested her before. She's too weak to be a CPU!"

"That's what you think" Arfoire replied back. "But tell me this. Why would she be able to wield a Keyblade just like yours?"

"Like...mine?" She looked to her Keyblade.

"You noticed the keychain attached to it, right?" the witch pointed to the tiny power symbol on her Keyblade. "It is a symbol of a Keyblade's identity. In your case, it is the proof of your identity as one of the CPU's of the lost world of Gamindustri"

"And...Neptune has something like it, too..." Noire pondered on it. "Still, that doesn't prove that she's one like me, too!"

"Feel free not to believe me on that, if you so please" Arfoire waved off. "If you want, you can probe her strength some more. I care not how you proceed with your life. Just remember that you still owe me for allowing you sanctuary in Maleficent's charge. Otherwise, she would have left you to the Heartless."

As the witch left in a puff of smoke, Noire looked to her own Keyblade again. "My proof as a CPU...Is Neptune really one, too?"

She shook her head, groaning in frustration. "How could I trust that witch on her word when she has repeatedly toyed with me for her own sick amusement since then? How can I face Neptune after how welcoming she and her friends were of me? Not to mention, this...tugging feeling in my heart when I'm near her."

She slapped her own face with her hands. "Calm down, Noire. Remember, in this vast space, you can only rely on yourself. You must keep everyone at a distance. That way, your heart will never falter..."

A bright light erupted around her, transforming her into the Newtype that the party encountered in Wonderland!

"It won't...It won't"

NEPSTATION

Neptune: We're back in Nepstation, and this time, we're bringing another guest. Say hello to them!

Artisan: Hello, everyone. It's great to be here!

Neptune: Man, imagine my surprise that this is the first time you showed up in a Neptunia fanfic, and it's in a crossover of all things!

Artisan: I admit, I really didn't do much to stand out in my only game. Not to mention, it's so different some people got turned off by it!

Neptune: Psh! Don't listen to those nay-sayers! There's nothing wrong with the classics! I mean, look! Indie games are pretty much rising in popularity nowadays since the gaming scene is changing! In this time and age, us classic gamers gotta stand together and support these indie developers to enrich their talents and opportunities.

Artisan: True. I did have fun making that game, so there's that. If you all have the time to see it, give Super Neptunia RPG a try! You might like it!

Neptune: Alright, now that self-promotion is out of the way, let's get to the news!

---

an image of the Gizmo Shop appears onscreen

Artisan: Recently, the town has seen an increase in their productivity thanks to the reactivation of the local Gizmo Shop, said to be inactive for a few years.

Neptune: Really? How bad was it?

Artisan: Well, some of the houses has reported electric cuts for a good number of hours before the lights went back on. Nowadays, the lights have always been on for as long as the people want it to.

Neptune: That must be quite the load off of people’s back, huh?

---

an image of a certain engineer shows onscreen, but his eyes are crossed out

Artisan: Hm-hm! Even Engineer C here states that he can go back into his old work and has been working non-stop ever since. He must be really beside himself now that the power’s here to stay!

Neptune: A hero’s work is never done, right?

Artisan: Indeed. Now, let’s move to the next article.

---

an image of a dogoo chasing after a ninja girl appears onscreen. The ninja’s eyes are crossed out

Neptune: A recent report stated that a new animal has been sighted around town, causing a ruckus and disturbance to the general public. Great Ninja YK had this to say.

Ninja YK: This thing is just too excited! Someone, please neuter this thing before it goes too wild! AH! Please don’t lick me! I’ll get rabies!

Artisan: Authorities are already handling the situation as we speak. Rest assured that the wild animal will be tamed and caged before the day is over.

Neptune: And another remind that you should train your pets and keep them tamed! We wouldn’t wanna cause a lot of ruckus in this quiet neighborhood, ya hear?

Artisan: Quite, and now for the last segment...

---

an image of a black-twintailed haired girl being hugged from behind is shown onscreen. The girl’s eyes are crossed out

Neptune: This is actually a sponsor! Have you ever wanted to talk to that new friend of yours but find their expressions hard to read? Do they look like they are always angry for whatever reason or not? Well, look no further, because this Nep’s got the solution!

---

an image saying School of Transcribing Tsunderes with a chibi Neptune on the left raising her arm to the logo appears onscreen

Neptune: Starting today, you can sign up to the School of Transcribing Tsunderes. Ever wanted to get closer to that hard-to-approach gal or guy? Ever wanted to understand what they’re saying or trying to say? Well, worry no longer! With my lessons, you’ll be getting that Rank 10 Bond Level with that tsundere in no time! In fact, I have a student who’s already excelling pretty well in our test run!

Artisan: Really now? How is their progress?

Neptune: Why don’t we ask him? Student S?

---

an image of a spiky-haired boy appeared onscreen

Student S: The lessons are going well! I feel like I can understand these people now! You should give these a try!

Neptune: Well?

Artisan: *chuckles* Alright, you’ve piqued my interest! I may consider signing up myself!

Neptune: He-he-he! That’s the spirit!

the previous image of the School of Transcribing Tsunderes reappeared

Neptune: So, what are you all waiting for!? Sign up for the School of Transcribing Tsunderes today and become better friends (or even more) with that hard to approach person in no time, guaranteed! It’s Nep-tastic!

Artisan: And that’s all for the news corner today!

Neptune: Which means it’s topic time! Since my usual co-host is doing some homework today, why don’t you pick one for us today, Arty?

Artisan: Certainly! For today’s topic, let’s discuss...

the word Drifter appears onscreen

Neptune: Aha. A quite obvious topic for you to pick!

Artisan: Hahaha! Can’t go wrong with something obvious. Now then...**Drifters**, as coined in this story, are people who have lost their worlds to the darkness and have landed on others as a result. These people tend to be out of place compared to the usual residents of a world, which makes them distinct and easy to spot with a trained eye.

an image of Traverse Town appears onscreen

Artisan: In certain cases, Drifters can end up in **Refuge Worlds** such as our own Traverse Town. Here, Drifters can settle in and stay for a while until their world can be restored.

Neptune: How will that work? Aren’t worlds that are gone...just gone?

Artisan: Not quite. Since worlds fall into darkness, they can be restored, but how that can be achieved, I don’t know, but we’re looking into it with what we have.

Neptune: I sure hope we find a way.

Artisan: You and me both. Continuing on the topic of Drifters...

an image of IF, Compa, Broccoli and Rena appears onscreen

Artisan: While some Drifters can clearly recall their lives and world of origin, some are special cases. They cannot recall their home, whatever lives they had before. All they can remember are the names they have, whatever skills they acquired and a few other things, depending on the Drifter.

Neptune: And get this! We believe that all these Drifters likely came from the same world! What that world is, oh boy we wish we knew!

Artisan: Just one of many mysteries to solve on your journey ahead, right?

Neptune: Yup! I get the feeling we'll find our answers soon enough.

Artisan: And we'll await whatever information you can give us!

Neptune: You got it! So, from us all here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Artisan: See you next time!

Chapter 7: Chapter 6.0: Arabian (Sandy) Dream

Chapter Summary

> Our party's next destination lies at the sandy world of Agrabah, where their first real encounter with the evil forces behind the Heartless await them...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

???

"...Pudding..."

"Um, Neptune? Please wake up"

Upon hearing that familiar voice, the girl in question woke up almost immediately.

"Huh? Oh, hey, Histy! How's it been?"

"Same old, same old, I'm afraid. You?"

"Oh, we had an amazing time since we last talked, Histy!"

"Is that so? Can you tell me?"

"Of course. Basically, blah blah blah blah blah"

"Hmmmmm, I see. Drifters. Keyholes. A Newtype and new companions who just vanished. Not to mention being poisoned by a witch! You have been through a lot in those worlds, Neptune."

The girl grinned as she rubbed her nose. "All in a day's work for this Nep! So, hey, quick questions"

"Shoot"

"Remember that feeling I had whenever I was near Sora?"

"You're referring to the connection between you two, yes?"

"Something like that. Ya see, when I met Noire a while ago, I got the same feeling from her. What's that mean?"

"This could take a while to explain, but to condense it, it means you are approaching a fellow CPU, Neptune."

Questions marks appeared around her. "CPU? What's that?"

"Again, this could take a while to explain, and I don't have the time for it right now, but basically, you and this Noire person are a special kind of people. One native to a certain world."

"A certain world? You think it could be the same world Compa and Iffy once lived at?"

"I cannot say for certain right now if that is indeed the same world most of the Drifters came from. Nevertheless, the fact that you are able to meet one of your kind is excellent news, Neptune!"

Neptune giggled. "Ya think so? But, uh, here's the thing..."

"Yes?"

"That feeling I felt with Noire? I felt something similar with the Newtype back then"

"Really now? Have you encountered anyone else like Noire or the Newtype on your travels?"

She shook her head. "Nada."

"I see. Hmmmmmmmm."

Feeling that this could take a while, and that they don't have a lot of time with this conversation, Neptune changed topics.

"Anyway, we can shelve that for later. I do have one more question, however"

"What is it, then?"

"Is the witch who kidnapped you go by the name of Maleficent?"

"No. Where did you hear that name, though?"

"Heard it from Leon and the others. Said she was the one who squatted on their home world after the Heartless ruined everything there."

"I see. I apologize for not informing you of my kidnapper's name sooner."

"It's no biggie!" Neptune smiled. "Besides, if my Nep Senses are correct, I get the feeling your kidnapper and this Male-ficient are working together, somehow"

"If that is the case, then it would make a gr...ve...nce..."

"Uh, Histy? Hello? Are we hanging up?"

"We...of...me...Pl...refu..."

Ocean Between – Approaching Agrabah

"WORLD AHOY!"

Neptune snapped awake at the duck's declaration.

"Woah!" the girl said as she yawned. "That does not make for a good alarm clock."

"Good morning, Nep-Nep" Compa greeted with a plate of pudding on her hand. "Here's your morning pudding!"

"The right way to start the day! Thanks, Compa!" Neptune thanked, taking the plate and started chowing down on the pudding.

"For you, yeah" IF snarked. "So anyway, what're we looking at?"

"Sand!" Goofy declared.

"Lots and lots of sand, apparently" Sora followed.

"Ugh, sand" Compa groaned. "It's coarse, rough, irritating and it gets everywhere! I knew I should've bought new clothes back at Traverse Town"

"Instead, you stocked up on more pudding ingredients aside from the usual grocery list..." the guild agent spoken out, causing the duck to groan at the handling of funds.

"But they were on sale!" the nurse complained. "I HAD to get them now!"

IF sighed. "At least we still have enough for a few items and accessories"

Goofy nodded. "Can't afford to remain unguarded out there!"

Neptune gulped, swallowing the last of the pudding. "You think there's time for me to change?"

"You packed clothes?" Donald asked.

"More like Arty insisted on giving me them" Neptune laughed. "Anyway, be back in a jiff! Hope we don't have any stowaways here or whatever!"

She then took to the infirmary to get her clothes changed.

The guild agent sighed. "The random things she says, I swear..."

"How about the rest of you?" Sora asked around. "It's bound to be hot down there"

"I think I'll be fine" IF boasted. "Adapting to different weathers is pretty much a must for a guild agent like me"

"We'll be okay!" Goofy answered. "Right, Donald?"

The duck nodded as the party turned their attention to the nurse.

"I guess you'll have to tough it out, Compa" Sora said apologetically. "Sorry"

The nurse groaned. "I hope we packed enough water for this trip"

"I'M BACK~"

Everyone turned to see Neptune, who changed her signature parka for a smaller jersey and purple skirt.

"Well, what do y'all think?" Neptune asked around "Cute, right?"

"Super-duper cute!" Compa complimented.

"At least you'll last better under the sun, that's for sure" IF said, narrowing her eyes against the purple-haired girl. "You made sure you're wearing bloomers, right?"

"Totally!" the girl with the key answered with a salute. "I know this is not just our franchise this time!"

Neptune then approached her fellow Keyblade wielder. "So, Sora, thoughts?"

"Well..." Sora scratched his cheek. "It...suits you?"

Neptune chuckled. "C'mon, buck-o! If that's all you have to say, what will happen if Kairi shows up in a fan-tabulous dress one day? And all you can then is 'It...suits you'? Man up, buck-o!"

Sora became flustered at that. "Uh. Well. That's..."

"Alright, you guys, break it up!" IF said, getting in-between the two. "We got a world to explore, friends and Drifters to find and a Keyhole to seal. So, let's all get going already."

"Okay!"

Agrabah – Alleyway

"So, this is the world you live in?" Arfoire, who is tagging along with Jafar and Maleficent, said as they walked through the sandy streets.

"RULE over, thank you very much" Jafar insisted.

"Oh, my mistake" Arfoire bowed to the man in red. "I forgot to pay my respects"

Maleficent sighed. "And the Keyhole?"

"The Heartless are searching for it now" the vizier answered as he approached the evil fairy. "I'm certain we'll find it soon enough"

"With that covered, there's only one more matter to attend to here..." the purple hag looked up to see a red bird flying down to Jafar's shoulder.

"Ah, Iago" the vizier called over. "Have you found her?"

"I've looked everywhere for Jasmine" the red bird reported. "She's disappeared like magic!"

"The girl is more trouble than she's worth" Jafar scoffed. "And the rat that aided her?"

"Not a clue either!" Iago said. "I swear, that cat-lady's really good at covering her tracks!"

Arfoire huffed. "Trouble in paradise?"

"You said you had things under control" Maleficent reminded.

"Agrabah is full of holes for rats to hide in" Jafar defended. "But why worry about Princess Jasmine? With her or without her, surely this world will be ours when we find the Keyhole."

"Surely you're not informed?" the purple witch said, grabbing the vizier's attention. "Our ultimate goal is to reach the heart of all worlds, and in order to do that..."

"We need all seven princesses of heart to open the final door leading to it" the green witch finished. "Any fewer is useless."

"Well, if the princess is that important, we'll find her."

Jafar then summoned his band of Bandit Heartless, scimitar-wielding warriors native to sandy areas like these, and gave them his orders.

"Find Jasmine and bring her to me!" he ordered. "And if you see that strange woman, kill her on sight!"

Sending Iago and his Heartless on their way, Jafar proceeds forth as well.

"Don't steep yourself in darkness too long." Maleficent warned the vizier. "The Heartless consume the careless"

Jafar laughed at the warning. "Your concern is touching, but hardly unnecessary."

Arfoire chuckled. "Well, this ought to be entertaining..."

As the three left the city, one figure who was eavesdropping on the conversation emerged from behind the stalls once the coast is clear.

"That was unsettling...I wonder what the Princess has to say about this..."

Agrabah – Hideout

"I'm back!"

The figure returned to the designated hideout. It wasn't impressive, considering the open holes, numerous displaced bricks and three entrances to the room, one of which has a pole on it.

But it did have an open view to the Sultan's Palace over yonder, so that's a plus.

"Ah, welcome back" a woman wearing teal approached the figure. "How was the reconnaissance, CyberConnect2?"

The figure, wearing a gray shirt, green shorts, a green cap and has some face paint on her face, scratched behind her head which sported cat-like ears while her cat-like tail swayed. "C'mon, Princess, you can just call me CC2. My name's a bit long anyway..."

"Only if you call me Jasmine" the princess sighed. "Anyway, did you find anything interesting?"

"I happened to overhear the creepy vizier talking to some folks in the streets" CC2 reported.

"You found Jafar?" Jasmine gasped. "What did he say? Do you know where's he headed?"

"About that..."

Before she could continue, they heard voices.

"...about we start searching here?"

"...take a break? My sweater's all drenched..."

CC2 put a finger on her mouth, silently telling the princess to hide and keep quiet. The cat-like lady silently sprinted to the nearby pathway and hid near the corner as she drew out one of her twin daggers out.

"...about that place over yonder? It looks spacious enough!"

"...idea! Let's go there, Donald!"

"...right. Alright!"

The voices stopped, but the sounds are replaced with footsteps drawing in closer...

And closer...

And closer...

"...!"

When the steps became too close, CC2 drew her dagger at the seeming intruder, causing them to yelp in surprise.

"Woah-hao!" a loud voice screamed.

"What's the big idea!?" a squeaky voice shouted.

"Goofy!? Donald!" a boy's voice shouted from the back. "You two okay!?"

"Sora!" the second voice (Donald, right?) called out. "Someone's in this place, and they're not too friendly!"

"I could say the same to you!" CC2 replied back with gusto, never moving from her spot. "Did you at least bother to check if people are living in these places?"

"Huh?" the first voice (Goofy) wondered as he regained his bearings. "Hang on, are you normal?"

"Huh?" CC2 raised her eyebrow. "Normal?"

"Like, not a dark, spooky creature normal?" Goofy elaborated.

"Heck yes!" CC2 replied indignantly. "We've been hiding our butts off from those things since they kept showing up, one after the other!"

"Then we can help out!"

"Huh?"

CC2 looked to the pathway to see a young boy with brown hair, a duck with a staff wearing blue and a..dog(?) wearing green with a shield.

"Who the heck are you guys?" She asked, surprised.

"We could ask you the same thing!" Donald yelled.

"O-Oh!" CC2 immediately put her dagger away in shame. "Sorry about that! I thought you could be with that sleazy vizier or those weird creatures roaming on the streets"

"D'oooh, it's alright!" Goofy said happily. "We're just glad you're okay!"

"Excuse me, but..." the boy (Sora, I think they called him) called out "...we got more friends waiting in the back, so do you mind letting us in?"

CC2 turned back to see Princess Jasmine giving an okay sign with her hand.

"Sure thing!" she replied to the boy. "This is just a temporary hideout, anyway!"

One explanation later…

"I see..." CC2 said, understanding their story (as much as they were able to tell without upsetting the World Order) "Heartless roaming around and searching for a Keyhole that could end up destroying this place if they found it"

"Jafar mentioned that they haven't found it yet" Princess Jasmine said. "But I worry if their search has gone well"

"Same here" IF shook her head. "Anyway, why are you two here in hiding, especially the princess over here?"

"Yeah!" Neptune exclaimed. "Shouldn't you be over in the castle or something?"

"Well, the thing is..." Jasmine tries to explain.

"Oooohhhhh!" Compa smashed her fist onto her hand. "You ran away from home, didn't you?"

"N-Not exactly" the princess stuttered. "I...needed to get a fresh perspective from the commoners, so I snuck away, and while I was, I heard from the city folk that my father, the Sultan, was deposed by the royal vizier, who then unleashed those dreadful monsters upon our people..."

Everyone's faces were filled with dread and sympathy.

"I bet it was a nightmare, huh?" Neptune said, her voice laid with empathy, recalling the first time she saw someone turn into a Heartless. It was not a pretty sight...

"Unfortunately." Jasmine closed her eyes. "I ran as far away as I could, but the monsters caught up to me. That's when a nice, young man came to save me..."

"You okay? C'mon. This way!"

"Oho~!" the girl in the jersey chirped. "Do I smell love in the air, or is it just me?"

Jasmine started to blush at that. "W-Well..."

"A WHOLE NEW WORLD~" Neptune started to sing, only to be bopped in the head.

"Quit the sudden number, Nep" IF scolded. "Anyway, someone came and saved you, right? What's next?"

"He told me to go hide in here for the time being before he left, saying he has some left-over business to take care of..."

The princess sighed. "Oh, Aladdin. I hope you're okay."

Goofy looked to CC2. "Did'ya know where he was going?"

The cat-like girl shook her head, not noticing that Neptune was playing catch with her tail. "Didn't even get to meet him. I met the princess when she was out by herself after all that huba-dub happened."

Eventually, the girl in the jersey caught the tail! "Gotcha!"

"Huh?" CC2 turned to see Neptune playing with her tail, who could only laugh. "Curious about that, huh?"

"I mean, we don't get to meet cat-girls every now and again..." Neptune said sheepishly.

"Well, sorry to say this but..." CC2 looked away in shame. "But that's a fake"

"Nep-wha?" Neptune's eyes became comical circles upon hearing that.

To further prove her point, CC2 pulled apart her 'cat-ears'. "See? All fake. Part of my look, though"

Neptune became downcast upon hearing that. "W-Why? Is my whole life a lie all along?"

"Neptune..." Sora became worried for his fellow wielder.

IF sighed. "Does she have to be so dramatic?"

"Don't mind me, guys..." Neptune said, walking towards a cabinet. "...I'll just sulk here and rethink my whole life while sitting on this nice carpet..."

"You're exaggerating..." the guild agent muttered.

As she sat down on said purple carpet, it begun to shake!

"Nep-huh!?" Neptune yelped. "Geez, can't you see I'm in the middle of an existential crisis here!?"

"That carpet just moved!" Compa shouted. "Everyone, that carpet just moved!"

"And once again, the worlds have proven to surprise us yet again..." IF sighed.

"We've been here for a while..." Jasmine said. "...and I don't think I ever noticed it move an inch..."

"Should we let it out?" Donald wondered as he approached the moving carpet.

"I think we should..."

Upon Goofy's word, the boys moved the cabinet out, letting the carpet...fly away to the outside.

"It flew!" Compa shouted again. "Everyone, the carpet just flew away!"

"We can see that, Compa. Thank you" IF said, patting Compa's head.

"Never thought I'd see a flying carpet in my entire life..." CC2 murmured, as a wide grin graced her lips. "...This just gets even more amazing!"

After a few more minutes of the carpet flying in its freedom, it returned to the hideout and stood against the party.

"It came back" Jasmine said.

"Yeah..." IF eyed the carpet suspiciously, which replied by folding its ends as if it were its arms. "What's it want?"

It then waved its upper left corner, as if beckoning them to come with it.

"It wants us to go with it?" Compa said, confused.

"I think that's what it wants" CC2 guessed.

"But the question is, where does it want us to go?" Donald wondered.

"Ooooohhhh~" Neptune cooed with star-lit eyes. "Maybe it will guide us to some treasure as thanks!"

IF sighed. "Really, Nep?"

"Think about it, Iffy!" the girl in the jersey exclaimed. "This has to be one of those secret finds where it leads to hidden rooms with all the fancy bonuses are! It's video game logic, Iffy!"

"Look, sometimes I can't keep up with your meta-logic here, Nep" the girl in the coat said.

"Well, my Nep Senses are telling me this carpet's trustworthy" Neptune exclaimed. "so I'd say we go for it!"

Compa nodded. "It's like my grandpa used to say. 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained'. I say we got for it"

IF hummed as she gathered her thoughts. "Well, we're going to need more information about this Jafar and his movements. Having the lay of the land will be good to have"

She then nodded. "Okay then. Let's go where this carpet wants us to go and explore more of this place"

"That's great, but uh..." Sora said with worry. "There's a problem"

"What is it, buck-o?" the female Keyblade wielder raised an eyebrow.

They looked at the carpet, which seemed to be dancing wildly now.

"I don't think he can fit all of us" the boy said.

Everyone began to think about the one question that is now on everyone's mind...

Which Neptune said out loud.

"So...who's gonna go?"

Agrabah – Desert

"Woo-hoo!"

Extending her hands out, Neptune, along with Sora, Donald and Goofy, rode the recently-freed magic carpet to their destination amidst the night breeze.

"Enjoying the ride?" Sora asked with a smile.

"Heck yes!" Neptune cheered. "You never get to feel the wind back in the Gummi Ship!"

"Welp" Goofy started. "It IS outer space in the Ocean Between..."

"Keep your guard up, guys!" Donald warned the group. "This is no pleasure ride!"

The girl in the jersey giggled. "You say that, but I bet you wanted a piece of the treasure too, don't ya ducky?"

"W-Wak!" Donald yelped in embarrassment. "Of course not! Why would I want some gold for myself? That's ridiculous!"

"Really~?" Neptune asked. "Then why's your beak riddled with drool?"

"WAK!"

Sora chuckled as the duck wiped off the saliva coming out of his beak. "I guess Donald's got a bit of the greedy streak, huh?"

"Welp, when you lived impoverished for a long time, that old habit tends to die hard..." Goofy remarked offhandly.

"I smell a troubled past there..." Neptune wondered.

"It's not much" Goofy said. "Before the King, Donald and I became who we are, we were simply janitors at the Royal Castle. Then, all of a sudden, we became musketeers, and long after that, we became royalty, in a way."

"Wow!" Sora's eyes widened in amazement. "That must be quite the story!"

"We'll tell ya all about it once we find King Mickey!" the royal captain urged. "Then the three of us'll tell ya the whole story!"

Donald, who was on lookout, noticed something on the ground.

"Look!"

Specifically on an open-circle rock formation, where he could swear he saw two figures about to be submerged in quick-sand!

"Those guys are in trouble!" Sora cried.

"Hey, Mr. Carpet! Take us there!"

The flying carpet heeded Neptune's request and swiftly landed the team in the open circle.

"Hang in there!"

Just as Goofy ran to where the figures were, Bandit Heartless emerged from the sand, their scimitars at the ready!

"Gah! They've got weapons!" Neptune cried in a panic.

"You idiot!" Donald scolded as he summoned his staff. "We all got weapons!"

"Oh yeah! Hehehe!"

Neptune and the rest summoned their weapons for a brawl.

Two of the Bandits attempted to charge at the defenseless girl, but she caught on to them...

"...Oooohhh, wanna play?"

...and blocked their incoming strikes as she started to channel magic.

"Time to try this! **THUNDER BLITZ!**"

Crashing her thunder-infused Keyblade against her attackers, all that was left of them was dust.

"Hehe! How's that!?"

Meanwhile, three of them attempt to assault Goofy, who was meeting their attacks with his trusty shield.

"We're getting nowhere at this rate!" the royal guard yelled.

"I got an idea!"

Channeling his magic to his friend's shield, Donald imbued Goofy's shield with ice magic.

"Good thinkin', Donald!"

Unleashing the magic imbued within, Goofy charged at his attackers, leaving them frozen and shattered against their icy combination.

This is their Combination Skill, **Goofy Elements**!

"Awesome!"

Lastly, Sora was clashing blades with the last remaining Bandit.

"You're good..."

However, the boy deflected his last strike and slammed his Keyblade against the Bandit, ending him once and for all with a mighty Blitz!

"...But you're no Riku!"

Sensing no danger, the team of four went to retrieve the figures, a man wearing an open purple robe and white pants along with a monkey wearing small robes and a hat.

"You okay?" Sora asked the man.

"How many fingers am I holding?" Neptune asked the man, holding her fingers up.

"Y-Yeah, I'll be fine" the man replied, shaking off the sand from his person.

The monkey screeched, turning the team's attention to more Heartless in the area, including Fat Bandits, fire-breathing cousins of the Large Body!

"We've got trouble!" Goofy warned the group.

"Too much trouble!" Donald said, keeping his guard up.

The rescued man, however, had a trump card in his pocket.

Pulling out a golden lamp, he rubbed it and shouted. "Genie! Get rid of these guys!"

As he rubbed the lamp, blue smoke emerged from it, revealing a large blue man with no feet, and a whimsical attitude!

"Wish number uno, coming right up!"

With a snap of his fingers, the Heartless are suddenly popped into a giant glass ball and loaded into a giant cannon.

"FIRE IN THE HOLE!"

He then fired the cannon, shooting the ball out into the night sky, releasing fireworks and taking all the Heartless out with it.

"Seriously, Al, this is quite a simple wish you made." the blue man said quickly with a disappointed expression. "Maybe something a little more exciting or complex will do the trick, hm?"

The rescued man chuckled. "I'll try, Genie. I'll try."

Agrabah - Oasis

Taking the chance to recuperate, the whole group gained some distance as they exchanged information.

"I see..." the rescued man chuckled. "Thanks, Sora"

"Aladdin, what are you doing out here?" the boy asked.

"Aladdin?" Goofy mumbled to himself as he begun to think.

"Same old stuff" Aladdin answered. "Hunting legendary treasure. Just paid a visit to the Cave of Wonders"

The flying carpet landed nearby. "That's where I found that carpet..."

He then revealed the golden lamp he was using earlier.

"...and this lamp."

"Man, getting those treasures sure ain't easy, huh?" Neptune wondered.

"Believe me, it was tempting with all those treasures around..." Aladdin said. "But I pulled through and got this out. Legend has it that whoever holds the lamp can summon the-"

"Please, kid!" the blue man suddenly interrupted as he danced around. "Leave the intros to a professional! The one and ONLY Genie of the Lamp!"

"Rub-a-dub-dub the lamp and have your dearest wishes granted!" Genie declared with a bow. He then flew down to Aladdin as he shook his hand. Confetti also rained down on him out of nowhere. "Today's winner is...Aladdin! Congratulations"

"Any wish?" Neptune and Donald asked in unison.

HIs giant hand stopped them. "Patience, my fine and fairly excited friends!"

"Any THREE WISHES!" Suddenly, three of him appeared as he held three fingers up.

"A one wish, a two wish, a three wish." As he counted down, his doubles vanished into genie smoke. "Then I make like a banana and split!"

"Our lucky winner made his first wish-"

He then flew down to Sora and loudly whispered in a falsetto. "and let me tell you, what a doozy that wish was, that I had to be a little extra about it-"

And then two of him appeared as he danced again. "So, he has TWO left! So, master, what'll you have for Wish NUMERO TWO!?"

A spotlight shined on Al as cheers could be heard amidst the hot desert sands. "Hmmm, how about making me a fabulously wealthy prince?"

"A...prince?" Goofy slowly said.

"Oooh! Money! Royalty! Fame! Why didn't I think of that?" Genie exclaimed. "Okay, you asked for it! A hundred servants and a hundred camels loaded with gold!" He then made

gestures akin to dialing a phone, complete with fitting sound effects! "Just say the word and I'll deliver it in 30 minutes or less, or your meal's free! Hey, I'll even throw in a cappuccino!"

"No, thanks!" Aladdin shook his hands. "I don't even know what a cappuccino is."

"Okay" Genie shrugged.

"A prince, eh?" Neptune said with star-struck eyes. "Is this the advent of Prince Ali!?"

"FABULOUS HE-Hey, hey, hey! Hold it, Ms. Meta Girl!" Genie called out. "I already have a great number lined up for that one!"

"Then it's all yours, Meta-Man!" Neptune chuckled.

"I think I'll put that on hold until we reach Agrabah" Aladdin said after giving it some thought.

"So, why a prince?" Sora asked as he crossed his arms.

"You see, there's this girl in Agrabah named Jasmine" Aladdin answered with a swoon. "But she's a princess, and I'm just a lowly street rat. Aw, she could never fall for a guy like me."

"Jasmine...?" Goofy realized something..."Hey, Al!"

"Okay, hold the phone here!" Neptune suddenly yelled, unknowingly interrupting the walking dog. "Cupid Neptune is here to tell you, lucky guy, that that is load of balarkey!"

"Ba-larkey?" Sora wondered, causing the girl to shush him.

"What do you mean?" Aladdin asked the girl.

"It means that your girl totes got the hots for ya!" She replied, putting her hands on her hips. "We spoke with her in your hideout and she was worried sick about you"

"Me? Please..." Aladdin rejected. "She's probably like that with everyone she meets. It's what's expected from royalty..."

"Nuh-uh!" Neptune loudly shook her head. "When she thought aloud about you, her eyes had that look of longing that said "Where for art thou, mine love?""

Aladdin looked down, still in doubt. "Are you really sure about that?"

"Exaggerated a bit there, but positive!" Neptune nodded furiously. "As a matter of fact, we should get back to the hideout and confirm for ourselves! What say you!?"

The street rat sighed. "Fine. The hideout's originally my place, anyway."

Despite the wind taken out of his sails, Goofy simply shrugged. "Aw, well."

Agrabah – Desert (En Route to the City)

The team, riding on the magic flying carpet, along with Aladdin, who rode on Genie's hand, flew straight for the city to meet with Princess Jasmine and their remaining party members (plus CyberConnect2)

"Ah, fresh air!" Genie breathed in the breeze. "The great outdoors!"

"I know, right!?" Neptune cheered as she extends her arms out again.

"I guess you don't get out much, huh?" Sora wondered.

"Comes with the job!" Genie answered. "PHENOMENAL COSMIC POWER!" He said with a booming voice. "itty bitty living space" he continued with a squeaky voice.

"It's always three wishes, then back to my portable prison" he continued in a normal voice. "I'm lucky to see the light of day every century or two..."

"Really?" Neptune wondered. "You can't get out of your lamp yourself?"

"Sadly no, my fellow 4th wall-breaker" the giant blue man replied sadly. "My lamp's got enchantments that'll make SURE I can't get out until someone rub-a-dubs it."

"Yeesh, if Iffy were here, she'd say something like 'Makes sense, wouldn't want all those 'phenomenal cosmic powers' to end up destroying the universe' or something." the girl in the jersey mimicked.

"That's one way to put it, yes" Genie nodded. "But all the same, I'm bound by the rules all Genies should adhere to. The three-wishes thing is one of those, I'm afraid..."

Aladdin hummed. "Say, Genie, what if I use my last wish to free you from the lamp? What do you think?"

"What a coinkydink!" Neptune slammed her fist onto her palm. "I had the same idea, too!"

"Is that even possible?" Sora wondered.

"Hmmm, lemme check" Genie, conjuring a book called the "Genie's Guide For Dummies" and a librarian's getup, scanned through the pages in lightspeed. "Oh, there's nothing here saying that!"

"Wow" Neptune intoned. "Not even a sticky note?"

"Nada!" the Genie answered, dispelling the book and the getup.

"Guess someone must'a overlooked that, huh?" Goofy commented.

"Still, Al" Genie, having reverted back, asked his master. "You'd do that?"

"Genie, it's a promise" Aladdin swore. "After we check up on Jasmine"

The street man sighed upon thinking about the princess again.

Noticing this, Donald called out to him. "Hey, Al"

"What's up, Donald?" Aladdin responded.

"I heard what you said about Princess Jasmine" the duck said. "And...I can relate with that"

The street man raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

"You see, I have a girlfriend like her. She's the waiting lady to our home's queen. When we first met all that long ago, she...didn't really like me all that much"

"Oh..."

"I was charmed by her, yes, but I was focused on not being a burden to my friends. Back then, I couldn't stand as tall as them and ran away like a coward. But, once I got my act together, she gave me a chance and we've been hooked with each other since."

"I see..."

"So, what I'm trying to say is...give yourself a chance and just talk to her, not as Prince Ali, but as Aladdin. If she's worried about Aladdin, you should go to her as Aladdin."

Aladdin sighed. "I dunno...I just..."

"Hey, if it helps, we'll be right behind you!" Donald encouraged the street man. "So, chin up and look at her, straight in the eye, okay?"

He could only chuckle to respond to his advice, mostly to hide his flabbergasted-face. "I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, Donald"

The duck responded with a thumbs up.

"Ahhhhhhh!" Neptune breathed in. "Don't you just love budding friendships?"

"I'll say!" Goofy nodded. "It's not everyday Donald gets to open up to anyone else like that!"

"Really?" Sora wondered.

Goofy nodded. "I bet'cha he misses bein' with Daisy right now. And I know she misses bein' with him just as much. Queen Minnie definitely feels the same with the King!"

"All the more reason for us to find them!" Neptune cheered. "We can't let these good ladies be waitin' any longer!"

Sora nodded. "Yeah!"

"Sounds like you folks got a lot on your plates, huh?" Genie asked them.

"You can say that!" Sora answered sheepishly.

"Hey!" Donald yelled. "Remember! World Order!"

"Ah! Sorry..." the boy with the key rubbed his head.

"Oh right, Wizards' and Faeries' Orders!"

Genie then zipped his mouth shut, literally.

Agrabah – Hideout

"Hmmmmm..." IF paced back and forth. "They're sure taking a long time..."

"I hope they haven't passed out of heat exhaustion." Compa hoped with worry.

"If Aladdin has been out for this long..." Jasmine wondered. "I fear something might have happened to him..."

"Well, with that creepy vizier and those dark creatures runnin' around" the cat-like woman stated as she looked out of the open hole. "I'd say that's likely..."

As CC2 looked out into the distance, she noticed a red dot floating around the sky...

"Wait a sec..."

The red dot then stopped for a while, and then turned away.

"SHOOT!" CC2 screamed as she retreated. "It's that bird!"

"A bird?" Compa tilted her head.

"Yeah" CC2 scrambled to get her weapons. "Jafar's pet bird. Loud and annoying and can talk for some reason"

"Oh no!" Jasmine gasped. "That must be Iago!"

"If he saw you, then..."

Sure enough, Bandit Heartless spawned inside the hideout.

"Oh, come on!" IF angrily unsheathed her qatars and slashed one of the Bandits away. "Can't we have a moment of peace here!? We're waiting on some people here!"

"W-What do we do!?" Compa yelped, barely blocking two Bandits with her syringe.

"The only thing we can do!" Channeling wind energy onto her twin daggers, CC2 made her move. "We run!"

Unleashing a torrent of wind against the surrounding Heartless, CC2 urged the group out of the hideout and onto the streets.

Agrabah – Palace Gates

"Did we lose them!?" Compa wondered, gasping for air. "I can't stand this heat!"

"Hopefully so" CC2 looked around. "Any more of them, IF?"

The guild agent looked around as she tried to catch her breath. "None so far. Still, we gotta find another place to hide or we're-"

"I'm afraid that won't happen, you street rats!"

The current group looked up on a nearby building to see the vile vizier himself!

"Jafar!" Jasmine called out.

"Princess Jasmine, it has been a while" Jafar bowed to the princess. "But I'm afraid your services are required elsewhere."

"No!" Jasmine answered defiantly. "I won't go with you! Not after what you have done to my father!"

"I assure you the Sultan is out of harm's way" the vizier reassured. "However, the same cannot be said for your dear friends!"

Tapping his staff down, he summoned a band of three Bandits and a Fat Bandit to surround them. However, these Heartless have an eerie red aura around them.

"This feeling..." IF thought aloud as she noticed the red auras. "That armored Heartless back then had those auras too!"

"So...what does that mean?" CC2 asked.

"It means very bad news!" Compa whined. "We are so goners!"

"Tch" Jafar clicked his tongue. "That vile witch...Must she interfere with my business?"

He scoffed. "No matter. Nothing will stop me now! Seize the princess and kill the rest!"

Two of the Bandits charged against IF, who could barely block their assaults...

"This isn't good..."

And sure enough, she was deflected and one of the Bandits pinned the guild agent down.

IF groaned. "Why did I think...it was good idea to send those two away...?"

"Iffy!"

Compa tried to spring to her friend's aid, but the third Bandit knocked her down and kept her pinned to the ground.

"IF! Compa!"

Distracted, the Fat Bandit shot out a fireball from it's mouth, sending CC2 down as well!

"Oh no..." Jasmine panicked, petrified by fear.

"Princess..." CC2 pleaded as she was being restrained. "You gotta run...Wait until...he shows up..."

"That will not happen"

Jafar appeared in front of the princess, extending a hand to her.

"Come with me, princess" Jafar pleaded with the princess.

Jasmine could only look between the vizier and her downed friends, who are pinned by the empowered Heartless.

"If you come with me, I will call off the Heartless..."

The princess hesitated. A part of her believed that he was lying. Most of her screamed to go away from him, having never trusted the vizier since the day he showed up at the palace. Indeed, it would be best to follow CC2's advice and run away...

But...

"Will you..." she started. "...truly call off these monsters if I go with you?"

The vizier bowed. "You have my word"

"D...Don't..." IF pleaded.

After a few more seconds of hesitation, Princess Jasmine came to her answer. "I..."

"Don't you dare finish!"

The princess looked to the source of the voice.

"After all this time...after all that bluster..." It was CyberConnect2, looking up with anger on her face. "Are you really going to give up just like that!?"

"B-But..." Jasmine pleaded.

"Stop!" CC2 shouted back. "You told me once how frustrated you were with your life there. You may have been princess of this world, but you didn't want to have your choices handed to you. You wanted to make your own decisions, come up with your own answers. Isn't that why you ran away!?"

Jasmine recalled that well. "Yes. I didn't want my future handed to me. I didn't want my goals and my love to be decided for me! I wanted someone who looked at me not as a princess of the land, but as a person who wanted to see more of the world, not just beyond the palace!"

CC2 grinned. "Then hold onto it. That anger. That frustration. That is something you felt. Something only you yourself can be proud of havin'. Once you make yourself somethin' good out of those, that's the part when you can be proud of yourself. That will be proof that Jasmine made her own choice in her life!"

Jafar growled. "Silence! You street rats know nothing! Of the great power that is within our grasp! The power that will change the world as we see fit! I will have that power at any cost! You made your choice, princess! Now suffer for your mistake!"

The girls that were pinned down started to scream as IF and Compa were being choked. However, CC2 continued to resist.

She even laughed. "That's it, huh? World domination, eh? That's a boring goal..."

This frustrated the vizier even more. "You dare! Heartless, kill that girl first!"

The Bandit restraining her lifted her up from the neck, putting it's sword close.

"...And yet, people like you dared to even exist? People like you, who would quash the dreams of others for your own selfish goals!? That's ridiculous..."

A fierce aura began to glow from the cat-lady. Her once-green aura of power began to slowly turn red.

"**You dare to have low lives kill me?**" her voice growled, as if something terrifying had awakened inside of her. "**YOU WILL PAY FOR YOUR INSOLENCE!**"

Her aura burst forth, wiping out her captor and pushing back all the others.

"What is this...power!?" Jafar said, shielding himself from her aura.

"CC2?"

Jasmine could only look agape at her friend. Her overall appearance hasn't changed much, but the green eyes CC2 once had, has become a fierce red.

"Holy..." the desert princess started.

"...Moly!" Compa finished, both girls staring in awe. "What is that?"

"It feels like she's channeling her anger into raw power..." the guild agent looked on in a mix of amazement and fear.

Jafar gritted his teeth. "Don't just stand there, you fools! Kill that girl, now!"

Two of the boosted Bandits charged right at the enraged woman, only to met with swift strikes on their chests, eliminating them instantly.

"She wiped them out in one hit!" the nurse commentated.

"This girl..." IF wondered. "Could there be a reason why she didn't use this power right away?"

Not done with the battle, the Fat Bandit breathed a stream of flame against the cat-lady, but she leapt up upon sensing the danger...

"**You're dead...**"

...and landed right behind it!

"**DOUBLE STRIKE DEATH!**"

The enraged woman unleashed her three-hit Power combo, wiping out the Fat Bandit and leaving the vile vizier all alone.

"Such...power..." Jafar gasped. "To think you held on to this power and never used it freely! Are these children more of a threat to our plans than we first suspected?"

CC2 proceeded to give Jafar a deadly glare, causing him to flinch back.

"You think this is all I have!?" Jafar tapped down his staff, causing the nearby red pots to grow giant spider legs! "I still have an ace up my sleeve!"

Two of the pots, however, exploded, revealing a giant bug head and a giant hind legs, almost that of a giant caterpillar.

The hind legs gathered each of the pots and the head together, forming the Pot Centipede Heartless!

"**...Weak...**"

However, CC2 remained undeterred. In fact, her aura glowed even stronger.

"**Die..HAH!**"

Down goes three Pot Spiders in it's midsection...

"**HRAH!**"

A power slash through the two in the rear!

"**YAH!**"

A heave against the two near the head!

"**YOU'RE FINISHED! BLACK FANG SOUL!**"

Unleashing her most powerful attack, she struck against the Heartless's head brutally in a flurry of slashes.

"**TAH!**"

Leaping up from the head, the resident Drifter surrounded herself in an orb...

"**FACE YOUR END!**"

...and all of a sudden, several slashes of wind cut through the Pot Centipede's head like butter, ending it with a final wind slash!

"Unbelievable..." Jafar muttered. "What...are you!?"

"**Enough yapping around**" CC2 growled as she aimed straight for the evil vizier. "**Time to die!**"

She swiftly struck against the vizier, who responded with a magical sphere to protect himself and entrap Jasmine at the same time!

"I'm afraid not, fool!" Jafar declared. "Not when our final goals are within reach!"

"Jasmine!"

"Iffy! Compa! CC2!"

Everyone looked to see Sora and the rest of the party, along with the rescued Aladdin in tow.

"Aladdin!" Jasmine called out in joy.

"You all came!" Compa said so happily she cried.

"What took you so long?" IF wondered as she slowly got up.

"Well, I could do the blah-blah-blah..." Neptune started. "But a more elaborate flashback wouldn't hurt, now would it?"

Agrabah – Alleyway (A Few Moments Earlier)

"Um, question, guys?"

Donald looked to the girl in the jersey. "Yeah?"

"When we left the town, it was relatively quiet, right?"

"Yup!" Goofy nodded.

"And now that we're back, there seems to be a band of Heartless roaming the streets, right?"

"Seems like it" Sora nodded. "Nothing we can't handle, but yeah"

"What are you trying to get at here?" Aladdin asked the girl impatiently, causing Genie to shush him.

"Calm down, Al" the blue man, having shrunk himself to the group's average height, said, conjuring a detective's outfit and a spyglass as he scans his master with it. "This young lady's sleuthing right now, and I say we let her reach her conclusion, first, wouldn't you say?"

"If all these Heartless are now roaming around," Neptune started. "That usually means bad things are coming or the main bad guy has shown up around here. So, that means that fugly vizier may be around here somehow!"

"You mean Jafar!?" Aladdin nearly shouted. "But why?"

"No doubt she's going after Jasmine" Sora figured.

"From what she told us," Goofy started. "the royal vizier's on a womanhunt against her."

"CC2 said that he needed her for some final goal" Donald continued. "Whatever it is, it can't be good."

"Haa-hahaha!" an evil laugh boomed throughout the alleyway. "That's right! That foolish vizier has his sights set on the princess for a particular reason!"

Purple smoke emerged in front of them, and from that smoke, an evil witch greeted them with a sneer.

"Who in the-" Neptune wondered.

"Haa-hahahaha!" the witch laughed. "We meet again, Neptune! I see you managed to recover from the poison. How fortunate for you!"

"Hey!" Goofy pointed to the lady.

"You're the one who poisoned Neptune!" Donald pointed out, readying his staff.

"That's right!" the wtich answered smugly. "Call me Arfoire! I will be the agent of your demise!"

"THAT'S HER!?" Sora shouted to Neptune as he pointed at the witch. "But she dresses up all lame! You sure this is the same hag who poisoned you?"

"How should I know!?" Neptune shouted back. "I couldn't get a look at her since I was passin' out, ya know? If I did, I would definitely question her sense of fashion, no doubt about it!"

Hearing those only served to tick Arfoire off. "You dare make a fool out of me!?"

"What are you doing here?" Aladdin demanded as he brought out his scimitar. "Are you in league with Jafar?"

"Not quite" Arfoire chuckled. "I have no interest in the results of his plans. However..."

She then scanned both Neptune and Sora. "I need to see for myself what the Keyblade's Chosen Ones can really do!"

The witch brought out her weapon, a dark heavy spear, with dark magic.

"You wanna fight us at this stage of the game?" Neptune laughed. "That's so totally what a mid-boss would do!"

"Say what you want, you fool!" Arfoire twirled her spear. "Pretty soon, I'll have you fools kneeling on the floor!"

"Hey, Al" Genie whispered to the street man as he punched the air. "What'dya say we give that old hag the good ol' one-two, eh?"

But his master shook his head. "It's alright. We got this"

"Oki-doki" Genie vanished in a puff of smoke. "But don't hesitate to call on me. Remember, two wishes left!"

"So then?" the witch readied her stance. "Are you ready to fall here?"

"We'll see about that!" Donald channeled energy into his staff. "**FIRA**!"

The witch boredly raised her hand, blocking the attack with an energy shield.

"Is that all?" the purple hag asked mockingly.

But as the smoke clears, she could hear the sound of a dog charging at her.

"This is for Nep-Nep, witch!"

Goofy unleashed a powerful **Charge** that pushed her back despite her magic barrier...

"...!"

...right where Aladdin snuck up behind her and slashed at her!

"You're quite the sneaky one!" Arfoire complimented, barely blocking the incoming attack in time.

"It's how we fight in the streets!" the street man said. "We sneak in, take what we get and get out in style!"

Aladdin hopped back as he prepared another strike.

"Do you really think you can beat me?" the witch mocked him as she blocked his strike.

But Aladdin grinned. "Not just me..."

The purple lady sensed two presences behind, jumping right after her!

Realizing that the two Keyblade wielders may be attacking her, she immediately prepared her counterattack!

"**SYLHET SPEAR!**"

She summoned a large spectral spear and aimed directly behind her. However, her aim was a bit off and the two managed to scrape through the spear and land a hit against her!

"We're not done yet!"

Sora followed up with a three-hit combo, ending with a **Blitz** through her head...

"Ah-ha!"

...sending the witch reeling back!

"You little!"

"Time to freeze!"

Seeing the opening, Donald prepares a strong **Blizzara** attack and aims right at her!

"Pesky vermin!" the witch barely blocked the attack again, but shards of ice formed in front of her.

"Trying to distract me, are you!?"

Angered at their insolence, the purple hag prepared the technique again.

"**SYLHET SPEAR!**"

Summoning another spectral spear, Arfoire crashed through the forming ice, leaving a snowy mist admist the desert town.

"Now...where are you?"

She looked around for presences and managed to spot a silhouette in the mist.

"Got you! **RAINY RATNAPURA!**"

The witch launched the technique, piercing the silhouette with a flurry of spear strikes.

"Gah!"

"Ow-wowow!"

As the mist cleared around her, she saw Aladdin and Goofy downed, the former knocked back behind the royal captain.

"That's the best you can do?" Arfoire said smugly.

"So much for our plan..." Aladdin bemoaned.

"Sorry, Al..." Goofy apologized.

"Hey!" Sora called out to his opponent as he charged against her. "Get away from them!"

"And why should I listen to you?" the witch summoned another spectral spear at him. "**SYLHET SPEAR!**"

Sora stopped his charge and proceeded to block the incoming attack with all his might...

"Haaaaaaaa!"

...which he did!

However, he was already exhausted from the non-stop battles that was he was barely able to stand.

"Child's play!"

Arfoire then took advantage of the opening and launched another attack...

"**KINESTRA SLASH!**"

...knocking Sora down!

"Tired already?" Arfoire mocked the boy. "And here I thought Keyblade wielders were supposed to be a challenge. You're still wet behind the ears, boy!"

Sora groaned at that remark, turning his head up to glare at the vile witch.

"Then how about this!? **THUNDARA**!"

As soon as she heard the loud cry, Arfoire immediately raised a magic barrier, blocking out lightning bolts coming out of the sky.

"Grrrr!" Arfoire growled. "Pesky little duck!"

She then charged straight at the royal wizard in her sights, who only smirked.

"What are you-" Throwing caution to the wind, she attacked again. "**RAINY RATNAPURA**!"

After striking down the duck, she looked around at the fallen state of her opponents.

"Is this all you have to give?" Arfoire mocked the party, but then noticed something missing.

Or rather, someone..."Wait. Where is that fool Neptune?"

"Yoo-hoo!"

She looked up to see Neptune, having climbed up to the nearby stall, as she waved at her opponent.

"Fleeing like a coward, are you!?"

The girl with the key laughed. "Like heck! Nope, you hurt my buddies one too many times! Time for me to dish out Nep Justice!"

Arfoire taunted her. "Then bring it on! I'm ready!"

The girl stepped back, pointing her Keyblade at Arfoire for a sec...

"Time for my new technique..."

...and then jumped down the stall and ran straight against Arfoire!

"**SYLHET SPEAR!**"

Arfoire launched another spectral spear at her, but found it's mark off, as if repelled by a gust of wind!

"What!?" the purple hag's eyes widened at the revelation. "An **Aerora** spell?"

Donald snickered. "How's...that?"

"So that's his aim!?" Arfoire bemoaned as Neptune closed the distance.

"**Critical**..."

Landing a slash, Neptune then launched her opponent upward...

"**EDGE**!"

...and after a quick step back, launched herself straight against her opponent, slashing her with all her might!

"GAH!"

This attack sent Arfoire reeling back. "To drive me into a corner like this...I suppose that's what vermin like you can do!"

The party slowly gets up and bunch up together, preparing for another battle.

However, the witch sneered. "But this will have to do for now. I suspect that our dear vizier will be wasting the gift I granted him. We will meet again, fools! Watch every corner or I will get you!"

Arfoire vanished in a puff of smoke, her evil laughter resounding throughout the Alleyway.

"Yeesh" Sora shook his head. "That was certainly one tough hag. You all doin' okay?"

"We can go for one more round!" Donald boasted.

"Don't forget to drink your potions, guys!" Goofy reminded as he brought out said potions.

"Oh, thanks!" Aladdin took a potion and drank it. He then noticed Neptune, who was just staring ahead. "What's up, Neptune?"

"That old hag's a witch, right?" she wondered.

"Sure looks like it" the duck answered.

"She said her name's Arfoire, right?" the dog asked. "Isn't the other one we're lookin' for named Maleficent?"

"Yeah" the boy with the key nodded. "But according to...the others, she's green, but this hag's purple, so..."

"Oh man!" Neptune facepalmed. "I was supposed to ask her about Histy!"

"Oh yeah!" Sora remembered.

"Histy?" Aladdin tilted his head.

"Just someone Neptune's looking for!" Sora answered immediately.

"I...see" Aladdin nodded hesitantly. "Do you know what she looks like?"

The girl shook her head. "Nope. Just heard her voice. She even said she was held captive by an evil witch. Maybe that Arfjord has her."

"Ya sure it's not Maleficent?" Goofy asked.

Neptune nodded. "Positive."

"If you say so..." Donald said.

"Anyway! Let's get going" Aladdin urged the group. "Hang in there, Jasmine..."

Back to the present...

"And there you have it!" Neptune finished the flashback.

"So you've been fighting a witch all this time while we're this close?" IF said in an exasperated tone.

"Hey, you never know!" Neptune replied. "That Arforite lady might've casted a barrier between our areas so we couldn't hear each other!"

"She has a point" Compa said, treating IF's wounds as hers are being healed by Donald.

"So that witch was useless, after all..." Jafar scoffed, repelling the cat-woman's assault. "No matter! Thanks to her, I have what I wanted here!"

"What do you mean?" CC2 asked, still in her enraged state.

Suddenly, Iago appeared on the scene, carrying a golden lamp on his feet.

"Hey, isn't that..." Donald started.

"The Genie's lamp?" Goofy finished.

"Huh?"

Aladdin inspected his pockets, only to find it isn't there!

"That little!"

"Don't tell me you dropped it during our fight with that witch?" Neptune complained.

"This is bad..." Sora said, feeling dread.

Jafar laughed. "How does it feel to be pick-pocketed, you filthy street rat?"

He then rubbed the lamp. "Now come to me, Genie of the Lamp!"

Blue smoke emerged from the lamp, and the Genie took form, slumped down in despair.

"Genie...No!" Aladdin pleaded.

"Sorry, Al..." Genie bemoaned. "But he's got the lamp, so I have to follow. Genie's Rules, remember?"

CC2 growled. "Just when I thought you couldn't get any lower..."

"Say what you all will, but this world will be mine! Ahahahahaha!"

The cat-like woman growled louder. "That's it! YOU'RE DEAD!"

Before she could hit her mark, Jafar teleported away, taking both Jasmine and the Genie with him!

"Aladdin!"

"Jasmine!" Aladdin reached out in vain as the smoke showed no one left behind.

And as the smoke cleared, the vizier's evil laughter rang throughout the sandy town.

"**Curses**!" CC2 slammer her fist onto the ground. "**I couldn't protect her! After all I said, too!**"

"CC..." Compa said, feeling bad for her.

"This has been an exhausting day..." IF started. "Let's take a breather for now. We'll decide our next move from there..."

"**But...!**"

The guild agent placed a reassuring hand on the raging woman's shoulder. "I know how you feel about this. This...helplessness in failing to save someone. I get it. Really. But nothing will happen if we just keep throwing fits. Let's cool our heads first, then we'll go save her."

CC2 took a deep breath, her raging aura dissipating as her eyes return to their normal green.

"Okay..."

With nothing else said, the party of eight headed back to Aladdin's hideout to regroup and recuperate, their worry over Jasmine and the Genie heavy in their hearts...

As they left the streets, Arfoire was up above, watching the scene with interest.

"Well now, I guess staying put was the right choice. Now I have something interesting to do here..."

Chapter End Notes

> Hello again, Mr. Author here! You probably noticed the weird numbering of this chapter. Welp, the current chapter is split up for this one (and small spoiler, at least two more chapters get this treatment, too).
> The next part will be out in a bit. See ya then!

Chapter 8: Chapter 6.5: Squirming (Lurking) Evil

Chapter Summary

> Determined to rescue Princess Jasmine and the Genie from Jafar's grip, our heroes head into the treasure-filled Cave of Wonders...

Agrabah – Cave of Wonders – Ritual Site – Moments Later

"And you're certain it's somewhere here?" Maleficent asked the vizier, who came with the unconscious princess and Genie in tow.

"I sense powerful magical energies in this place." Jafar answered. "I'm certain this is it."

"Are you certain?" Arfoire chuckled. "For all you know, it could just be another magical artifact native to your world"

Jafar scoffed at her. "I don't need any lip from one as deceitful as you!"

"Even though my little tussle caused that so-called street rat to drop his lamp for your little birdie to take" Arfoire shrugged. "Gratitude doesn't seem native to this world, it seems"

"Why you..." Jafar glared at the purple witch.

"Enough!" Maleficent scolded the two. "The more time we waste here, the more chances those children will have to find us. Now, Jafar, show us the Keyhole"

"Tch" Jafar produced the Genie's lamp and rubbed said lamp. "You heard her, Genie. This is my first wish! Show us the Keyhole!"

The Genie appeared and with a disinterested look, revealed the location of the Keyhole with a snap of his fingers.

"Well" Arfoire looked surprised. "Look at that"

The vizier's evil laughter boomed throughout the room, their plans one step closer to fruition.

Agrabah – Hideout

It was approaching evening in Agrabah. Despite the stillness of the night, not a single Heartless was reported in town. A sign that the evil vizier and his cohorts are nowhere in sight.

"We're back~!" Neptune chirped as she and IF entered the hideout. "And we're happy to report everything's nice and quiet out there!"

"Thanks to that, we managed to restock our inventory." the guild agent added as she distributed the purchased items around. "Are you all rested up now?"

"Yep!" Sora cheered. "We're all good."

"Thanks to Compa's treatments, no less" Goofy hooted.

The nurse giggled. "It was nothing. Not even being beaten down by scary Heartless will stop Compa!"

"That's our lovely nurse-to-be for ya!" Neptune cheered, ruffling the nurse's hair. "C'mere, you!"

"Hey, Nep-Nep!" Compa giggled at the treatment. "That tickles!"

"C'mon!" Donald yelled. "We should get going already!"

"Calm your feathers, ducky!" the girl in the jersey said cheekily. "No one's gonna nab the treasure from you!"

"I told you, I'm not interested in any treasure!" the duck fought back, but his aside glance told a different story.

"Suuuure you are~" Neptune replied back smoothly.

Despite the situation, Aladdin was smiling at the escalating scene. "Goes to show how tough those guys are, if they can still laugh around like that."

"Yeah..." CC2 said.

"You doing alright?" the street man looked to the cat-girl.

"More or less" she said with a sigh. "It wasn't easy bearin' all that to you guys, you know..."

"Channeling your rage to unleash your inner power..." Aladdin recalled.

"That doesn't seem like good news..." IF chimed in. "From what we observed, negative emotions like that can draw the darkness in. If you keep using that power, then you'll..."

"Yeah. I'll probably end up turned into one of those Heartless creeps" CC2 finished. "Even so, I'm not backing down what I said to Jasmine."

The guild agent smiled. "No one expects you to."

"Besides, you wanna save her just as much as we do, right?" Neptune butted in.

"Heck yeah!" the cat-girl shouted. "Jasmine's one of my first friends here. I'm not gonna let her down like this!"

"That makes two of us" Aladdin declared. "Besides, I still got a lot to say to her..."

"And we'll make sure you get that chance!" Donald said proudly, earning nods from the rest of the party.

Aladdin chuckled. "Alright! Let's head for the Cave of Wonders!"

Agrabah – Cave of Wonders - Entrance

The party, first consisting of Sora, IF, CC2 and Aladdin arrived at the supposed site of the ancient cave via the flying carpet. Once they have landed, the carpet rounded back to ferry the other half of the party over.

"You sure this is the place?" the cat-lady asked,

"Yep" Aladdin nodded, pointing to the rock formation around it. "Can't miss a detail like that around it"

"But I don't see a cave around here" Sora pointed out, looking around the area.

"That's because it's a special kind of cave" the street man said. "One which protects it's own treasures."

"It protects it's own treasures?" IF parroted.

"Yep..."

Just as Aladdin finished talking, the ground began to shake!

"What the...!?"

Out from the sand in front of them, a large, sandy, leopard head emerged from the depths, it's two eyes glowing with darkness.

"Grrrrrr..."

"Does it normally growl like that?" CC2 asked, bringing out her twin daggers.

"No! It usually speaks before even intruders!" Aladdin answered as he brought out his scimitar. "Jafar must've done something to him!"

CC2 grolwed. "Or that purple hag you've been telling me about..."

"Whatever the case is, seeing this means we're really on the right track..." IF said, unsheathing her qatars. "Let's find a way to pacify the Cave first! Then, we'll go in and stop Jafar."

Sora nodded, summoning his Keyblade. "Got it!"

The Cave made it's first move, unleashing slow moving beams from it's darkened eyes.

"Deflect those beams!" IF ordered the group. "Sora, we'll head up there and try to dispel the darkness!"

Sora nodded as he deflected one of the beams. "Gotcha!"

Just as they were about to head out, more Bandits emerged from the sands.

Aladdin groaned at the sight. "More of these guys!"

CC2 sliced down two nearby Bandits as more emerged from the ground. "Get goin'! We'll hold 'em off!"

Wasting no time, Sora and IF hopped up to the eyes of the Cave.

"So how do we do this?" Sora asked the guild agent.

"I wish I knew" IF prepped her qatars. "But when in doubt, just hit things until something happens!"

Sora laughed, taking a few whacks at the right eye. "That sounds like something Neptune would say..."

She sighed, dodging a beam coming out of the left eye. "Maybe she's starting to get to me too. Don't tell her I said that."

The boy raised his hand. "Keyblade wielder's honor!"

"Okay then..." IF took a step back while the moment is right. "...Ready, Sora?"

Sora nodded. It was time for their new Combination Skill!

"Let's dash through them!"

Empowering their weapons with wind magic, the two proceeded to dash through both the eyes a total of three times.

"**DOUBLE RAVE**!"

They performed one more dash...

"Feel the gusty winds!"

...leaving a small cyclone in the middle of the Cave's eyes, purging one of the eyes of the darkness, but the other eye still remains partially corrupted.

Sensing intruders near it, the giant head started to shake them off!

"Oh, it didn't like that!" Sora shouted as they hung on for dear life.

"Roll down!" IF ordered as they neared the ground.

The two of them did, rejoining with Aladdin and CC2, who dealt with most of the Heartless in the area.

"That was rough..." CC2 helped IF up. "You guys still good to go?"

The guild agent nodded. "There's still one more eye to go. We need to get back up there!"

After shaking it's head, the Cave spit out three Fat Bandits for the group to fight.

"He's bringing out the big guns!" Aladdin cried.

"Let's deal with them, Al!" Sora called out as the two boys charged against the Heartless.

"Then we'll go for the eye!" IF turned to the cat-girl. "You with me?"

CC2 gave her a thumbs up. "You got it!"

The two girls rushed past the increasing amount of eye breams and fireballs while jumping up to the Cave's corrupted eye and proceeded to attack it.

"Feel my gust of wind!" IF chanted, unleashing her Aero technique. "**GUSTY STORM**!"

The guild agent unleashed a small tornado right near the eye, dealing some damage to it...

"And now..."

...and also providing an improvised trampoline for CC2 to jump onto, sending her up in the air, primed with her own technique.

"...you're done! **DEATH DROP**!"

Slamming her twin daggers down from the air against the darkened eye, the Cave began to shake furiously again as the corruption dissipated from it.

"Did you guys get it?" Aladdin asked the girls who rejoined the guys.

"I think so" CC2 answered. "You guys?"

Sora blocked an incoming fireball from a Fat Bandit. An empowered and enraged Fat Bandit glowing in red. "Just one last guy to deal with, and he's pretty tough!"

IF clicked her tongue. "This looks bad. We gotta go he-"

"MOVE! MOVE MOVE MOVE!"

They suddenly heard someone yelling at the distance.

"Who the...?" the street man wondered.

"Is that...?" the cat-lady continued.

"Nep/tune!?" IF and Sora answered simultaneously.

"I'M GONNA CRASH! MOVEMOVEMOVE!"

IF immediately grabbed CC2 and dropped the both of them down to the sand, with Sora and Aladdin doing the same...

"HIIIIIYAH!"

...as a purple blur sliced through the last Fat Bandit and landed down in...less-than-spectacular style...

"Oh man..." Neptune complained. "I gotta work on my superhero landings next time..."

"Hey, fellas!"

"Are you all okay?"

The rest of the party turned to see Goofy, Compa and Donald coming down from the flying carpet.

"More or less" Aladdin nodded.

"Can't say the same for Neptune over there, though" CC2 pointed to the female Keyblade wielder submerged in the sand like a spear that was stuck on the ground.

Compa moaned. "This is why I think that wasn't a good idea..."

Donald sighed. "She clearly wanted to look cool with her 'cool' idea..."

"Hey, at least she got rid of the Heartless" Goofy looked on the bright side.

"And a pretty dangerous one at that." IF sighed as she approached the fallen Neptune on her right. "C'mon, let's help her out and start working our way in."

"Way ahead of you!" Sora agreed, going to the girl's left.

Once they recovered Neptune, the part of eight proceeded into the Cave of Wonders, determined to rescue Princess Jasmine and the Genie.

Agrabah – Cave of Wonders - Waterway

"Geez!" Neptune complained, half of her submerged in the water. "Why does this cave have like, backdoor switches underground!?"

"It's pretty common practice to put your switches where no one else can get to them" IF, who is swimming with her, explained. "and preferably, NOT out in the open"

"But at this rate, my jersey's gonna get all wet!" Neptune raged. "Not to mention Compa's sweater and your phones, Iffy!"

"Why do you think I asked Compa to stay back?" IF shook her head. "Not only is she our marker, she can keep herself and my babies safe while we work on these statues."

Near one of them, Sora, Donald and Goofy are busy activating one of the statues while keeping an eye out for others like it.

Neptune sighed. "I feel bad for Arty. She went out of her way to give me this and now it's all drenched..."

"Hey now" IF reacted. "If my guess is right, she likely bought that over by the moogles, and the outfits they sell tend to be waterproof."

"Really!?" Neptune's eye shone. "Wowee! Those floating pom-poms really thought of everything!"

"Yeah..." IF sighed. "From product lineups to haggling countermeasures, those little creatures thought of it all."

"I smell a dark dealing in the works here" Neptune commented.

"Like you would believe it..." IF shook her arms "Munny is hard to come by when the Heartless keeps spawning out in the streets and you don't have a Keyblade to keep them down..."

"Couldn't you just get the munny they drop?" the girl in the jersey wondered.

"Doesn't exactly work that way" the guild agent huffed. "You gotta beat them down with something like the Keyblade before those creeps drop anything..."

"Dang..."

"Hey guys!" Sora called out. "We got one of the nearby platforms down! Mind going over there?"

"Gotcha, buck-o!" Neptune answered. "C'mon. Ol' Nep here needs her circulation flowing!"

"C'mon, you're not that old..." IF snarked, but followed the girl with the key nonetheless.

In another area underground, Aladdin had Abu activate another statue nearby.

"Feelin' nervous?" CC2 asked the street man.

"Exploring this cave? Nah" Aladdin shook his head. "Meeting Jasmine again? Yeah..."

"C'mon now. Chin up!" CC2 told him. "You ever chatted with girls before?"

"Yeah, but I didn't think I could talk to her straight knowing that she's royalty now." Aladdin replied.

"Really?" CC2 crossed her arms. "Cuz from what she told me, you've been chatting her up fine when you first met her"

"That was before I knew she was a princess!" Aladdin protested. "When I first saw her, I was like, 'woah', then as we spent time together, I thought I found someone who had troubles in this world like I did. Not knowing where to fit in and all that. And then, I figured, if I can't stand by her as I am, I figured I'd at least change my standing so I can be with her when it counts..."

"So that's why your second wish is to become a prince..." CC2 figured.

"Yeah, but I can't go through with that now because she and Genie are in danger." the street man slapped his fist. "I can't afford to be selfish until the people I care about are safe and sound."

CC2 laughed.

"What's so funny?" Aladdin asked indignantly.

"Well, it's just..." CC2 started. "You've just proven to me why Jasmine says you're the right person as you are..."

"...What?" the street man asked, now confused. "What do you mean?"

"You'll have to take it up with her on that one" CC2 shrugged. "Just know that your second wish is gonna go to waste if that's the reason why you wanna be a prince."

"Geez, you too?" Aladdin shook his head. "Still, you must be quite close to her if you can speak about her like that."

"I wouldn't really say close, but..." the cat-lady shrugged. "I was willing to listen to her vent, and I didn't really care about her social standing. The important thing is, someone out there needed help and I couldn't just leave her like that. Besides, I don't know anyone else in this world..."

"Because you're a Drifter?" Aladdin said.

"That's what IF told me, yeah" CC2 answered. "Folks like us who came from another world and ended up in others cuz their home fell to darkness. Then there's special cases like us who can't really remember what their home world really is."

Meanwhile, Sora and the rest of the party (sans Compa) are approaching another trying to approach another statue to little avail thanks to the large distance between them and the destination, resulting in the party just falling straight to the waters below.

"LIKE A KANGA-NOOOOOOO!"

Just like Neptune attempted to do right there...

"Geez, why does platforming have to be so hard!?" Neptune complained as she fell into the water for the third time.

IF sighed as she took a few steps back. "You're rushing too soon. Here. I'll show you!"

She then dashed forward and hopped off without losing her speed, allowing her to land on the other side perfectly, leaving the rest of the party in awe.

"There. Easy" the guild agent boasted as she turned around. "Now just do like me and don't lost your momentum!"

"Just run like that and don't stop, right?" Sora said, doing some squats to prepare himself.

Neptune, in the meanwhile, took a deep breath and then slapped her own cheeks. "Okay, then, let's freaking do this!"

IF chuckled at her gusto. "You've got this, guys!"

Going back to the conversation...

"You don't?" Aladdin asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not quite. I remember leavin' my hometown to go explore the world, tryin' out new delicacies, checkin' out the latest stories and maybe even more. But that's just all about I remember aside from my name and my skills." CC2 explained. "That's why I wanna make sure I savor every moment I get here, whether by myself or with others. It's all I got left livin' for here."

Aladdin looked up to see Sora managing to light up a statue, signifying the way forward has opened.

"Then let's make the most of what we have here."

CC2 looked up to the street man with a toothy smile.

"No one knows the streets of Agrabah better than me" Aladdin boasted. "I'll show you and Jasmine around once when we're done here. How about that?"

CC2 laughed again. "I've explored most of those streets already, but it can't hurt to have a local's expertise on the subject, so sure, I'll hold you to that, Al."

Aladdin grinned. "It's a promise, CC2!"

The two shook their hands, their resolve strengthened by the prospect of a promise.

Agrabah – Cave of Wonders – Treasure Room

"Treasure!" Neptune yelled as she ran to a pile of gold coins and sunk into it. "Gold! Jewels! Dabloons! This place's got it all!"

"Oh boy!" Donald said excitedly, jumping into another pile. "I'm rich!"

IF groaned at the sight. "Geez! Will you two get a grip already? That slimeball Jafar may be just ahead."

Neptune and Donald raised up from the piles they were just in. "Awwwwww..."

Aladdin chuckled. "I don't think it's a good idea to take stuff from here, anyway"

"Speaking from experience?" CC2 guessed.

"You could say that..." Aladdin turned to his simian companion, who was hiding his hat filled with gold coins as he smiled nervously.

IF facepalmed. "Greedy louts, I swear..."

"Better just leave the treasure alone" CC2 suggested. "Who knows? You might get yourself cut by a golden arrowhead and start manifesting an evil spirit or something?"

Neptune snickered. "Jokes on you, CC! I would actually prefer such an outcome!"

The guild agent groaned. "Can we please focus here? We still have people to rescue and bad guys to defeat, remember?"

The girl with the key sighed in defeat. "Okay, fine..."

"C'mon, fellas!" Goofy urged the group. "Let's go save Jasmine and the Genie!"

"You heard him" Sora agreed. "Let's get going!"

As the group charged forth, a barrier suddenly appeared, separating the boys from the girls still in the Treasure Room!

"What the nep!?" Neptune banged her hands against the barrier. "Why the heck would you appear now, IMB (Inconvenient Magic Barrier)!?"

"Haa-hahahahaha!"

The girls turned around to see a familiar face, one Neptune just saw a while ago, in fact.

"That evil laughter..." Neptune started. "It's you, Arfjord!"

"It's AR-FOIRE, you nitwit!" Arfoire complained. "At least get my name right!"

"What do you want, this time?" IF interrogated.

"Gonna send more of those scary minions at us?" Compa followed.

Arfoire smirked as she began to channel magic. "Nothing like that this time, I'm afraid. However..."

Her eyes turned to CC2, who began to bring out her twin daggers. "The heck you lookin' at me for!?"

"I wished to perform an experiment today..." She sneered as she waved her hand against the cat-like Drifter. "...And I know just the guinea pig for this one..."

IF, sensing danger, brought out her qatars. "Brace yourselves!"

"**SYLHET SPEAR!**"

As the witch unleashed numerous spears at the girls, who all proceeded to block them, Arfoire took the chance and got right behind CyberConnect2.

"Shoot!"

Leaving no chance to react, the witch grabbed the cat-lady by her neck as she began to exert dark energy against her.

"What in the-"

CC2 eventually started to scream in pain as her eyes began to shift from green to red.

"CC!" Compa called out.

"Hey hey hey!" Neptune shouted. "What are you doing to her!?"

"Oh no..." IF realized in dread.

"Haa-hahahaha!" the witch laughed. "Figured it out, simpletons? I happened to discover that this one here has an amazing power, and it would be such a waste to squander such marvels, now would it?"

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" CC2 continued to scream as she is losing control of herself, signified by her erratically shifting eye color. "This feeling...this...anger...!"

"This is bad..." IF shook her head. "She's forcing her to use her rage-induced powers against us!"

"That's no good!" Compa complained.

"Hey, Arforite!" Neptune called out as she pointed her Keyblade at her. "This is no way to make new friends! Force and subversion are NOT OK!"

Arfoire scoffed. "See if I care about that. All I care about is my goals, and I will use any means to get it!"

"G...Guys..." CC2 spoke weakly as her eyes are settling into their red color. "You gotta...forget about...me. Help Al...rescue Jasmine..."

Neptune shook her head. "Nuh-uh! No way! Temporary though this is, you're a member of our party, CC2!"

"And we never leave one of our own behind!" Compa said as she held her syringe tight, her face filled with determination.

"But..."

"You may as well give up on that" IF sighed but smiled. "We can get pretty stubborn when we want to"

"Besides" Neptune interrupted. "I'm sure Sora and his pals can handle a sleazeball like Mr. Snake Staff, no biggie! Let us worry about you for a change, CC2!"

"You guys..."

Arfoire chuckled. "How touching. It must be nice to have such wonderful traveling companions, DON'T YOU THINK!?"

She began to exert more energy against CC2, causing her to scream in anguish.

"Now, the only thing left in your heart is pure, unbridled anger! Rage indiscriminate!"

She then released her captive Drifter, who was hunched, but still standing while breathing heavily. A dark aura surrounds her very being, signifying that she has lost control.

"Enjoy your torment, fools!" Arfoire taunted as she vanished. "None of you will leave this Cave alive. Haa-hahahaha!"

CC2 slowly raised her head, her eyes fully reddened as her mouth growled in anger.

"**Rage...Hatred...Destruction!**"

"So, Iffy..." Neptune turned to her guild friend. "Any ideas?"

"Maybe..." IF answered. "For now, let's restrain her. Compa, get the treatment ready! We're counting on you!"

The nurse nodded as she placed some strange blue liquid into her syringe. "Right! Time for your treatment, CC!"

The enraged CC2 roared, charging against Neptune and IF, who proceeded to block her incoming attack.

"**Destroy...DESTROY**!"

"You, lady, need a time out!" Neptune charged her Keyblade with ice magic. "**FROST CRUSHER**!"

"Smite her anger, o thunderous gods..." IF chanted, her qatars brimming with lightning magic. "**FURIOUS LIGHTNING**!"

The two launched their magic attacks against the corrupted Drifter, which only served to anger her more.

"**Fools...**"

The angered cat-girl retaliated with a super high-speed double-bladed dance, sending Neptune and IF reeling back. This is her **Peerless Wild Blade**.

"Owie..." Neptune clutched her right arm. "Didn't feel this much pain before..."

"I got you all!"

Compa unfurled her **Emergency Aid Kit** and immediately treated her companion's wounds, keeping them in the fight.

"Whew! Now we're talking!" IF cheered as she got up, her wounds healed. "Thanks, Compa!"

The nurse giggled. "Don't mention it!"

The girl with the key groaned. "Still, how are you gonna get her to calm down, Compa?"

"I've got something prepped for that!" Compa answered, patting her syringe filled with the blue liquid that's now filling half of it. "But I need more time before this finishes and I can't help out in combat until then. Can you keep her busy?"

Neptune grinned as her Keyblade wreathed in wind magic. "Roger that! Now, taste my **WIND SLICER**!"

The girl with the key unleashed her magic attack, pushing the enraged Drifter back!

"GRRRRRRRR!"

CC2 growled again as she regained her offensive edge.

"**Die! DIe! DIE!**"

"Sheesh, tone down the violence, girl!" Neptune complained as she parried each of the frenzied girl's attacks, five of them to be exact. "Uncontrollable rage isn't the hot fashion these days, you know?"

"**GRAH!**"

But she landed a clean sixth hit, sending the Keyblade wielder crashing into a pile of jewels.

"Nep-Nep!"

Compa rushed to Neptune's side, her kit still in her hands.

Meanwhile, IF was preparing a spell to halt CC2's rampage.

"Okay, now you've done it!" she released her spell, unleashing a pillar of flame below the frenzied fighter. "**DEMON FLAMES!**"

"Raaaaahhhh!"

Not letting up, IF closes the distance and unleashes her close-quarter technique as well!

"**CHAOS EDGE!**"

Reeling back from the guild agent's strong overhead kick, the enraged CC2 roared, causing her aura to flare up with power.

"**You...will...DIE!**"

She continued her assault, causing IF to dodge the enraged fighter's moves with grace.

"She's tough, but without her mind to guide her moves, her attacks are easily telegraphed..." the guild agent thought aloud, never losing momentum. "But if we don't neutralize her, she'll burn herself out or be consumed by the darkness by the time her rampage is over, if it ever ends..."

At the corner of her eye, she sees Neptune getting up, her wounds patched up twice over by Compa, the nurse's syringe now nearly filled with the blue liquid.

"Just gotta wear her down a little more until it's ready, and then...Nep!"

"Already on it!"

Neptune immediately dashed straight at the rampaging CC2, taking the frenzied warrior by surprise as she's being flung up the air.

"**GUSTY STORM!**"

"**CRITICAL EDGE!**"

Being hit hard has caused her to land onto the ground in a loud thump!

"Did we get her?" Compa wondered as dust surrounded CC2's body.

"I don't know..." IF mused. "Keep that syringe up, Compa. We may not be done yet..."

Neptune, strangely, was clutching onto her chest tightly. No, it looked like she was holding something in her hand.

The dust around CC2, however, dispersed, as her aura flared up even more!

"No mercy! No forgiveness!"

"Oh no!" Compa cried. "She's going to use her ultimate technique!"

IF clicked her tongue. "The same one that took out that centipede Heartless in one move. This is bad..."

"PleaseworkPleaseworkPleasework!" Neptune pleaded as she held her chest tighter.

"**No more games! BLACK FANG SOUL!**"

"No, you don't!" IF stood in front of Compa, her arms braced as she readied to take the hit head on.

"IFFY!"

"HELP US, PLEASE!"

A bright light began to shine around Neptune, as the tip of her Keyblade shone.

"Yes! Time to summon!"

Spinning her Keyblade around and sending energy up to the air, a proud lion manifested near her.

"Is that..." IF's eyes widened.

"The lion summon we got!?" Compa reacted.

"Alright, Simba!" Neptune pointed to the enraged girl. "Sick 'er!"

Thinking fast, Simba immediately lunged at the angered cat-lady, causing the two to engage in a primal duel, with scratches, slices, roars and bites abound.

"You were holding on to that Summon Gem all this time, Nep?" IF wondered. "When did you have time to get that?"

"When we were getting out of the underground, of course!" Neptune boasted. "I wanted to give this summon thing a go, so I asked Sora for the gem."

"That's amazing, Nep-Nep!" Compa praised the Keyblade wielder.

"Whatever the reason, we managed to dodge a massive bullet here" IF looked on the duel, and it looked like Simba is losing ground. "But we can't rest yet. Compa, is it ready yet?"

The nurse nodded, her syringe now fully filled with the blue liquid. "Primed and ready, Iffy!"

"Alright. Once we get an opening, Nep and I will restrain her" IF told her companions. "Once we do, Compa, get in close and do your thing!"

Neptune and Compa nodded. "Right!"

Meanwhile, the wild scuffle between CC2 and Simba had just ended with the former biting on the latter's neck and then throwing him off her, allowing her to get up.

"**Bothersome...gnat**" CC2 primed her daggers right at Simba's neck, ready for the kill. "**Time to die...**"

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

Before she could register what happened, CC2 found herself pinned to the floor, her daggers out of reach as she growled and howled haplessly.

"We got her!" IF shouted. "Now, Compa!"

"Time for your shots, CC!"

Plunging her giant syringe onto her back, CC2's screams began to lessen, her dark aura fading away as she loses consciousness.

"Is she down...?" IF breathed heavily, checking on the cat-lady's state. Judging by her slumped arms and unopened eyes, she has now lost consciousness. "Okay. Our plan worked."

"I'm glad we got her to stop..." Compa sat down in exhaustion. "Good thing I packed some **Sleeping Agents**, just in case..."

Neptune, meanwhile, approached the downed Simba and patted his head. "You did good, Lion King. You did good."

Simba faded away with a smile on his face, glad to fulfill his duty.

In the corner of her eye, Neptune noticed a magic force dissipating in the pathway ahead. "Hey, the IMB went down!"

"That's convenient" IF stood up, carrying CC2 on her back. "Anyway, let's go check up on Sora and the others. They may need our help!"

"Say no more, Iffy!" Compa got up, her drive returning to her step. "Let's go!"

Agrabah- Cave of Wonders – Ritual Site

"That's the Keyhole?" Sora asked as he looked upon the giant keyhole-shaped structure ahead of him.

Genie nodded. "Heart of this World and all that jazz. Gonna lock it up, buck-o?"

"We gotta!" Donald answered instead.

"Yup!" Goofy nodded. "Or else, Heartless'll come in and swallow this world up!"

"Can't believe Jafar's this close to destroying our world like that!" Aladdin remarked, watching over the unconscious Jasmine. "And why would he need Jasmine for, anyway?"

"That's under a World Order clause, Al" the blue man answered. "Can't exactly answer, lest the wizards and fairies get on my case."

"We are not done yet, you fools!"

The party looked at the middle of the room to see Jafar, on his last legs after his bout with Sora and his group.

"Get out!" Donald yelled at him.

"No more evil viziers!" Goofy yelled as well.

Aladdin chuckled. "I suppose with all that bluster, you still fell short, huh?"

"What was that!?" Jafar snapped back.

"I mean, c'mon" the street man shrugged. "You were quite tough with your magic and all that, but you couldn't find the Keyhole without Jasmine or Genie!"

"Uh, Al" Genie said, worried about what his preferred master is saying. "What are you saying?"

"Fact is," Aladdin continued, putting his hands on his hips. "you're not the most powerful being in the world. Genie here is, and you're not even half as good as he'll ever be! Why do you think we've been consciously avoiding his attacks and not engaging him in our fight?"

"Al, I dunno if I like where this is going..."

"You insolent, little...!"

Producing the golden lamp, the vile vizier, now surrounded in a dark aura, makes his final gambit. "Genie, my final wish! Make me into an all-powerful Genie!"

"This is not good for my resume..."

Covering his eyes with one of his hands, he shot magic at the vizier from his remaining free hand, causing smoke to rise from below him and his laughing figure.

"What the nep is going on here!?"

Neptune and her group arrived back in time to see the ground beneath Jafar disintegrating, the evil vizier nowhere in sight.

"Guess things just gone from bad to worse, huh?" IF snarked, then sighed.

"Is everyone alright?" Compa asked around, producing her aid kit.

"We could use some bandagin'" Goofy admitted, the bruises around his body visible for all to see.

"You tell us..." Donald followed as he sat down. "We nearly ran out of items trying to beat Jafar..."

"Only because you kept getting hit by his beams and icicles, Donald..." Aladdin pointed out.

"SO DID YOU!" the royal wizard shouted back before reeling back in pain.

"So, what happened with you guys?" Sora asked the girls. "Why is CC2 knocked out?"

"Get this! The evil witch came back and turned our pal against us!" Neptune summed up. "Can you believe the nerve of her!? Ugh!"

"Will she be okay?" Goofy asked, clearly worried.

"GAH! RAH! RAAAAHHH!"

CC2 suddenly started thrashing around, causing distress to her carrier IF.

"Hang on!"

Producing a smaller syringe, she injects CC2 with another Sleeping Agent, sending her back to the land of dreams.

"Good call to make backups like that, Compa" IF praised the nurse as she sets the downed Drifter next to Jasmine.

"Always keep spares in hand!" Compa quoted as she gave a thumbs up.

"Hmmmm."

Genie, now freed from his servitude to Jafar, inspects the downed CyberConnect2.

"Seems like your Drifter pal here's infected with a copious amount of injected darkness!"

"Injected?" Donald started.

"Darkness?" Goofy gulped.

"See this?" Genie produced a syringe filled with black substance in it's vial. "Now watch this!"

He produced another copy and injected said copy with the vial's contents, causing his muscles to expand as he howls loudly, his eyes turning red and a menacing red aura spreads across his entire being!

"Basically, anyone infected with this matter will turn anyone who has darkness in their core will gain immense strength and power, but they will lose their senses and become mindless creatures, set on destruction and chaos!"

The clone Genie immediately started wrecking the stands across the room, as he broke and threw bricks apart and across the room in it's rampage.

"Okay, okay!" Aladdin shook his hands. "I think we've seen enough!"

Genie immediately snapped his fingers and the clone is gone!

"So that witch infected her and turned her against you guys?" Sora asked with his arms crossed.

"Basically, yeah" IF crossed her arms as she spoke. "But also, that aura that she had when we fought her was similar to the Heartless Jafar sicced on us and even that giant armor from a few days ago."

"Does that mean that Ms. Witch had her sights set on us from back then, too?" Compa wondered as she was treating Donald's wounds.

"I think so" the boy answered. "Our other friends said they saw her when we were fighting that armored Heartless a few days ago..."

"Meaning that old hag has been watching us even before then..." the guild agent surmised.

"Hmmmmm, that witch lady sure knows her stuff about darkness" Genie guessed. "I'd keep a close eye on her. Never know what she may do next."

"Considering that we don't know what her goal is and the fact that she's working with the bad guys we encountered, that's a safe bet as any" IF nodded as she distributed some Potions and Ethers around.

"Yeah" Aladdin stood up, looking at the crater in front of them. "But right now, we gotta deal with Jafar"

"Right!" Sora stood up, his Keyblade at the ready.

"We up for one more round, ladies and gents?" Neptune called out to the rest of the party, her Keyblade slung by her shoulder.

"Yeah!" Donald stood up, his staff on his hand.

"We goin' all the way in!" Goofy declared, his shield at the ready.

"This nurse's gonna work overtime for this!" Compa primed herself. "But I'm with you!"

"A genie as a final opponent?" IF smirked. "This'll be quite a tale to tell later, huh?"

"You can leave your princess and furry friend to me, Al!" Genie pounded his fist to his chest. "You still got two wishes left, after all!"

Aladdin chuckled. "Yeah, thanks Genie."

"You got a plan, Al?" IF asked the street man.

Aladdin winked. "Only the best one."

Hearing that made Neptune think of their short-for-a-time loner friend. "*Hope you're doing okay out there, Noire...*"

Agrabah – Cave of Wonders – Tiles of Judgement

Jumping down to the site below the crater filled with raising platforms, the party looked around for any sign of their mystical foe.

"If I were an ultra-powered evil genie, where would I be?" Neptune loudly wondered.

"Why ask?" a loud booming voice spoke

Rising from the nearby lava pool, a red genie with a sinister face rose to greet the party.

"When he's just around the corner!"

"Jafar!"

The party readied their weapons for a fight, only...

"Guys, how do we hit that guy from here?" Neptune pointed out the obvious.

"Melee is out of the question" IF analyzed. "Magic is the way to go!"

Meanwhile, the local street-man noticed a red bird flying frantically around the arena.

"Okay, keep them busy, guys!" Aladdin then called out to one of the party members. "Goofy, with me!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

The royal captain saluted as he accompanied Aladdin and prepare for their plan.

"So, I will deal with five street rats today, hm?" Jafar declared. "How bothersome. You fools are nothing compared to my power!"

"We'll see about that! **THUNDER**!"

Sora called forth his Thunder magic against the evil genie, which barely damaged him.

"Don't forget about me! **WIND SLICER**!"

Neptune follows up the assault with a wind-enhanced slash, but Jafar casually flicks it away from him.

"You guys..." Donald channeled energy into his staff. "Here's how you do it! **FIRE**!"

Donald aims his Fira magic against the genie's belly, but it only nicked him!

"That barely tickled me!"

"Then have a taste of this! **BLISTERING COLD**!"

IF unleashed her Blizzard magic against Jafar, but it only felt like a breeze that blew against him...

"Is that all you mortals have?" Jafar boasted.

"Not yet!"

Compa aimed her syringe straight at Jafar's mouth, blasting a shot of purple against him.

"Have a **Poisonous Agent**, Mr. Evil Genie!"

But he swatted the shot away like it was nothing!

"Hmph, if that is all..."

The evil genie sank into the lava pool, and after a good four seconds, rose again, carrying a large boulder with him.

"Then meet your demise! Hahahahaha!"

He then threw the massive boulder against the party...

"RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!"

...which caused everyone to run around, hoping the boulder or it's broken debris won't hit them, but in an arena with raising platforms like this, it proved difficult.

"This is bad..." IF mused. "These platforms will make it difficult to coordinate our moves."

"What do we do!?" Donald cried.

"Easy" Sora answered, getting up. "We keep going!"

"He's right!" Neptune rallied, using up an Ether. "Al and the Goofster need more time!"

"Then I'll keep going!" Compa said, arming her syringe again.

"Right!" the guild agent agreed. "Keep an eye out for his attacks and use up those Ethers like your lives depend on it! We need at least a few good licks in!"

"What good will your attacks do?" the evil genie gloated as he brought up more lava-coated rocks with his magic. "I can destroy you all with merely a thought!"

"Then go ahead and prove it, why don't ya!?" the girl in the jersey taunted.

"Why do that?" the evil genie extended his arms forth, sending the rocks against the party. "When I can take my time and watch you all squirm with my new power?"

"You see that?" Neptune quipped. "The whole 'take my time to crush my enemy' bit? That's what we in the hero industry call 'underestimating your foes'! Better watch out or we'll pull the rug under you!"

The evil genie scoffed. "As if you could!"

He then channeled thunder magic into his hands and zaps the whole area with lightning, causing the whole party to either roll away from the lightning or brace themselves as they were zapped.

"Ahahahahaha!" Jafar laughed. "Look at you! Scurrying away like the rats that you are! Nothing will stand in my way now!"

"This is bad!" IF distressed as lightning zapped across the arena. "At this rate, we're gonna be fried worse than Thanksgiving turkey!"

Donald looked around the area to assess the situation. Currently, Neptune and Compa are in one area, trying to take cover as they argued over a new plan of attack. Sora, meanwhile, is jumping from platform to platform, taking care to dodge incoming lightning as he continued to cast magic after magic against the evil genie, but he is noticeably running out of breath. IF, in the meanwhile, is continuing to channel her magic against her foe as well, but her dwindling Ether count means she can't last long either...

"Hmmmm..."

He looked to his own staff. In his days of training in the art of wizardry, he came across all kinds of spells, ranging from simple to complex to even the silliest ones.

And then, there's the forbidden spells. Ones that can, at worst, cost your life to use, or for a slightly better outcome, knock you out cold for days.

Only those with good magic capabilities can cast such spells. The less gifted, however, will end up burning themselves out before they could ever hope to cast such spells.

Donald is one of the wizards in the former category, and he has a certain spell in mind, one that could leave him bedridden for days if he does it right. At worst, he could be on death's door.

But against a being of phenomenal cosmic power like Jafar, he has little choice on the matter.

All he needs is...

"HEY!"

His thoughts snapped out when he noticed Neptune and Compa in the central platform approaching the genie.

"What do you want now?" the evil genie asked. "Do you wish for a quick end?"

"No, we just thought of giving you a peace offering!" Compa replied.

"After all, we can't do anything to a powerful, almighty being like you!" Neptune said with praise. This is clearly a diversion.

"Hmmmmm" Jafar contemplated. "I'm listening..."

"They're clearly distracting him" IF muttered. "I know Compa. She would never accept a slimeball like Jafar. And as crazy as Nep is..."

"She wouldn't just surrender to him like that, would she?"

They heard Sora approaching the two, tired and out of breath.

"You ok, Sora? "Donald inquired.

"Yeah...Just...Phew!" Sora wiped out the sweat from his forehead. "Didn't think doing a jumping marathon was on my to-do list when traveling words, but here we are!"

"At least your endurance will improve" IF commented. "What do you think those two are doing?"

"Maybe they're trying out a new Combination Skill?" Donald wondered.

"What would theirs look like, then?" the boy with the key asked.

"And that is why, we offer you our finest dessert!"

The two girls channeled energy into their hands and after a cute spin, the two posed.

"**A HUGE PLATE OF PUDDING**!"

"Say what?"

The evil genie looked stupefied by the declaration. But before he could call out their bluff, he noticed a growing shadow above him.

"What is-"

Sure enough, a huge plate fell on his head, and as the plate vanished, a large pudding fell on top of his head, smearing his face with pudding goodness!

"That's their Combination Skill?" Sora sweatdropped as his eyes widened into comical circles.

"Since when can they do that!?" Donald complained. "I couldn't even bring out a frog from a hat!"

"That move is so absurd..." IF sighed as she smiled. "But it's so like them that it couldn't be anything else..."

"So..." Compa started.

"How do you like it?" Neptune continued.

Jafar forcefully wiped the pudding from his face. "You dare make a fool out of me!? You shall pay for your insolence!"

"Eeeeep!"

The two girls embraced themselves for the worst.

"Welp..." Neptune started.

"At least we tried, guys..." Compa finished, bracing for the worst.

"Now, what do we do!?" Donald panicked.

"Is it a bad time to say we're out of items and MP again?" Sora chimed in.

IF sighed in resignation, eyeing her empty pockets. "Of course..."

Jafar began to channel more magical energy into his hands. "For your insolence, I shall smite you all to the Abyss for all eternity!"

"Not so fast!"

The evil genie looked to the source of the voice. From the far corner of the area, he sees Aladdin and Goofy, the latter holding onto Iago, who is attempting to spring himself free.

"Al!" Neptune called out.

"You're back!" Sora ran along with Neptune to rejoin their new friend.

"Ah, the original street rat returns!" Jafar shouted. "I never knew rats like you could develop solidarity!"

"It's what we learn from the streets, vizier!" Aladdin fought back. "We scrape by with whatever's around to survive! Even working together with fellows!"

"But what can you do?" the evil genie gloated as he spun his arms around, wielding the powers of the cosmos. "I have obtained the ultimate power! Soon, all the worlds will bow to me!"

"Yeah. You wished for the ultimate power..." Aladdin started, his eyes obscured by his hair. "...and you got it..."

The evil genie noticed the strange attitude Aladdin exuded.

"And everything that goes with it!"

He then produced a magic lamp from his back. A black lamp, not unlike the golden lamp that housed the blue and friendly Genie.

"N-No!" Jafar screamed. "How did you get it!? I made sure that bird-brain hid it somewhere where no one can find it!"

"Bird-brain, you say!?" Iago complained. "And after ALL I did for YOU!"

"Don't underestimate street rats!" Aladdin boasted. "We know where we hide our earnings. Honestly, you could do a lot better for a royal vizier."

"And now, it's time to go back to your lamp!" Goofy declared.

"No! Please!" Jafar begged. "I beg of you! You have my lamp now, right? That means you get three wishes! Your wish is my command!"

"Ugh!" Iago facepalmed. "Learn to beg right, you jerk-wad!"

"Yeaaaaahhhhh..."

Aladdin then raised the black lamp, which then proceeded to suck the evil genie in.

"No!"

"No! NO! Nonononononono!"

"And you know what they say!" Goofy started as the red bird is getting sucked in too!

"Wait, why am I getting sucked in, too!?"

"Nonononononononononono!"

"Phenominal cosmic power!" Sora shouted.

"I didn't sign up for this!"

"NONONONONONONONO!"

"Itty bitty living space." Neptune finished.

And with that, Jafar and Iago are now sealed within the black lamp, cursed to be sealed away until an unlucky soul frees them and Agrabah would once again know terror from the evil genie.

But for now, the battle is won, not due to brute strength, but through the wittiness and cunning of one street man and his new comrades.

Agrabah – Hideout

"I'm sorry, Al..." Genie apologized. "I let her out of my sight for one split second due to someone throwing a PEBBLE at me, and then she was gone...like magic!"

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Genie" Compa comforted the big man. "We all slip up at times."

"Besides, if we're going with Nep's logic" IF butted in. "Jasmine's likely taken to the enemy's stronghold."

"Whose?" Aladdin asked.

"The ones that sleazy guy is working with." Neptune answered. "You know, like that Malnutrition and Yvoire!"

"Ya mean Maleficent and Arfoire!" Goofy corrected the girl.

"Yeah, them" the girl quickly nodded.

"Hey, Sora, Donald" Aladdin looked up to the boy with the key. "Do you think I could...?"

Sora, however figured what he was going to ask. "Well, um..."

"We'd love to do that, but that would be..." Goofy whispered.

"Meddling with the World Order" Donald continued a bit more loudly.

"So, I can't go because of some stupid order" Aladdin complained.

"Wha-" Donald tried to protest, but Goofy held him back and slammed his beak shut.

"Listen, Al, that World Order's been around for eons now, ever since that one war in that one world occurred." Genie explained as he turned into a history professor. "Now, because of that war, people in the background had to ensure the worlds remain unaware of each other's existence so they don't go causing trouble again and start another war that could recreate the universe!"

"That's...a lot of vague details there..." IF noticed. "But it's none of our concern right now, so we won't pry."

Genie wiped off the sweat from his forehead. "Thanks for the understanding, Iffy."

Aladdin, however slumped down as he sighed. Could he truly do anything to save Jasmine?

"Listen, Al" Sora started. "You can leave Jasmine to us!"

Donald nodded, breaking free from Goofy. "Yeah, we'll make sure she's back, safe and sound!"

"How about this, Al?" Genie proposed. "You still have two wishes, right? Use one to get Jasmine back and the last one to cure lil' CC here! Whaddaya say!?"

Aladdin opened his eyes. "I've made up my mind. Genie...my second wish is for CC2 to be cured..."

"Wish Numero Dos, GRANTED!"

He transformed into a doctor's outfit, with a clone wearing a nurse's outfit holding onto two shock devices as they approach CC2 lying on a hospital bed.

"Okay, time for the darkness purge operation!" the doctor Genie instructed.

"Yes, sir!" the nurse Genie agreed as he readied the devices on his hands.

"And...CLEAR!"

The nurse Genie slammed the devices onto CC2's chest, causing black smoke to rise from her mouth.

"And...CLEAR!"

Another slam, causing more of the dark aura to emerge from her.

"Oh, CC..." Compa cried with worry.

"One more, Doc?" the nurse Genie asked.

The doctor Genie nodded. "One more"

Charging up the devices once more, the nurse Genie slams them onto their patient, causing the dark aura to flare up even more...

"AND CLEAR!"

...and with one last jolt, the dark aura dispersed, leaving the cat-lady coughing.

"W...what was that?" CC2 said as she shook her head and raised herself up. "Felt like I was hit with a ton of bricks then slammed into an electric wall..."

"CC2!" Neptune cried happily.

"You're back!" Compa cried as well.

"Welcome back" IF greeted.

"Hey, guys." CC2 rubbed her head. "What...just happe-Oh."

She hung her head in shame. "I remember now. I attacked you guys. And after all I said about keepin' my anger in check, too..."

"Hey, don't feel too bad!" Neptune reassured. "We're all tough cookies here. Besides, it's R4-D2's fault that you went stir crazy to begin with!"

"Arfoire" IF quickly corrected.

"Yeah" Sora nodded. "There's nothing for you to apologize for. We're all friends here"

CC2 chuckled. "Thanks, guys..."

"And now," Aladdin continued. "for my final wish..."

"Alright, lemme get my tracking equipment and we'll get ourselves..."

"...I wish...for your freedom, Genie!"

"...a rescued princess, fresh from...say wha?"

Genie suddenly felt magic surging around him as his floating tail turned into humanoid legs and the braces on his wrists magically faded away, signifying his newfound freedom from genie servitude.

"Al...why?" Genie asked, clearly confused.

"I gave my word, Genie" Aladdin reassured. "I promised I'd free you and I did. Now you can go wherever you want. The worlds are your oysters."

"I know, but..." Genie sweated profusely. "This is so much to take in! So many to places to go! So many things to do!"

"But..." Aladdin interrupted his friend. "before that, could you help out Sora and Neptune and the others in finding Jasmine? I know this 'World Order' stuff means I can't go, but you can! Even help them out in the other worlds they go to, huh?"

"Hmmmm" Genie crossed his arms as he turned around. "As far as I'm concerned, I'm done taking orders from others."

"Genie..."

But the blue man turned around. "But a favor, though. I guess I could give it a try!"

Aladdin smiled. "Genie."

"Just leave it to me, Al!" Genie saluted. "I'll have your Princess delivered back to you and to Agrabah safe and sound!"

"And we'll make sure that will happen!" Neptune raised a fist to the Genie. "Right?"

"You bet'cha!" Genie returned the gesture in a fistbump.

Aladdin chuckled. "Thanks, guys"

Agrabah - Alleyway

After another moment of exchanges, Aladdin and CyberConnect2 waved the group goodbye.

"Man, I'm gonna miss 'em, y'know?" CC2 mused.

"Didn't IF gave you a way to contact them?" Aladdin raised an eyebrow.

"Yup" She then showed the street man a green cellphone. "Don't know how long these things'll last, so I better use them sparingly."

Aladdin chuckled. "How thrifty of you"

"Gotta have to be to survive on these streets" CC2 boasted.

Silence filled the atmosphere for a good seven seconds before the cat-lady spoke again.

"So, I heard what you guys been talking about while I was out cold" she confessed. "Gotta say, that was pretty gutsy of you, Al"

Aladdin raised an eyebrow again. "What is?"

"Y'know, staying behind" CC2 clarified.

"Oh, that" Aladdin rubbed the back of his head. "Well, I really wanted to go after Jasmine with them, I really do, but between all this talk of 'World Order' and the like, I realized that I can still do something here."

"Oh yeah?" CC2 wondered as she puts her hands behind her head. "And what's that?"

"I can keep this place safe, so Jasmine has a place to return home to"

Aladdin looked ahead, with a face of steeled resolve. "Keeping this world safe, means there will be places for us to explore, more secrets to uncover, more wonders to discover. I can't very well do that if the world is gone. Just because Sora and Neptune sealed this world's Keyhole, that doesn't mean all the Heartless are going away."

"I get ya" CC2 sighed. "So long as darkness exists in people's hearts, the Heartless will keep comin', huh?"

"That's what they told us, yeah" Aladdin nodded. "That's why I gotta make sure this place stays safe and sound, so Jasmine can travel with us without a worry in the world."

CC2 chuckled. "You're a real swell guy, you know that?"

Aladdin rubbed the back of his head. "C'mon, I'm a street rat. I'm not good."

The cat-lady laughed. "If kowtowing to a clearly oppressive power is good, then I prefer being a street rat any day of the week!"

"It's not an easy life, you know?" Aladdin shook his head.

CC2 shrugged. "Can't be that bad if we made it out of that Cave just fine. Twice even for you and Abu!"

Aladdin's pet monkey screeched in agreement, causing his owner to chuckle in turn. "You got us there."

CyberConnect2 stepped forward. "Say, I'm feeling parched from all that napping. Mind showing me a nice place to eat?"

Aladdin smirked. "Well, there is this one merchant..."

NEPSTATION

Neptune: We're coming in hot from Nepstation, and phoo-ey! Is it gettin' hot in here!?

CC2: Haha! You tell me! Good thing I packed light, huh?

Neptune: Oh yeah! A PSA for y'all! Be sure to pack what is necessary and study ahead what the place you're travelling to is. Don't wanna bring all those fur coats on the beach now, y'all!

CC2: That would be embarrassing...

Neptune: Yup-yup! Now, before we get to the news, I just want to say a little apology for not showing up earlier.

CC2: Whaddaya mean?

Neptune: You see, when Mr. Author splits these chapters up like that, it means we won't be going live until the end of the actual chapter. So if a chapter splits up into, say, 3 parts like 10.1, 10.5, and 10.9, we'll only get this broadcast after 10.9, so there.

CC2: Huh, I see.

Neptune: On behalf of Nepstation, I give our humblest apologies, but at least you goty some time with Mr. Author, right? Now then, my furry(?) co-host, shall we get actually to the news?

CC2: Sure thing!

---

an image of a sleeping tiger comforted by a short old man, whose eyes are crossed out, is shown onscreen

Neptune: Recently, we've heard reports of a crying tiger over at the palace grounds. The local guards say that the poor thing has been howling day and night since the disappearance of her owner...

CC2: It is said that the tiger’s owner is actually the missing Princess herself. Ever since the disappearance of the princess and the royal vizier, the palace has been in an uproar.

Neptune: However, with the reveal of the vizier’s treache—treache----BETRAYAL, the populace has been raising their complaints. The poor Sultan has been beside himself with not only that, but the loss of his only daughter. We here at Nepstation hope and pray that the princess is safe and be returned home safely.

CC2: I sure hope so too. No parent should ever experience outliving their own children...

Neptune: True, onto the next article...

---

an image of a giant leopard head with it’s mouth open, showing a group of bandits leaving the head, is shown onscreen

CC2: Certain reports have cited that numerous thieves have been making away with numerous treasures from ancient burial sites and other such areas.

Neptune: It ain’t just that. Apparently, some of them thought of spending those riches to build up their own territories, with hired guards and all! There are even whispers of some royal guards being bribed with hush munny to keep them away from their territories.

CC2: Only the few and the daring would actually consider raiding these misbegotten territories now, and with the people in an uproar, the number of crimes taking place across the world has skyrocketed. It’s amazing that the populace hasn’t fully rioted yet.

Neptune: Don’t tempt fate there, my friend...

CC2: R-Right. Speaking of riches...

an image of a moogle and a merchant being attacked by Heartless appears onscreen

CC2: There have been reports of merchant caravans being assaulted by dark creatures, leaving broken carts and untold amounts of riches and supplies behind in the vast deserts. The moogles have levied their complaints as such. ‘It’s hard to do business in this heat, let alone against the Heartless, kupo!’

Neptune: Broken carts? Yikes, seems like an open gold mine for banditry right there! Someone should really get in on that!

---

an image of a street man and a young woman in green, both of their faces blurred, giving food to poor children, is shown onscreen

CC2: Well, if the royal guard won’t do it, then it is up to us regular folks to do it ourselves! We gotta take that first step and fight for our right to survive in this harsh world!

Neptune: Okay, okay! Before you turn our show into a revolution gathering, we gotta end this program first.

CC2: Ah! Sorry again. I just...I can’t help it if people are starving out there, y’know? Like the whole place has turned into a warzone...

Neptune: Hey, I feel ya. A good meal can turn a frown upside down. Heck, anything that can fill the little tank can do that! Maybe we can send some down your way if that helps.

CC2: You’d do that? Thanks a bunch!

Neptune: No problem! So, on that note, let’s move on the reviews. Get over here, Sora!

Sora: Okay, so for our topic today, it’s...**Magic**!

an image of a purple hat and staff appears onscreen

Neptune: Now, I’m sure everyone here knows about this, but here’s a refresher. Physical attacks are powerful, but some enemies might be either out of your reach or just say ‘No’ to your Keyblade smacks! So, we have Magic Attacks as another option!

an image of several magical orbs appear onscreen

Sora: Currently, we have Fire, Blizzard, Thunder, Cure and Aero magic. In addition, we also have Summon Gems that can call other friends to help us in battle.

Neptune: Yup! But, as you’ve probably noticed, we at our party have...different ways to use magic.

an image of a duck, a nurse and a guild agent all using their magic appears onscreen

Sora: First off, me and Donald use our magic the traditional way, channeling them through our weapons and blast them out against the Heartless!

Neptune: For Compa, she channels her magic through her syringe and fires it out like a bullet in a gun! For Iffy, she summons glyphs on the ground beneath her enemies and smites them out with her chuuni chants! And as for me, I can't’ properly channel magic as well as Sora does, so I just enchant my weapon with them and smack the Heartless real good! How’s that for improv?

Sora: You sure learned that rather quickly, huh?

Neptune: All ‘cause I had good teachers, he-he-he!

an alarm bell rang off

Sora: Welp, we’re outta time...

Neptune: Before we end this program for realsies, if you folks got any donations to spare, send it to your nearest hungry neighbor who needs it, or over at us and we’ll make sure to send them straight to those who need it! We’re serious about this, promise!

Sora: Yup! So, from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 9: Chapter 7: A Very Small Wish (Hope)

Chapter Summary

As our heroes continue their journey, they were suddenly consumed by the giant whale Monstro, leading to intersecting paths crossing once more...

Destiny Islands – Play Island

"Did you see that meteor shower last night?" a young boy asked his best friend. "There was so much falling from the sky!"

"It was pretty, you have to admit" the boy's best friend answered. "I'm just glad none of those stars fell all the way here"

The boy looked at his friend with curiosity. "Why is that?"

His best friend sighed. "Because if one of those stars fell down here, people could get seriously hurt, or worse..."

The boy began to panic.

"What's with you, Sora?" his best friend asked. "You've been awfully jumpy today. Did something happen?"

"No!" Young Sora immediately answered. "Nothing happened! A girl didn't just woke up at the shore or something, no sir!"

His best friend could only raise an eyebrow at his suspiciously-specific answer. "Whatever"

"Anyway!" Sora said, desperate to change topics. "You hear about the mayor's new daughter?"

"I think so" the best friend answered. "He adopted her this morning, right?"

"Yeah!" Sora's eyes shone bright. "You think she'll play with us here on this island?"

"Who can say?" the best friend shrugged. "We gotta go ask her first."

"Good idea!" Sora said, putting his hands behind his head. "Man, you're so reliable, Riku"

Riku laughed. "I know. I know"

Monstro – Mouth

"-ep-Nep" a voice called out. "Nep-Nep. Wakey-wakey, Nep-Nep!"

Neptune groaned in her sleep. "Just three more minutes..."

"If you don't wake up, I'll throw away your morning pudding!"

The girl snored. "...Pudding..."

"Or worse yet, I'll put eggplant in it!"

Neptune immediately snapped awake at the threat. "NOT MY PUDDING!"

The girl in the parka looked to her right to see Compa, bright and cheery as ever. "Good morning, Nep-Nep!"

"Mornin', Compa" Neptune yawned as she got up. "What kind of world did we end in this time?"

"Uhhhhh" the nurse stammered. "About that..."

Neptune looked around, noticing the numerous amounts of crates and barrels littered across the area. "Wow! Look at all these boxes! We must be in some sort of storage world, right!?"

"Actually, that's..."

"Wait, wait! Don't tell me!" Neptune interrupted. "We're in a secret level with all the goodies out there! We couldn't find one in the last world, so our luck reigned supreme this time, right!?"

"No, that's..."

They were interrupted from their conversation when a small box fell on Neptune's head.

"Ow" Neptune winced slightly. "Who's throwing boxes at the Nep!?"

"Not us!" Donald answered as he took cover with Goofy, who raised his shield as an improvised umbrella.

"What's up with you guys?" Neptune asked the rest of the party. "Why are you taking cover there?"

"Cuz we're expectin' showers!" Goofy answered as another gummi box fell on top of his covered head. "Heavy showers!"

"Hey!" IF called out to a figure well above them. "Stop throwing stuff away! Not all stuff is junk, you know!?"

But the figure didn't even hear them, judging by the continuous dropping of gummi boxes near the party's peripheral...

"I...don't get it" Sora wondered as he got up with a single hop from his very short coma. "Why would a whale be swimming all the way out here?"

"A what now?" Neptune replied, looking at the boy with the key with comical circles. "Compa, is he cereal?"

"Yessy!" Compa nodded. "While you were napping, we ended up getting eaten by Mr. Space Whale! We're in his mouth right now!"

She pointed to the area behind them, showing large teeth and gums that clearly stood out admist the wooden objects littered across the general area.

"See?"

"Ahhhhhhh, a whale!" Neptune nodded in understanding. "Gotcha! Hahahaha!"

Only for her to snap. "Wait! This is no laughing matter! Why did we get eaten up by a space whale!? Is there a secret space whale domination plot ongoing right now!? We gotta warn Arty and the others!"

IF sighed. "And here I thought she'd snap back into reality..."

But Neptune continued to rant. "Nobody said this game would contain vore! I want out!"

"What's a 'vore'?" Sora wondered as he sweatdropped.

The nurse simply giggled, patting the oblivious, innocent boy at the head. "We'll tell you when you get older, Sora..."

Another gummi box then fell on Neptune. "Hey, watch it, you! Can't you see we're facing a whale crisis here!?"

"Whale crisis!?"

Everyone looked up to the source of the voice, a small boy who had a large orange block in his hands...

"Owwwww..."

...that he dropped in a panic due to Neptune's yelling, hitting his feet in the process...

Compa gasped at the sound of danger. "Are you okay up there!?"

"My toes..." the boy cried. "They hurt..."

The rest of the party then glared at Neptune, who started to sweat nervously.

"Uh..." the girl with the key panicked. "My bad..."

"Hang in there!" the nurse looked around for a way to get to the boy. "Nurse Compa'll come to treat your ouchies...As soon as I know how to get to you..."

"Still, that boy up there looked kinda familiar..." Goofy said, putting a finger on his lowered head.

"Hey, isn't that Pinocchio?" Sora answered.

Looking closely, the figure was a boy wearing a simple outfit and a yellow hat. Strangely, his skin appears wooden rather than fleshy.

"That's right! It's Pinocchio!" Donald nodded.

"You mean that puppet boy we saw back in Traverse Town?" IF wondered as her eyes began to furrow. "Wait a minute! How did he get all the way here!?"

"He must've stowed away with us the last time we were in town!"

A cricket emerged from Sora's hood, one wearing a suit and top hat to be precise.

"Oh, hey Jiminy!" Sora greeted.

"Took you seven chapters to finally show up in this fic, huh?" Neptune said with a smile, turning to the camera to speak. "Oh, for those not in the know, this is our walking journal writer, Jiminy Cricket! If you wanna look back on what happened or look into what we just fought, he's the conscience for you!"

"Well, to be fair, we kinda glossed over a lot of scenes that mostly remained unchanged in this story..." Jiminy then looked up to see his charge reeling in pain. "Pinocch, you doing okay?"

"Jiminy..." the puppet boy moaned in pain. "My feet hurt..."

"Hang in there!" the cricket shouted. "We're gonna get you down there and get you treated!"

Meanwhile...

Near the passage to the whale's innards, an old man is busy inspecting his belongings.

"Well, everything here's still in one piece..." he mused. "Still, I can't thank you enough for your help!"

"Of course! It's a ninja's job to assist those under their charge, after all!"

With the old man is a bright and cheery girl with orange hair, and a school uniform whose top doesn't seem to fit her torso (though she's still modestly covered).

"Don't be so humble, Marvy" the old man said. "You've helped this old man far more than you can imagine, living alone in this giant whale..."

The girl called Marvy shook her head, never losing her smile. "It's no trouble. At times like this, it's best we stick together to survive!"

"That is true..." the old man sighed. "I sure wish Pinocchio is doing okay..."

"Mr. Geppetto..." Marvy bounced with a big smile. "Well, cheer up! I'm sure he'll turn up here somehow! Why, he could even bring some friends with him!"

"Papa!"

The two turned to the sound of the voice, who is being carried by a girl wearing a black undershirt swimming their way to dry land along with five others.

"Pinocchio, my boy!" Geppetto cried happily at the sight of his son. "Where have you been!?"

"I came back with help!" Pinocchio answered. "Mind helping us up?"

Seeing the company, Marvy approached the edge of the boat. "Don't worry! I'll help you all up!"

After helping them up, the two parties took time for some introductions.

"I see" Geppetto nodded. "Thank you for finding my boy and bringing him back to me. It means the world to me that he's back here."

"We just kinda bumped into him by chance, really" Sora rubbed his head.

"Naw, at times like this, you should say 'you're welcome!'" Neptune, now in her jersey to avoid getting her parka wet, said happily.

"I'm just glad we are out of the water now..." Compa, wrapped around in IF's jacket, shivered, still feeling her sweater wet with water. "Brrrrrr, being covered in whale saliva is NOT a delightful experience..."

"We're definitely going to need PLENTY of showers later..." IF complained as she wiped off the water from her hair with a provided towel. "Good thing I left my cells behind in the Gummi Ship..."

"Just take it easy for now" Donald, maintaining a fire-lit staff for the group to dry off, instructed.

"So, uh, what's your story here?" Goofy asked the other party.

"Well, you see, I went out of town to look for my boy who hasn't come back the other night." Geppetto narrated. "When I reached out to the shore where people said they last saw him, I rented out a boat to go find him and lo and behold! I saw the mighty Monstro surfacing out of the water and barreled himself towards me!"

"I joined up with him since he needed help to run this ship. When I saw the whale coming in, we tried to sail away" Marvy continued, still smiling. "And well, the whale swallowed us whole and that's why we're here!"

"That must've been rough for you two..." IF stated. "Being alone here with dwindling supplies inside a whale's mouth..."

"Thankfully, the ship is filled with rations" Marvy stated. "We've been well-fed here thanks to those!"

"Yes, but the food's going to run out soon" Geppetto shook his head. "Unless we can leave this blasted whale, we won't be able to get supplies."

"Where would you even get supplies from?" Compa dared to ask.

"From the town, obviously!" the old man answered. "I know this one place that..."

As the old man continued, the main party gathered among themselves in a circle.

"Okay, so that old man's likely showing his age right now..." Neptune whispered. "But I don't think his world's around here."

"You tell me" Sora responded. "He doesn't look like he's from Agrabah or any other world we've been to."

"I don't think he lives in any of the worlds ahead..." Donald thought aloud.

"Do ya guys think he might be a Drifter?" Goofy wondered.

Compa nodded. "That could be it..."

IF hummed. "That means his world's likely swallowed up, and this whale's all that's left of it, swimming through the Ocean Between..."

The nurse's eyes widened into comical circles in surprise. "Is that even possible!?"

The guild agent sighed. "At this point, anything could happen now. But he and that ninja girl are lucky."

"Sure beats becomin' a Heartless, that's for sure!" Goofy said.

"Should we break it to him?" Neptune wondered.

Before the party could ponder further...

"Pinocchio!" Geppetto shouted. "Where are you, my son?"

The party broke the circle and looked around. Sure enough, the puppet boy was nowhere to be seen!

"Oh, come the nep on!" the girl in the jersey complained. "He ran off again!?"

"Considering he just stowed away in our ship after he was told to stay put..." the guild agent shook her head. "I'd be more surprised if he DIDN'T walk off while we were talking"

"Boys do have a sense of wonder and curiosity, after all!" Goofy chuckled.

"But he could get hurt while he's out there!" Compa panicked.

"I'd rather not see some of his body parts stuck in whale stomach acid, that's for sure!" Neptune internally threw up at the thought.

"Then let's go look for him!" Jiminy urged the group from Sora's hood.

Sora nodded, rolling his right arm. "Right! Good thing we stocked up with the merchants before we left, huh?"

"Mind if I come with you all?" Marvy asked. "I've been walking around Monstro for a while now, so I may know the way around this place."

"I'm pretty sure he didn't wander THAT far off" IF shrugged, loudly contemplating. "But we'll never know what happens in here. Not to mention Geppetto might be attacked the moment we all leave here..."

"Oh, don't worry about that!" Marvy reassured. "For some reason, the monsters don't attack this part of the whale. Mr. Geppetto will be very safe while we travel inward!"

The guild agent hummed. "Still..."

"Iffy, just take the help. You heard her. The old man's gonna be fine!" Neptune urged the guild agent. "Besides, my Nep Senses are telling me this Marvy lady's gonna be all sorts of cool!"

IF sighed. "All right. Lead the way, Marvy"

The orange-haired girl smiled. "I won't let you down!"

Monstro – Chamber 4

Pinocchio wandered off into the whale's bowel, swearing he saw someone there.

"What are you doing here?"

Hearing someone, he hid to see a young man with silver hair talking to a woman with white hair and seems to be...floating?

"What? I can't check up on a fellow like yourself?" the woman asked as she shook her head. "It's a Goddess' duty to watch over those weaker than her"

"That only applies to people in your world, and last I recall, we lived in different worlds" the boy scoffed. "Besides, if I can take a princess while a genie is guarding her, then a puppet guarded by a Drifter won't be that difficult."

"Only because I threw a pebble at the back of his head!" the woman complained. "You got lucky that Genie was easy to distract!"

The young man huffed. "I don't need your help. Just go away."

The woman huffed in frustration. "Then humor me for a moment. What would you need a living puppet for? I don't recall Maleficent or Arfoire asking anything regarding that."

"They didn't" the young man answered offhandly. "It's a personal task"

The woman frowned. "Is this about that girl they found earlier? The one you and that Sora are looking for?"

The young man gritted his teeth, though the puppet boy couldn't see this from where he stood.

"Why would he care about her!?" the boy shouted. "He's got new friends now. He's replaced us!"

"That doesn't sound like it to me" the woman said, crossing her arms. "I don't think that's how friends work"

"What would you know about friends?" the young man scoffed again. "You never even had any"

The woman became flustered at that. "I-I so do! I met them a couple of worlds ago, in fact"

"Beating them up doesn't equate to friendship, you know?"

"That encounter doesn't count!"

And so, the two of them continued to bicker amongst themselves, all the while the puppet boy continued to watch.

"Maybe I should go tell Papa and Jiminy and Marvy about this..."

A loud roar suddenly shook the ground around them.

"What in the-" the young boy looked around.

"Is it acting up!?" the woman wondered, bringing out a large sword.

Pinocchio nearly yelped, but covered his mouth in the hopes no one heard him...

Not like he could see either, with his eyes closed by someone else...

"Come along, now..."

And soon, he vanished, brought away before either figure knew he was there...

Monstro – Chamber 5 – A Few Minutes Earlier...

"So..." Neptune looked around. "Where are we now?"

"Can someone tell?" Compa bemoaned. "Every place here is starting to look the same to me..."

"I'm pretty sure we didn't come to this room before" Goofy looked around, noting the numerous ledges leading up to his right and the ledges leading down to his left.

"Goofy's right!" Marvy exclaimed. "We're close to Monstro's bowel."

She then points to the only known passageway in the room. "Just walk straight here and we'll arrive there!"

Donald was busy catching his breath. "Did Pinocchio have to run this far in the whale?"

"C'mon, Donald!" Goofy cheered his friend up. "Didn't you use to play with the triplets like that before?"

"At least they didn't run too far off!" the royal wizard shouted.

"Triplets?" Neptune thought for a moment, then a lightbulb lit up her head. "Ooooooh! The little duckies managing their item shop!"

Goofy nodded. "The same ones!"

"We couldn't thank them enough for all the items we bought from them!" Compa cheered.

"At least they're easier to deal with than the moogles in most cases..." IF sighed as she approached the passageway. "Pinocchio's just ahead, right?"

Marvy nodded. "My nose has caught onto his scent, and the trail leads through here!"

"Well then, let's go go..."

The ninja's eyebrows suddenly furrowed, raising her hand to halt Neptune "Wait! I sense two more people in the room ahead!"

"Enemies?" Sora wondered.

"I wonder..." IF said, silently loosening her qatars.

"I'll sneak in and confirm the presences" Marvy put a finger on her mouth, telling the others to remain quiet. "Please stay here and keep it down until I come back."

"Alright, you do that" the guild agent nodded. "We'll wait here and rest a bit"

As soon as she got confirmation, she seemingly vanished in a puff of smoke.

"Huh" Goofy started. "I didn't know she could do that..."

"Woah!" Neptune cooed with starry eyes. "She's a bona-fide ninja! So cool!"

"We already know a ninja, Neptune..." Donald pointed out.

"Never underestimate a ninja's speed, huh?" Compa commented.

"At least that explains how she managed to get the lay of the...body around these parts" IF mused.

"Guess we'll just rest up while we wait, huh?" Sora said, putting his hands on his back.

Neptune stretched her arms. "A good time for a nap! Oh, speaking of naps, Sora!"

The boy raised an eyebrow as he turned to his fellow Keyblade wielder. "What's up?"

"Say, have you had any...weird dreams lately?"

Sora grunted in surprise. "Weird dreams? How weird are we talking?"

"Well..." Neptune strained her eyes while they were closed. "I had one while I was snoozing earlier. The weird part about it, I was dreaming about you and Riku when you were smaller."

"Me and Riku?" Sora crossed his arms as he continued to speak. "What were we doing there?"

"Nothing much" Neptune shrugged. "Just talking about a meteor shower and the mayor's adopted daughter."

"Meteor shower?" Sora's eyes then widened in remembrance. "Oh yeah! That's the night I first saw Kairi!"

"Kairi?" Neptune's eyes started to widen too. "Oh! She's the mayor's daughter you two were talking about!"

The boy nodded. "It was the weirdest thing. I saw them flying out of the sky one night, so I ran out to the shore to get as close a look as I can. While I was, I heard something nearby, so I took a look, and wouldn't you know it? Behind one of the boats, there was a girl with red hair who just woke up."

"I see." She then approached Sora with a grin. "Heh-he! So, you were already considering her before you even knew her, huh?"

"Huh!?" Sora's face flushed at the implications.

"Y'know the thing about first meetings during a special event like meteor showers, right?" Neptune's eyes sparkled. "A classic 'boy meets girl' scenario on a starry night! I can dig the classic romance vibes from this!"

Sora's face of redness continued to deepen. "H-Hey, come on. You didn't have to put it like that!"

"But what else could you call that situation, if not that!?" Neptune's cheered. "Anyway, this little Nep'll be rooting for you two! So go and get her, buck-o!"

Sora chuckled at the support, scratching his cheek. "Thanks, Neptune. Really"

"So, then" Neptune put her hands behind her back. "What about you? Had any weird dreams lately?"

"Well..." Sora scratched his head. "I did, actually. It could beat yours in weirdness."

"Try me!" Neptune dared the boy.

"Well, I can't remember much..." the boy started. "I remember being in a town. Actually, I feel like that place is fancier than a town..."

"Uh-huh" Neptune nodded.

"It was lively. The buildings were tall. People around were so happy, too!"

"Okay. Any...discerning features about this 'town'?"

"Well, it had a large tower in the middle of it." Sora raised his hand up to measure the tower he saw, raising it above his head. "Around this high from where I saw it. I think that's what stood out to me."

"Huh. Why does that sound familiar?" the girl murmured to herself. "Anyway, continue"

"And then, all of a sudden, the scenery changed."

"Plot twist ahoy!"

Sora nodded. "The buildings were being destroyed. The sky was red. The people were running about, panicking too. And Heartless were everywhere"

"Did you try to fight them off?"

"I tried" Sora looked into his right hand with sadness. "But for some reason, I couldn't use my Keyblade there. Next thing I knew, I was swarmed by them, but then, I saw some lights flying out."

"Lights?"

Sora nodded again, raising three of his fingers up from his waist to above his own head. "One of those lights actually came out from above that large tower. Then that one light split up into three as it flew off with the other lights that were far away from it."

"Huh..." Neptune began to pace back and forth, trying to make sense of Sora's dream. "So that was it?"

"Yeah, pretty much" Sora agreed. "What was all that about? I didn't even see you in that dream"

"Beats me" the girl shrugged. "Maybe we oughta ask someone who can interpret it, huh?"

"How about Merlin or the Fairy Godmother?" Sora suggested. "They might have an idea."

Neptune nodded. "Sounds good to me!"

Suddenly, the ground around them shook as a loud roar was heard!

"An earthquake?" Goofy panicked.

"But we're in a whale, so..." Compa wondered. "A whale-quake?"

"I'm more worried about that roar just now!" IF noted.

"Is the whale feeling hungry?" Donald wondered.

After a good three seconds, the shaking stopped.

"Oh boy..." Neptune sighed in relief. "That was a close one, huh?"

"Hey guys!"

The party turned to see Marvy carrying Pinocchio with her on the passageway.

"Pinocchio!" Jiminy called out. "Thanks heavens you're alright!"

"Hi Jiminy! Hi guys!" Pinocchio waved to everyone in greeting. "I just saw something incredible in there!"

"Why did you run off like that?" Donald interrupted.

"You could've gotten really hurt out there!" Compa scolded the boy.

"I-I'm sorry" the puppet boy apologized, bowing his head in shame. "But it got boring after a while, so I left for a walk..."

But then, his nose suddenly grew!

"Pinocch..." Jiminy called out. "What did we say about lying?"

"Oh, okay..." Pinocchio apologized. "I was getting nervous around you guys. I...had a bad time with some strange adults back then, so I didn't know what to do."

"Is that why you ran?" the guild agent asked.

"Hm-hm" the puppet boy nodded. "I got Papa really worried, and I still felt nervous, so I snuck off to see if there's a way out of this whale. I'm really sorry, guys..."

"Pinocchio..."

Marvy knelt down to the puppet boy. "If you want to play, you can just ask. Don't be afraid to approach people."

The puppet boy remained silent.

"Listen, I understand you are still weary of people after what happened at the circus..."

"What's she talking about?" Compa whispered to her guild friend. "Does it relate with what Pinocchio just said to us?"

"Maybe" IF guessed. "Must be quite the long story..."

"...But you and your grandfather were willing to trust me despite me not belonging in your world" Marvy continued as she patted the boy's head. "Don't look at me all weird. I know I look out of place back there. A ninja in a circus, right?"

"So, she's aware that she's a Drifter..." Donald murmured. Goofy could only nod.

"Anyway, back to my point. I don't treat things like trust lightly." Marvy declared, putting a hand on her heart. "A ninja's duty is to their charge. Their safety. Their desires. All are top priority for one like me. So, if you want to go around and play tag or whatever game you could think of, and if you still feel shy towards other people, be sure to ask me. I'll play with you whenever I can."

"Marvy..." If Pinocchio had human eyes, he would be crying tears of joy, but simply feeling the tender care Marvy exuded from her words is enough. "Yeah. Thanks a lot!"

"Man, right there in the feels..." Neptune said, wiping a few tears leaking from her eyes, only to jolt herself when she remembered something. "Oh yeah! Didn't the boy say he saw something back there?"

"Oh!" Pinocchio jolted, remembering something. "There's some people up ahead!"

"People?" Sora asked.

"Two of them, in fact" Marvy reported. "Pinocchio?"

The puppet boy nodded, pointing to the passageway behind them. "There's a guy with silver hair there and a lady with white hair talking to each other in there. Last we saw them, they were heading in deeper into Monstro"

"A guy with silver hair..." Sora started.

"And a lady with white hair..." Neptune continued.

After another good three seconds, the two came to a realization.

"It's Riku/the Newtype!" the two shouted.

"What are they doing here?" Donald wondered with a bit of apprehension.

"And together, at that" the nurse wondered.

"I wonder about that..." IF thought aloud. "The fact that both Riku and the Newtype are here means that they both have a method of world travel, likely different from ours"

"But what are they doing here, exactly?" Goofy expressed his thoughts.

"Well, you know what they say?" Neptune suggested. "We won't know 'till we find out!"

"Yeah!" Sora nodded. "Let's go to them!"

IF sighed. "This smells like an unusual trap to me, but nothing ventured, nothing gained, so let's get going. Besides..."

"You think there's something unusual about them?" Artisan reiterated.

IF nodded. "I was a bit suspicious regarding the two. Now that they have vanished, I'm more than certain something's up with them..."

Leon hummed. "The fact that Riku and Noire vanished shortly after that last stunt is suspicious enough. But what's even more suspicious is the fact that they're also opposing the Heartless like we are"

"Yet they seem to be working independently from us..." the horned woman noted. "Either they're both working alone or they're actually..."

IF grunted, not liking the train of thought.

"We can't afford to get distracted" Leon stated. "Keep this on the down-low for now. We don't want the rest of your party to get distracted with these possibilities."

"But what if it's true?" the guild agent asked. "They might just end up stabbing us in the back when we least expect it."

"Then you already know what to do" Artisan answered. "You have the most experience out of everyone else in the group when it comes to sniffing out details. They will trust your senses when the moment counts"

"Those guys rely on their hearts more than their heads" Leon said. "That's why we're counting on you to use yours to keep them safe."

IF furrowed her eyes as she looked to her weapons. "I need to confirm if my suspicions are true. About Riku and that Newtype..."

Monstro – Bowel

"Remind me again..." Riku started. "Why is a supposed Goddess like you having a hard time?"

The Newtype groaned in frustration. "Shut up! I'm...just off my game today, that's all!"

"It can't be because the environment's too small for you..." Riku shook his head.

"S-Shut up and just help me fight this thing!" the Newtype urged as she raised her sword against their foe, a large squid-like Heartless with two tentacles for arms attached to it's neck, it's belly shaped like a cage fit for a person as small as a growing child. This is the Parasite Cage, a Heartless that thrives in harsh marshes and in this case, a whale's stomach.

The Newtype clicked her tongue as she felt the same raging red aura surrounding this Heartless. "Curse that Arfoire! Is she really going to turn Heartless across the worlds into this state everywhere she goes!?"

Riku dashed forward, slashing the Cage's left arm while the Newtype focused on the right. It raged by flailing furiously, pushing the two back.

"Shoot!" the Newtype cursed. "I can't risk using my Infinite Slash here!"

"Figures you need space..." Riku mumbled. "Not like I can make any progress here either..."

"AGH!" the Newtype slammed her fist onto the ground. "What do we do now!?"

"Riku!"

"Lovely Newtype!"

The two couldn't believe their ears! Unexpected help has arrived...

"Sora!?"

"Neptune!?"

...in the form of the two Keyblade Wielders and their companions (along with a ninja girl and a puppet boy)

"What are you all doing here!?" the Newtype asked incredulously. "Have you fools gotten swallowed up too?"

"I guess you could say that, hahahahaha" Neptune laughed, despite the grim situation. "Sorry I couldn't prepare the pudding I promised though..."

The Newtype sighed. "Not like I was expecting it."

"Need some help?" Sora asked his best friend with a toothy grin.

Riku scoffed, getting up by himself. "Like I need it..."

"Hey!" Donald complained.

"That was not very nice..." Goofy said, shaking his head.

"Can't you at least tolerate them for now?" the Newtype scolded Riku. "We're in a bit of a bind here!" She then moved closer to him in a whisper. "Besides, that puppet boy you're looking for is right there. You could snatch him in the confusion"

As he spots Pinocchio being carried by their new Drifter ally, Riku huffed. "Fine. Just don't get in my way"

"Another day, another enraged Heartless to fight..." IF sighed as she prepared her weapons.

"Marvy, you should set Pinocchio down somewhere so you can help us" Compa suggested, readying her syringe.

"Okay!"

Setting down the puppet boy, Marvy instructed him.

"Go hide nearby, and don't wander off until we're done here!"

Pinocchio nodded. "Good luck, Marvy!"

As soon as he left, the party readied themselves for a tough battle.

"Alright-y!" Neptune cheered. "With this huge party, we can't lose this fight!"

"Neptune" Sora chastised the girl with the key. "You shouldn't jinx us!"

"D'awwwww! Look at you!" Neptune cooed the boy. "Applying what you've learned from me! Mama Neptune couldn't be any prouder!"

"Since when were you his mom!?" Donald complained.

The enraged Heartless took the chance and hopped to them, causing the party to split up to the sides. The Parasite Cage immediately planted itself back in the middle after making its move.

"Looks like it's quick on the uptake..." IF noticed. "Any other quirks you noticed?"

"It's mainly using its arms to deflect us" the Newtype answered. "Don't bother hitting their belly from behind. It's impervious to our attacks"

"Then we go for the front..." IF then gave out her instructions. "We're going to need some bait!"

"Bait?" her nurse friend asked as she and everyone else turned to her.

"This thing's quick on the uptake, so we need to draw it's attention while we get a few good hits on their head." IF advised as the Cage's arms began to attack again.

"Watch it!" Marvy shouted as she and everyone else leapt or rolled around to safety.

"So, who's going for the head?" Sora wondered.

"Definitely someone swift with their movements, meaning..."

Her eyes turned to the ninja Drifter, who pounded her chest with her fist.

"Okay then! Donald, Compa, you're both on support duty. Fling spells and keep everyone topped off!"

"Got it!/Roger that!"

The two then proceeded to start casting spells at the Parasite Cage, keeping it distracted while IF continues her debriefing.

"Nep, Sora, Goof! The three of you will be running decoy. Distract the arms and watch for danger!"

"Roger doger!/Got'cha!/Okidoki!"

The three charged forth, taking the fight to the Parasite Cage.

"Riku, Newtype! You're both with me! We'll keep hitting the head from the front as much as possible!"

Riku scoffed as he moved. "I was planning on doing that."

"If we're hitting from the front, then..."

The guild agent nodded to the Newtype, turning her head to the last remaining party member. "Marvy, get behind the creature and assassinate it. If it doesn't die in one blow, pull back and ready another attack. Keep at it until we win this, got it?"

Marvy nodded, bringing out her killer knife. "Understood."

"Okay, let's do this!"

The fight was on! Leading the charge, Sora and Neptune charge at each of the Heartless' arms, assaulting the sides of it's head with aerial combos.

"These arms just won't hold still!" Neptune complained, landing another aerial attack at the right side.

"Just keep hitting at it!" Sora encouraged, maintaining his offensive with the left side.

Sensing the attackers, the Parasite Cage began to madly flail it's arms, pushing the two Keyblade wielders back.

"Gah!/Owie!"

"Let's heal them up, Donald!" Compa urged the duck, who nodded with a charged staff.

"**CURA**!"

Feeling the healing light from Donald's spell, Neptune hops back up to the fight.

"Al-right! Time for a big one!" Neptune charged forth and unleashed her combat technique! "**CROSS COMBINATION**!"

Hitting the Cage square on it's belly with her six-hit combo, Neptune pulls back once the Cage has set it's sights on her.

"Got it's attention!" She then waved to her fellow wielder. "All yours, buck-o!"

Sora nodded as Compa finished her treatments. "Time to switch things up!"

The boy with the key charged again, this time with Goofy.

"Ready, Goofy?"

"You bet'cha!"

Stopping partway, Sora grabbed the royal captain and spun him around three times...

"FLY AWAY!"

...and threw him straight at the Parasite Cage's head! This is their Combination Skill, the **Goofy Launcher**!

"INCOMING!"

The hit stunned the giant Heartless, lowering it's head down, leaving it defenseless!

"There's our opening!" IF begins dashing forth! "Let's go!"

"No need to tell me./Time to move!"

The three closed in and unleashed their skills against the maddened Heartless!

"**HEAVEN DEMON**!"

A direct hit of ten slashes!

"**MAELSTROM**!"

Another direct hit from a spinning attack!

"**FALL SLASH**!"

Yet another direct hit from numerous slashes dropped by the Newtype's blade!

The three unleashed their techniques against the Cage with all their might, causing it to spiral further into anger!

"That did a lot!" the Newtype commented.

"It's flailing again!" Riku observed the Heartless' arms doing precisely that.

"Dodge the arms!" IF instructed as she charged magic into her qatars. "Switch to ranged attacks! Keep it busy!"

"Then we'll keep the arms busy!" the Newtype declared as she charged forth, weaving through the arms with grace. "Let's go, Riku!"

"No need to tell me!" Riku shouted, charging forth, doing the same.

"Let's switch things up, Donald!" Compa urged the royal wizard, who nodded.

"Al-right!"

And it's not just those two, Sora and Neptune began to fling spells (Wind Slicers in the latter's case) at the Heartless as well. Goofy even aided them by throwing his shield like a frisbee!

"It's distracted!"

As the Newtype drew close, the Cage's head remains fully focused to what's in front of it, leaving it's back exposed...

"...Target acquired..."

Marvy jumped in from behind, having drawn two katanas and drew them to the Heartless' neck...

"...Farewell..."

...and did a clean slice straight through the head. While it didn't clean the head off, the feeling of being cut clean caused the Cage to keel back, revealing a glowing red orb inside it's belly.

"What's that?" Sora wondered.

"That must be it's weak point!" Compa pointed out.

"Hey, you two!" Neptune shouted to the Newtype and Riku. "Hit it for maximum damage!"

"No need to tell us, idiot!" the Newtype turned to Riku during her charge. "Ready?"

Riku responded with a grunt, his Soul Eater primed as well.

The two leapt and jumped at the orb with all their might!

"YOU'RE MINE!"

"VOLCANO DIVE!"

Their attack severely damaged the orb, causing the Heartless to begin exploding in a flash of light!

"EVERYBODY DUCK!"

The whole party braced for impact as the Parasite Cage exploded, leaving only a crater where it stood.

"Is everyone alright?" IF asked around.

"If anybody's dead, raise your hands!" Neptune followed.

"That was a really close one..." Marvy sighed in relief.

"Poor whale's gonna feel this in the mornin'" Goofy said glumly, looking at the open crater.

"Good thing we're still here!" Compa shouted, bringing out her First Aid Kit. "Tell me who needs treatment!"

"You guys get yourselves patched up" the guild agent inferred. "I'll check back to see if Pinocchio is still with us."

"Please do" Jiminy answered, having come out of Sora's hood.

Once IF went back to check on the puppet boy, she circled back to the party in a panic. "Guys, he's gone!"

"Oh, no way..." Neptune snarked. "Even though we told him to stay put..."

"That can't be!" Marvy cried. "I kept a close watch on his presence. He's been in the same spot since we started the fight!"

"And when did you lose him?" the guild agent asked.

"Since the Heartless exploded..." the ninja answered glumly.

"Hol' up, where's Riku and the Newtype?" Goofy looked around.

"They're gone again!" Donald complained.

"Just like before..." IF mumbled to herself. "Then that means...I hate it when I'm right..."

Sora groaned as he got up. "C'mon! We gotta go after them!"

Monstro – Stomach

"So, in the end, we were able to get that puppet while everyone was distracted" the Newtype recalled, looking at said poor puppet being carried like baggage on Riku's hand. "I still don't get what's the point of all this"

"They said that Kairi's lost her heart" Riku answered. "I figured an empty vessel like this will be able to store it until we can give it back to her"

"Lost her heart?" the Newtype wondered. "Shouldn't she become a Heartless by then?"

Riku shook his head. "Her body's completely intact, but is unconscious. Until I find her heart, she will never wake up"

The Newtype sighed. "That's going to be a tall order, then. How would you go finding someone's heart? They can't just be lying around somewhere."

"Kingdom Hearts"

"Huh?"

Riku looked at the Newtype. "From what Maleficent told me, there's a place where all hearts gather. In that place, I could find Kairi's lost heart and give it back to her."

"Okay..." the Newtype replied, not knowing what he's talking about. "But how will you even get there? Will you even find her heart if you get there? This all seems too good to be true..."

"You think I don't know that!?" Riku snapped back. "She's...she's the only one I can trust now...the only one I have left. Everyone on the island is gone! And Sora...he moved on from me, from us...Who else do I have left!?"

"Riku..."

"That's why...I have to get her back...No matter what it takes..."

She could relate with that. Being alone out in the unknown. With no one or nowhere to rely on. The one big difference between the two, is simply that Riku has an origin point and has people he knew and knew him before today.

The Newtype...no, Noire? She had no one. She was all alone with nothing but the clothes on her back and the Keyblade that hides her powers as a CPU of Gamindustri, whatever that was.

Sure, Arfoire provided her with some clarity behind her existence, but she also siccs enhanced Heartless at her for her own sick amusement, all the while keeping her goals close to her heart. There was little benefit in maintaining that relationship, but she held on to it since it's the only one she had.

...Or was it?

Her thoughts raced back to that bright, cheery little girl. Initially, she set out against her because she heard from Arfoire that she may house great potential like hers, different from the boy she's travelling with.

She tried testing this out for herself in Wonderland, but she didn't exude anything like her Goddess form did. Even when close to the brink, nothing. She only got through that because

of the aid of mortals like that nurse girl (Compa, right?), the one in blue (IF, she believes) and the King's bodyguards (Donald and Goofy, yes?), to say nothing of the boy also wielding the Keyblade (Sora, right?). Yet even then, her heart felt...strange from that short encounter. Her attitude towards her back then didn't help this feeling dissipate any faster either.

And then she recalled their encounter in Traverse Town. She originally went there to accompany Riku, but lost sight of him when she arrived. As

she tried to regain her bearings, Neptune and her party unexpectedly bumped into her while she was in her normal form. They, thankfully, have yet to piece together that she and that 'Newtype' are one and the same (though that IF has been eyeing her quite suspiciously), so she accepted their invitation into their party to further probe into them, and more specifically, into Neptune. Thankfully, again, it took one set of encounters over at the town's Gizmo Shop to show she can at least be trusted to fight alongside them. Neptune, in particular, seem dazed at the sight of her fighting, noting it was 'too cool that her eyes couldn't help but gawk at her general direction'. Was she flirting with her or can she not express her feelings in a better way? Who can say? Anyway, once she probed into her state of mind, more specifically, how she and a few others can't recall their home worlds, she butted in, saying that she was freed by a heavenly voice who was kidnapped by a witch and needed help. It didn't really answer much about her state of mind, but it did nail down what she and the others are doing on their journey.

Overall, it just convinced her that Neptune was just another ordinary girl. One who happened to be chosen by the same type of weapon only spoken of in legend. Why would Arfoire be so...wary of an ordinary, if wacky, girl? That Sora boy is also quite ordinary himself, yet Maleficent is confident that she can handle him due to her history with Keyblade wielders or so she heard. She doesn't get it.

And yet...

Yet...

She felt her heart beating in her chest, recalling the feeling she felt whenever she was near Neptune. It was not an unwelcome feeling, to say the least...but she cannot really tell what this feeling is, and that's what irks her, more than anything.

She sighed. "Why? Why do you make me feel this way, Neptune?"

Could that be why she's keeping her distance from them? From Neptune? Yet the desire for their company runs counter to her own belief. The belief that as a Goddess, she must not interact with lesser beings. A belief that she now questions after meeting Neptune as a...friend...and seeing Riku in his current state of mind, like seeing through a mirror's reflection...

"You called for me?"

The Newtype yelped, turning around to see Neptune, Sora and their whole party, including the ninja Drifter (Marvy, right?) facing them now.

"W-When did you all get here!?" the Newtype demanded.

"We got here just a while ago" Compa answered.

"Did we catch you at a bad time?" Goofy asked.

The Newtype became flustered. "N-No. I wasn't caught up in my thoughts or anything! It's not like I was thinking about you guys or something!"

IF sighed. "Care to translate that, Nep?"

Neptune nodded with a smile. "It means she missed us so much. D'awwwww, she must be really lonely!"

"S-Shut up!" the Newtype turned to Riku. "C'mon, Riku, say something!"

"Something" Riku snarked.

"I didn't mean it like that!" the Newtype groaned. "Anyway, what's your business here!?"

"Riku!" Sora called out to his best friend. "Give Pinocchio back!"

"Pretty please!" Marvy pleaded. "Mr. Geppetto is really worried for his son."

"I can't do that" Riku shook his head.

"Why not?" Compa asked.

The Newtype sighed. "Riku here thinks this boy may hold the key to house Kairi's lost heart."

"Her...lost heart?" Neptune gasped.

"What happened to her!?" Sora demanded. "Did you really find her?"

"We already found her..." Riku replied as he looked to Pinocchio. "Or...what's left of her. From what was told to me, her body's intact, but her heart isn't. I thought if I could acquire this puppet, one who is special enough to gain their own heart, maybe I might be able to find and store Kairi's heart here until I can return it to her."

"And where would you find that?" Donald demanded to know.

"A special place where all lost hearts gather" Riku replied vaguely.

"..." IF observed the two closely, her eyes furrowed for any suspicious movements.

"So, how about it, Sora?" Riku extended a hand out to his best friend. "Why don't we join forces? Together, we can go and save Kairi and explore the worlds whenever we want. How about it?"

"What!?" the court wizard screamed in surprise.

And apparently, so did Neptune! "Now hold on a sec-"

But Sora put a hand in front of her, beckoning her to stop.

The boy stepped forward...

"Well, what say you, Sora?"

...and summoned his Keyblade, raising his stance.

"What are you-?"

The Newtype sighed. "I figured as much"

"Y-You'd fight me? Over a puppet that wasn't supposed to have a heart in the first place? Over KAIRI!?"

The boy gave his answer. "Heart or no heart, at least he has a conscience"

The other boy raised an eyebrow. "Conscience?"

"A little voice in your head, telling you what's right from wrong" Riku's best friend explained. "We all have that little voice in our head, reminding us of our mistakes and how we can do better. You may not hear it, but right now it's loud and clear!"

He raised his Keyblade against him. "And it's telling me you are on the wrong side!"

"Wrong?" Riku's eyes widened in surprise. "You're telling me...that I'm wrong?"

"This isn't the right way to save your pal, y'know!" Neptune butted in.

"If you want help finding Kairi, you can come with us!" Compa urged.

"We can make space for you on the Gummi Ship" Goofy suggested.

"You're pretty good. That much I can say" Donald admitted.

"It's not too late, Riku" Sora pleaded, lowering his Keyblade and extending his free hand to his best friend. "Come with us. We can save Kairi together. And we'll do it right!"

Riku gritted his teeth. "You dare say that...after what you did?"

"Huh?" Sora reigned his hand back.

"After you left us!?"

Riku immediately summoned his Soul Eater and attempted to attack him, only for IF to move in and block the attack!

"Iffy!" Neptune called out.

"So, it's come to this..." the guild agent said with a hint of sadness.

Seeing this only made the silver-haired boy angrier. "OUT OF MY WAY!"

He tried to push past her, but IF deflected the attack and remained in front of Sora, determined to defend her friend.

"Not until you give it up" IF barked back. "You've sunken into the darkness already. It's making you think differently about your friend, when you and Kairi have never left his thoughts, not even once. I don't

know what the people around you have been telling you, but Sora's right. You're clearly on the wrong side here. Kairi would be disappointed in you..."

Riku growled in anger. He will not let this stand! Not while he still has the puppet!

"Aren't you going to notice by now?"

He turned angrily to the Newtype, who was looking at his left arm.

"Look at what you're holding"

He looked, and sure enough, there was only a log with a red scarf in his hand.

"Where the-?"

"Retrieval mission complete!"

He looked behind them, and saw that the ninja Drifter has set down Pinocchio near her.

"Pinocchio!" Another voice called out, belonging that to a cricket that is running to the puppet boy. "Oh, Pinocchio!"

"Please wake up!" Marvy pleaded. "Big Sis Marvy and Jiminy are here!"

"Marvy...Jiminy..." Pinocchio said weakly. "I..don't think I'm going to make it..."

"Don't give up on us, please!" Jiminy pleaded louder.

"We're here with you and we won't give up on you!" Marvy held onto Pinocchio's hand. "So, please! Don't give up on yourself!"

"You guys..."

A bright light shone around him, and once it faded, the puppet boy felt more energetic than ever, like he had woken up from a bad dream.

"Pinocchio?"

Or rather, because his nose grew again...

"I...guess I'm okay now!"

Marvy and Jiminy cried tears of joy as they hugged him.

"Oh Pinocchio!"

"Aw-right!" Neptune cheered.

"I'm glad he's okay!" Compa wiped away a tear.

Donald and Goofy looked at each other and nodded.

Sora and IF glanced at the scene with a smile.

"So, that was your aim all along, was it?" the Newtype demanded.

"One of them, at least" IF admitted, pointing her right qatar at the two. "Now give it up, both of you. Whatever you're planning here, it's over."

Riku clicked his tongue. He can't give up like this! He's stronger than Sora! Stronger than any of them! He's not afraid!

The Newtype sighed again. "Must you be so stubborn?"

She floated forward, readying her stance.

"What are you doing?" Riku demanded.

"Covering your escape" the Newtype answered bluntly. "Frankly, you're too weak to take them on right now."

"And you?" Riku scoffed.

The Newtype smirked. "Did you forget? I'm a Goddess. It'll take more than seven mortals in an enclosed arena to defeat one such as me!"

She then swung her blade in defiance. "Now go!"

Riku clicked his tongue again. "Just so you know, don't expect any favors."

He then vanished into a Dark Corridor, fleeing the whale innards.

"I don't expect to" the Newtype replied.

"That dark portal...So, that's how he gets around worlds...So, it's just you now..." IF readied her stance. "Tell me something."

"Speak, then"

"You are clearly a far more capable individual at a glance. Why didn't you stop Marvy from retrieving Pinocchio?"

The white-haired woman flipped her hair. "This whole charade was Riku's idea, but quite frankly, I don't see any chance of it working out the way he wanted it to be. Whether the puppet boy is in his hands or yours matters little to me."

"So, you say" the guild agent replied. "Then why are you standing in our way now?"

"Yeah!" Neptune agreed. "You fight the Heartless, too! Why do we need to fight?"

"I have my reasons" the Newtype answered cryptically. "Personal ones at that. What Riku or anyone else has to do with it does not concern me in the slightest."

"Even though you've seen how well we fought against that Heartless from before?" IF raised an eyebrow at that.

The Newtype swung her blade. "Only because you had our help. How well do you mortals fare without power like mine?"

"Then one last question" IF insisted. "Why keep watch over Riku?"

The Newtype gave it some thought. "Honestly, I'm not even sure. Given my own philosophy, I shouldn't even spare a glance at him, but I did anyway. Besides, I am a Goddess. It is her duty to watch over those under her charge."

She then raised her blade against the party. "Now that the questions are over, it's time to see how much you've all improved. I've gotten a glimpse from the last fight, but I want to see more. Don't hold back, because I won't!"

Neptune groaned. "Do we have to? I'd rather talk this over with pudding than fight!"

IF sighed as she readied her stance. "I don't think she's gonna budge on this. She's quite stubborn for a so-called Goddess"

Sora followed her lead and readied his Keyblade. "Then let's give this everything we've got!"

"Marvy, get Pinocchio outta here!" Goofy urged as he and the rest of his companions readied their weapons.

The ninja nodded. "I'll return the favor shortly. Stay strong, everyone!"

"You can do it!" Pinocchio cheered as he and Marvy left the stomach.

"So, you all decided to stand your ground, even against a Goddess?" the Newtype taunted, and then smirked. "Don't disappoint me!"

Neptune groaned again, readying her stance. "Fine! Just so you know, you asked for it!"

The Newtype, wasting no time, launched her assault against the party. As she approached the front of the party, she took a step on the ground, and leapt over the front line, landing right where their rear line is.

"Wak!" Donald screamed.

"She's right in front of us!" Compa raised her syringe in defense.

"Aim for the weak point, and the body falls apart!"

She attempts to launch her attack, but fell back when she noticed a pillar of Blizzard magic was about to hit her from below.

"Haaaaaaahhhh!"

"Yaaaaaaahhhh!"

She turned around and raised her blade, defending herself from a combined attack against Sora and Neptune!

"Good reaction timing" the Newtype complimented. "You anticipated my attack and prepared an appropriate countermeasure on the fly."

"Testing us, are we?" Neptune mocked.

Sora growled. "Then you'll regret not taking us seriously!"

The Newtype turned her head around to see Compa aiming her syringe, charged with Donald's magic, right at her.

"This Skill...!"

"**TREATMENT BLASTER**!"

Seeing the incoming attack, the Newtype deflected the Keyblade wielder's attacks and flew away before the beam could hit her.

"Aw!" Donald moaned. "She dodged it..."

"Don't let up!" IF urged the group. "Ready another round!"

"Like I'll let you!"

The Newtype charged at the duo again, but this time, she is blocked by the royal captain's shield.

"Out of my way, dog!"

"Not on your life!"

"Then have a taste of this!"

She slashed upward, sending Goofy up into the air...

"**DROP CRUSH**!"

...and kicked him right back down, dealing a lot of pain his way.

"Goofy!" Compa cried.

"Are you okay!?" Donald said, readying a Cura spell.

"You two should worry about yourselves first!"

The Newtype, not giving the duo a chance to recover, charges up her blade with energy...

"**TORNERAID SWORD**!"

...and slashes straight at Compa and Donald!

"Ahhhhh!"

"Oh no!"

"**Defense**!"

The two were pushed back, but thanks to a timely **Aero** from Sora, the damage to the two was mitigated.

"And now there are three..." the Newtype floated up to see IF, still standing her ground while Sora and Neptune stood on the platforms around the whale's stomach. "Your guardian and backline support are out. Next up is..."

She then set her sights upon IF!

"You! Without you, those two idiots won't be able to coordinate their attacks! It's over!"

The guild agent raised her arms in defense, but instead of a sword attack...

"Shoot!" the guild agent cursed as she braced for impact!

...the Newtype kicked her right at her stomach, sending her flying back to a wall!

"Oh no!"

Before Sora could go check up on IF, he felt a presence behind him and tried to block an incoming attack...

"**TORNERAID CHAIN**!"

"GAH!"

...and ended up slammed hard to the edge of a platform. Mercifully, he landed out of range of the whale's stomach acid.

"Iffy! Sora!"

As Neptune jumped down, her face was met with the edge of the Newtype's sword.

"Is this the extent of your power?" the Newtype mocked. "Look around you, Neptune. How helpless you've become. How weak your friends are."

For each step the Newtype took forward, Neptune took one back. She tried to take a swing, but the white-haired woman deflected it, sending the girl's Keyblade away from her hand. Along the way, she tumbled on the unconscious Goofy and fell down, the Newtype's sword still on her sights.

"As I thought. Not a single spark in you." the Newtype muttered, glancing away with a forlorn expression "I guess what I felt then was just a fluke..."

This only confused the girl with the key, however. "Uh, hello? Explanation, please?"

The Newtype shook her head as she raised her blade. "It's no use. You've failed, Neptune. Goodbye..."

"*So, this is it, huh?*" Neptune thought to herself as the blade slowly descended on her. "*You know, for what it's worth, this adventure's been really fun. Histy, sorry I can't keep my promise now. Sora, Compa, Iffy, Donald, Goofster, guess I'll be waitin' for you up there...*"

She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable...

"...Wha-"

But the blade never came close. When Neptune opened her eyes, she sees someone blocking the Newtype's attack with two katanas in her hands!

"Not another step!"

The Newtype growled. "Blasted ninja!"

The defender deflected the attack, causing the Newtype to take another swing that the ninja dodged effortlessly, jumping up to grab Neptune's Keyblade and returning to said Keyblade's owner in a cool seven seconds.

"I've returned as promised, Neppy!"

Neppy couldn't believe her eyes. She can't mistake that never-leaving smile, bright orange hair, music notes on her eyes, and misfitted school uniform.

"Marvy!" Neptune sighed in relief. "Thanks for the save!"

Marvy giggled. "It's no biggie! Ninjas always return the favor. You helped me, so now, I'll help you."

She then handed Neptune's Keyblade back to her, along with something else with it.

The ninja leaned close to the girl's right ear and whispered. "That little one's a thank-you gift from Mr. Geppetto..."

Once Neptune saw the gift, she gasped loudly.

"Go rest for now" Marvy sheathed her katanas and brought out a singular knife. "Allow me to deal with her"

The white-haired woman scoffed. "Do you think you can beat me?"

"That is irrelevant" Marvy readied her stance. "By my honor as a ninja, I, MarvelousAQL, will bring you down!"

"Then you've made your grave..."

The two stood still in silence, waiting for the other to dare to make a move...

...and after five seconds...

...the two closed the distance and clashed again!

"**TRI-COLOR ORDER**!"

The Newtype aimed for a three-stab attack...

"**RENSEN**!"

...but the ninja swept past her with a slash from her knife!

Neptune couldn't keep up with the back and forth the two are exhibiting right now. Between the high speeds and powerful techniques, this battle seemed to be slowed down to a snail's pace for it to be truly followed!

However, she stopped her gawking when she heard a groan near her...

"**POISON FENCER**!"

Dodging the poisonous attack, Marvy prepares another technique...

"**RANBU**!" A three-hit strike!

...Not letting up, she prepares yet another!

"**BATTOU RANBU**!" A five-hit attack!

Groaning, the Newtype prepares to respond in kind.

"You're tougher than you look, but..."

She charged forth and unleashed her attack...

"**LACY DANCE**!"

...sending the ninja back with a fierce slash!

"GAH!" Marvy screamed as she was forced back onto the ground.

"You're not half bad for a mere Drifter" the Newtype complimented as she approached her downed enemy. "But you're still not good enough to beat me..."

She then pointed her blade at her foe. "Any last words?"

"Go ahead..." Marvy dared with an unflinching gaze. "...Do your worst"

The Newtype furrowed her eyes at her target, raising her blade.

"You've asked for it..."

"**FORCE**!"

"WHAT!?"

Suddenly, the Newtype felt herself being lowered to the ground!

"Time to follow up! **GRAVITY SLAM**!"

And then, she felt the hilt of a Keyblade empowered with magic hit her on the back, keeping her grounded.

"What is the meaning of this!? I feel so...sluggish!"

The Newtype was brought down to the ground by the Keyblade Wielder's newly obtained Gravity spell!

"You had a spell like that!?" the Newtype realized.

"A little thank-you gift for rescuing a fellow 4th-wall breaker!" Neptune boasted. "Now then, a little pick-me-up courtesy of our friendly neighborhood ninja and her old charge!"

She then grabbed the item that Marvy gave her, a **Megalixir**, and used it up, not only healing her and her standing allies, but also reviving her fallen friends as well!

"We're back in action!" Goofy cheered.

"Oh boy!" Donald shouted.

"The nurse is in the building!" Compa readied herself.

"Time for Round 2!" IF stood up with pride.

"Oh yeah!" Sora cheered. "Feeling better than ever!"

Marvy's smile widened as the item she gifted restored their energy. "Thank goodness it worked..."

The Newtype growled at the revelation. "Pesky little..."

"So, uh, Ms. Newtype" Neptune remarked. "Here's a little lesson for ya..."

As the Newtype is getting up from the Gravity spell, she finds herself surrounded on all sides by the Keyblade wielders' party!

"...don't mess with us!"

Goofy started the attack with a good-old fashioned **Goofy Charge**...

"Up you go!"

...pushing the Newtype back!

"Sora!"

Hearing Donald's call, Sora jumps up and begins unleashing their Combination Skill, the **Elemental Slam**!

"Up there!" A fire slash upwards.

"And another!" A blizzard slash further up!

"Here's the big one!" And a lightning slam to finish it off!

"GAH!"

"Not feeling so hot now, huh?" With her taunt finished, IF moved in and delivered her technique straight against the Newtype. "**HEAVEN DEMON**!"

"AH!"

"And now..."

"The pudding I promised you!"

"What!?"

The white-haired woman looked up to see a giant plate of pudding falling directly at her. The plate dissipated before it hit the Newtype, causing the pudding to cover her whole body instead.

The Newtype was hit with **A Plate of Pudding**!

"Well, it's not exactly that, but it's the spirit that counts!"

"Neptune..." the Newtype growled as she tried to wipe off the pudding from her body. "Why you...!"

"Don't let your guard down..."

The Newtype turned to see Marvy, the ninja Drifter with her katanas armed again.

"...**Midarisaki**..."

The ninja charged at the defenseless Newtype, delivering a fifteen-hit combo of katana strikes at her with relentless gusto!

"...And now, the finisher!"

She then wreathed herself in flames that took shape of a large bird, and flew towards the Newtype, engulfing her in flames as Marvy slowly sheathed her katana.

"Had enough?" IF said to the downed Newtype.

"Son of a gun..." the Newtype mumbled, failing to get up. "They actually beat me..."

"I mean, you were tough as molasses back there" Neptune commented. "I don't think we could've beaten you if we haven't ganged up on you like we did. Not to mention, Marvy over here"

Marvy chuckled. "I mean, I was knocked over after a while. Having to run back and forth tends to be pretty draining..."

The Newtype quickly got up, stumbling as she did so, and snorted. "Don't get such big heads just because you've won today! I...wasn't in the best condition and this arena's too small! When we fight again, it will be on much better terms"

"Are you serious now!?" the nurse complained.

"Must we keep fightin' each other?" Goofy shook his head in disbelief.

"..."

The white-haired woman began to float away. "Be sure to return stronger than ever, Neptune. Next time, I WILL win!"

"I don't know if we're supposed to keep this rival shin-dig, but okay!" Neptune waved at the Newtype happily. "See ya in the next world or two, you lovely gal!"

"Shut up, Neptune!"

Her voice trailed off as she flew away.

"*She's certainly gotten stronger than before. Her companions, too. But even still, I do not feel a spark that signifies her identity as a CPU. Maybe I need to be a bit more drastic to draw it*

out."

She felt her heartbeat once more.

"*And yet, that strange feeling is still there whenever I'm near her. What is it?*"

Traverse Town – Third District – Vacant House

"Got another round of training done..."

Leon returned to the Lone House to retrieve some supplies for the next patrol, but finds that he's not alone...

"I am so...so bored...bored right out of my brain~"

He finds Yuffie, the so-called Great Ninja, lying boredly on the bed while singing her own self-made song, the Dogoo lying on her belly as she wrapped an arm around it.

"Shouldn't you be out there right now?" he asked the ninja.

"But I don't...wanna...go outdoors right now~" she replied, never missing a beat or tone.

"Listen, you're the only one who can scout out areas we can't even look at." Leon sighed. "Okay, we'll get something from the Moogles later today. How about that?"

Yuffie, upon hearing this, gets up, causing the Dogoo to jump off her belly. "You sure?"

Leon pinched his nose, knowing he's going to regret this. "I am"

"Sweet!" the ninja hopped on to the door. "C'mon, let's go scouting already!"

"Like a kid in a circus..." As soon as she left, Leon left a heavy sigh. "The things I do for that girl, honestly..."

He then felt something vibrating on his pocket. Producing a silver cellphone, he looked to see the word 'Artisan' on the phone.

The man answered the call. "Artisan, what is it?"

Traverse Town – First District

"I cannot thank you all enough for this!" Geppetto thanked the boys (and Yuffie and Marvy). "Imagine my surprise when we were blown out of that blasted whale and into these young one's fancy ship! This never happened in my hay-day!"

"Don't mention it!" Sora brushed off.

"We're just glad you all got a place to live!" Goofy said with a smile.

"But you didn't have to go all the way for us!" Marvy insisted.

"But nothing!" Donald opposed. "We want to help out here too!"

"Right now, your world is lost, making all of you Drifters" Leon said. "There's no shame in settling in a Refuge World until you can get back on your feet and your world somehow returns"

"Did you lose yours too, Mister?" Pinocchio asked innocently.

"Unfortunately..." Leon sighed.

"No thanks to that stupid witch, Maleficent!" Yuffie complained as she started to do air punches. "When I get to that lady, I will-"

"Um, please keep it down" Marvy pleaded as she covered Pinocchio's ears. "We don't want Pinocchio to start swearing down the road."

"Ugh. Sorry about that" Yuffie scratched her head. "Still, it's strange to meet a fellow ninja around here, even if we're both from different worlds!"

"I...don't remember much of my home world" Marvy scratched her cheek. "But it's still nice to meet a fellow ninja too."

"Not just a ninja" Yuffie boasted. "I'm THE Great Ninja Yuffie. Here to take all the treasures for our home world!"

As the two ninjas get acquainted, Leon turned his attention to the other boys. "Where are the girls?"

"Off showering" Donald answered.

"Gotta have to remove all the whale stink, they said..." Goofy relayed.

"I see" Leon nodded. "Well, you all do the same once we're done helping Geppetto out. Can't afford to get distracted by body odor when fighting the Heartless or Maleficent's cohorts..."

Sora nodded. "Sure thing"

Before the trio returned to work, Leon called them again.

"By the way, is what Artisan said true? That Riku and the lady in white and black are working for Maleficent now?"

"That's what Iffy believes..." Goofy mentioned.

"Riku seemed to be in the wrong crowd" Donald relayed. "The Newtype, not so much, we think"

Sora hung his head down, still thinking about what happened to Riku back there. What could've happened to him? Could he have said what he felt back then better? But more importantly...

Are he and Kairi going to be okay, when Maleficent and her other cohorts are quite close to them?

While the Newtype lady is a tough cookie, even she can't be everywhere at once. Still, she said that she's watching over Riku. He wanted to believe that, at least, he can be safe, but...

Leon hummed. "Getting through to those two will be tough, especially if that Newtype has been giving you trouble by herself..."

"Even so, we're not stopping" Sora suddenly declared. "I came along on this journey to get BOTH my friends back. I won't give up on them. Not now. Not ever."

Both Donald and Goofy nodded in agreement.

Leon smirked. "I see. Glad to hear it."

"Oh, and check this trick out!"

"That's amazing, Yuffie!"

"Do it again! Do it again!"

Seeing the ninjas entertaining the young puppet boy, the boys felt reenergized.

"Okay! What say we get back to work?" Donald asked his friends.

"Okay!"

The three continued their work, carrying the needed supplies for Geppetto's new home.

As Leon watched on, he still felt a bit concerned about leaving such heavy responsibilities to two children who were thrust with power they never even asked for. Still, their drive to help others, on top of their determination to find those they desire, are likely why they are achieving such successes in the first place.

Maybe Maleficent and her cohorts are underestimating how strong the party can grow? Maybe Riku and the Newtype couldn't keep up with their growth, in spite of their pride? Who knows? But at least the Lionhearted Man knows one thing.

"Those two...may be just what our worlds needed...Bright hearts who can make others smile just for being who they are..."

NEPSTATION

Neptune: It’s time for Nepstation! *shivers* Brrrr, coming here after a nice bath was not the right choice. I feel quite chilly now...

Marvy: Maybe you should rest up for a while before doing this news cast...

Neptune: And disappoint my fans by not making an appearance here? Never!

Marvy: Wow...Such dedication, hahaha...

Neptune: *clears throat* Anyway, let’s proceed with to the news

---

an image of a whale swimming in space has appeared onscreen

Marvy: Recently, a giant whale has been sighted swimming in outer space! Space travelers have been baffled at the sight of the sea mammal! One of the witnesses has this to say...

Witness N: It’s the coming of the Space Whale Domination Plan! Warn everyone! Evacuate all cities! WE ARE DOOMED~!

Marvy: Truly a most distressing sight...

Neptune: Hey! That witness’s warnings are very warranted! Have you SEEN the insides of a space whale!?

Marvy: *sweatdrops* Uhhhh...

Neptune: *sighs* Okay, rhetorical question, but my point still stands! Those things are not a natural occurrence!

Marvy: So is basically everything that’s happening lately...

Neptune: You’ll never know! Maybe they’ll send an army of monsters and brainwashed thralls and obliterate the sector in a really convoluted space drama story!

Marvy: I...don’t know how what to say to that...

Neptune: L-Let's just move on to the next segment...

---

an image of a fox and a hound with their eyes crossed out appeared onscreen

Neptune: There have been recent sightings of missing children occurring out there in the worlds. Witnesses state that a fox with a top hat and their hound assistant may be behind this case. There has been little sighting of the suspects ever since, but the ever-present danger to the children is still...er...present! So, watch your kids closely, parents! You’ll never know when they’ll turn into a donkey next...

Marvy: *furrows eyes*

Neptune: Um...you have a dangerous look in your eyes? You okay?

Marvy: *smiles* Oh, I'm fine. I was just thinking how tasty fox meat would be. I've never had some before.

Neptune: *shudders* The way you just casually said that terrifies me!

Marvy: *giggles* We ninja are trained in the art of intimidation. This is just the intermediate lessons.

Neptune: I...see...Ahahaha...

Marvy: Now with that out of the way, let's get to the next section!

an image of a white parka, a peach sweater and a long blue coat are shown onscreen

Neptune: With the ever-present danger of space whales and other such unknowns, the Moogle Conglomerate has decided to update their clothing lines with the latest threads suited for otherworldly travel!

Marvy: Be it from the harshest deserts or the wettest innards, these new threads will ensure a safe and cool feeling as you travel around!

Neptune: So, go on and grab these spiffy new threads today! First orders are discounted so get all that cash out and spend, spend, spend!

Marvy: Just be sure to save some for rations!

Neptune: Now that that's outta way, let's get to today's topic! Since my usual co-host is chilling after a nice bath, mind sticking with me for this one?

Marvy: Not at all! So, what are we talking about today?

Neptune: Well, our topic for today is...

the word Worlds appear onscreen

Marvy: Oh? Are we talking about the **Worlds** today?

Neptune: Looks like it! So, as you can see, we here at Nep Team Epic has been traversing several places littered around the **Ocean Between**, or outer space for you pea-brained people. These places are called Worlds.

an image of some of the visited worlds are shown onscreen

Marvy: Several of these Worlds are unique in nature. One is a mysterious land filled with twists and turns. Another is a desert world where treasures lie beneath the sands. Yet another hosts gladiator tournaments above the clouds!

Neptune: Yup! Every world’s got their quirks and landmarks! Pretty unmistakable and easily identifiable, especially for avid Golden Age Disney fans!

Marvy: But...I got a question...

Neptune: Shoot

an image of Monstro appears onscreen

Marvy: Does this whale swimming around outer space count as a World?

Neptune: Ummmmm, I don’t think so...

Marvy: Huh? How come?

Neptune: I think Iffy already mentioned this, but that whale came from another world that has already fallen into darkness, so that not-space whale is all that’s left from it.

Marvy: Oh no! Poor thing...

Neptune: Yup. See, for a world to be gone, the Heartless will have to find the Keyhole to it that leads to that World’s Heart, it’s core, and gobble it all up! The whale’s one part of the World that was already gone...But! If the Keyhole is sealed before that happens, then the World is safe from danger...I think...

Marvy: So...does that make the whale a Drifter? A really big Drifter.

Neptune: Huh...it kinda does, huh...

Marvy: I believe the turn of phrase is...Mind blown.

Neptune: Hahaha! You got it!

Marvy: Thank you so much for passing by. Everyone else who reads these stories, leave kudos, subscribe and bookmark and leave a comment or two, and Mr. Author will get to you as soon as he can!

Neptune: And so, from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Marvy: See you next time!

Chapter 10: Chapter 8: Under (Dangers in) the Sea

Chapter Summary

> Within the watery world of Atlantica, our party discovers the meaning of wonder, responsibility and fatherhood...

Ocean Between – Approaching Atlantica

"WORLD AHOY!"

"We're really gonna start our arrivals like this every time, huh?" IF complained at Neptune's loud declaration.

"Anyway, what do we have for this world?" Compa asked.

"Water" Goofy said simply.

"Lots and lots of water" Sora continued.

"At least it's not whale saliva this time..." IF sighed as she stood up. "I better hang my coat somewhere..."

"An underwater world, huh?" Neptune wondered. "I wonder if we got swimming gear..."

Compa groaned. "I don't know how to swim in deep waters..."

"That's okay!" Goofy reassured. "We can teach ya!"

"Hold up!" Sora shouted. "How do we even get in there? We'll just drown!"

"Not a problem!" Donald said, bringing out his staff. "I know just the magic that will help us blend in!"

"Well, that settles that!" Neptune raised a fist. "So let's go go go!"

Atlantica – Canyon

In the vast sea world, our party emerged not as humanoid creatures, but as various sea-folk. Donald and Goofy entered as a half-squid, half-duck and a sea turtle respectively. Meanwhile, Sora arrived as a merman with a blue fin. Neptune, Compa and IF all entered as mermaids, with seashells covering their chests and having purple, pink and dark blue fins respectively.

"Woah, mermaids, huh?" Neptune wondered in amazement. "Now that I think about it, we never got to do something like that for our franchise, huh?"

IF hummed as she swam around a bit. "This isn't too bad. Granted, it will take a lot of time to adjust to this, but I think we can manage going around here like this..."

Compa moaned, trying to stay afloat.

"You really can't swim, huh?" Sora chuckled.

"It's bad enough that I can't swim!" the nurse complained. "Now we're deep under water, and I can't move an inch without looking stupid!"

"Oh, what's the harm?" Neptune said, laying down while trying to swim backwards. "Times like these, we gotta make the most out of the moment, and stuff! Right, Sora?"

"Errrrr, right" Sora answered, rubbing his cheek.

"C'mon, buck-o! Why don't you try swimming with us?" Neptune asked the boy. "Don't tell me you don't know how to either?"

"I do know!" Sora tried to defend himself. "It's just..we never swim in that deep in!"

Neptune laughed. "And you call yourself an islander..."

"Oh, that's it!"

Sora began to playfully chase around Neptune across the area, leaving poor Compa floating while the rest of the party were swimming around.

"Those two..." IF sighed. "Give them a moment and they'll start prancing around like kids."

"I mean, they still ARE kids..." Donald said.

"Oh, let 'em have this." Goofy suggested. "We'll never know when we'll get moments like this again..."

"That's great and all..." Compa started. "But who's gonna teach me how to swim!?"

"Maybe we can help."

The party looked to the source of the voice, seeing a mermaid with red hair, blue eyes and green fin accompanied by a yellow fish and a red crab.

Atlantica – Underwater Palace

"There you go!" the red-haired mermaid cheered. "You're getting the hang of this!"

"Well, Ms. Ariel" Compa started, swimming along fine. "Learning fast is great, but..."

She picked up the pace as she and the party were being chased around by green scuba-diving Heartless, called **Screwdivers**, wielding large forks for weapons!

"We're still being chased around!"

IF clicked her tongue as she prepares another spell. "Doesn't help that we still need to adjust fighting underwater"

"Just keep swimming!" Donald ordered the group as he fired a **Firaga** spell (that didn't dissipate underwater) at the Heartless.

"You heard Dory the Duck!" Neptune chirped, keeping pace with everyone. "Keep swimmin'!"

"Just a little more, my guests!" the red crab named Sebastian urged. "We are almost to da Royal Palace, mon!"

Suddenly, a giant blue fish Heartless appeared in front of them. An **Aquatank**, to be precise!

"Oh no!"

"Get back! **FORCE**!" Sora shouted, casting a **Gravity** spell against the giant fish, flattening it to the ground.

"Away ya go!" Goofy then pounded the downed Heartless with his shield, clearing the way forward. "C'mon, fellers! The way is clear!"

"I hope King Triton can fight these monsters off..." the yellow fish named Flounder hoped.

"Is he strong?" Compa wondered.

"Only the mightiest in Atlantica, mon!" Sebastian boasted. "He, the King, has safeguarded our kingdom for generations!"

"Oooooohhhh" Neptune's eye glittered in stars. "Wonder how good this king is, huh?"

Atlantica – Ariel's Grotto

"Well, that king's kind of a prick, huh?" Neptune complained.

"I mean, he fought off all those Heartless in a zap..." Sora said.

"But did he have to shout on poor Ariel like that?" Neptune wondered in anger.

"Give it a rest, Nep" IF sighed. "Besides, I'm pretty sure that he's just worried about his daughter"

"If he wanted to keep her safe" Neptune continued to complain. "then maybe give her some sort of safety artifact or something..."

Ariel sighed. "Let's...not talk about Daddy right now. I do have something I want to go check out for my collection, though..."

"Oh?" Sora raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Atlantica – Sunken Ship

"And then, we're here!" Neptune chirped.

"We've been doing a lot of jump cuts in this chapter, huh?" Compa noticed.

IF sighed. "It's official. The author can't do underwater exploration, huh?"

"Aw, I bet they're doing their best to tell our story!" Goofy tried to reassure the group.

"Enough about that!" Donald shouted. "What's in the chest!?"

Sora laughed weakly. "I'm pretty sure there isn't any gold in there, Donald..."

"Aw, you'll never know!" the duck back-handed. "C'mon, open it!"

Ariel chuckled. "Calm down, I'm about to open it"

She opened the lone chest on the ground, revealing a crystal trident!

"Wow..." Flounder looked in amazement. "This looks like the King's trident, huh?"

"Now that you mention it, it kinda does" Compa noticed.

"..." IF hummed, gathering her thoughts.

"Hey, isn't there a trident-shaped hole in your grotto, Ariel?" Sora recalled.

Ariel nodded. "This is just the perfect fit for it. Let's head back!"

Neptune's eyes widened. "Wait, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Donald wondered.

"Oh! I hear it too!" Goofy gasped.

"Hear what?" Flounder said nervously.

"I hear nothing! I see nothing, lalalala!" Compa complained, covering her ears while squeezing her eyes shut.

"Wait, is it me..." IF started. "Or is the sound getting closer?"

Sora dared to around, only to see a menacing face staring right at them.

"Sora, what are you looking at-"

Donald followed his face and looked at what he saw, terrifying him.

"S-S-S-S-"

The face barged right in, shattering the ship's windows, revealing the face's true form!

"SHARK!"

Seeing the ocean's apex predator on the prowl, the party immediately fled the scene before it could completely catch them.

Atlantica – Ariel's Grotto

"D-Did we lose him?" Sora wondered.

"I sure hope so" Compa moaned.

Neptune groaned. "Being chased around by sharks is no fun! If we weren't so aquatic right now, we could've trounced that shark!"

She got bopped in the head by a duck's staff for her trouble. "Hey! World Order!"

"Does the crystal fit?" Goofy asked Ariel as she placed the trident onto the hole.

Sure enough, it fits perfectly! Not only that, the crystal trident shone, revealing a familar shape!

"Oh!" Sora noticed.

"The Keyhole!" IF gasped.

"Well, that was easy!" Neptune cheered, summoning her Keyblade. "C'mon, buck-o! Let's seal this thing and be on our way!"

Sora nodded, summoning his Keyblade. But before they could do that...

"Not so fast!"

The whole party turned around to see...

"Daddy!?"

"King Triton!"

...the King of Atlantica in the grotto, furious and mad.

"Uh, Neptune..." Sora called out.

Neptune clicked her tongue. "Okay, this one's on me. I jinxed us..."

"Daddy!" Ariel demanded. "What are you doing here!?"

"Ariel!" King Triton shouted as he raised his trident. "Get away from those people right now!"

"What is he doing?" Compa cried out, scared of what he would do.

IF, however, figured out what he was trying to do, and tried to plead with him. "Wait, Your Majesty! Please hear us out!"

"I won't hear another word of this!"

Drowning out IF's pleas, he blasts the crystal trident to kingdom come, taking the Keyhole with it.

"Daddy..." Ariel shook in anger. "You're the worst! I hate you!"

She swam out in anger, tears spilling from her face all the while...

"Ariel!"

Compa and Flounder gave pursuit to the crying girl, but King Triton halted the nurse's advance.

"What's the big idea, meanie king!?" Neptune complained. "Can't you see we were keeping your world safe!?"

"That's what you think, but..." King Triton started. "All of you here aren't from around here, aren't you?"

"H-How did you know?" the boy wished to know.

"I can tell from the way you all swam" the king answered. "You all couldn't tell your dorsal fins from your tails."

"Well..." Sora stammered. "That's..."

"So, what if we don't!?" Neptune continued to fight back.

"Nep, you shouldn't..." IF tried to simmer the girl down.

"Then you must already know" the King of Atlantica scolded. "One must not meddle in the affairs of other worlds!"

He then points his trident at their Keyblades. "Those weapons in particular are dangerous, said to bring forth pain and destruction wherever it goes!"

"Hold on, pal!" Neptune complained again. "That's not what we've been doing!"

"How do you even know about the Keyblade?" IF wondered.

"It is the word of our predecessor kings, passed down from mouth-to-mouth" King Triton explained. "If I allowed the Keyhole to remain open, then our world will be exposed to danger from those monsters!"

"And that's why we are here!" Neptune fought back. "We came to SEAL it so those Heartless and whatever baddie leads them won't get to it!"

King Triton scoffed at them. "Such slander! Take your keys and leave my kingdom AND my daughter alone!"

Neptune only got even madder. "I WON'T HEAR IT FROM AN INSENSITIVE JERK WHO JUST MADE HIS DAUGHTER CRY!"

"NEP!"

"Calm down, please!"

IF and Sora forcefully lowered Neptune's head, bowing all the while. "We won't cause any more trouble, Your Majesty."

"We'll leave as soon as possible!" Sora stammered.

"You'd better. I'm affording this ounce of mercy as thanks for saving my daughter..." King Triton let out a loud breath as he turned and left.

"Grrrr!" Neptune immediately forced their hands away. "Why'd you stop me, guys!?"

"Listen, I can get that you're frustrated about everything that happened" IF tried to reason. "But throwing a fit isn't gonna help in the long run."

"But..."

The guild agent put a hand on her friend's shoulder. "I get it. Ariel's suffering right now. And the world is still suffering from the Heartless. But King Triton is not the main source of the problem here."

Goofy nodded. "He's actin' gruff, but he's doin' his best as both king and father. I think I even saw how sad he looked."

"Is he now?" Neptune snarked.

Compa placed her hand on Neptune's other shoulder. "I get that you're upset, but let's focus on finding Ariel and cheering her up first. We can worry about King Triton and the Heartless later."

"What they said" Sora said, nodding. "We'll take stuff on, one at a time, okay?"

IF looked to the court wizard. "Is that alright with you?"

Donald gave a small nod.

Neptune sighed. "Fine. I'm worried about her, anyway."

Atlantica – King's Throne

King Triton returned to his throne with a heavy heart as he released his trident, letting it float to it's place behind his throne.

"Hopefully, that will put a stop to those...Heartless for a while..."

"Your Majesty, are ya sure that be da right course of action, mon?" Sebastian tried to voice out. "It really looked like those folks are tryin' to help us out, y'know?"

"I won't have another word about this, Sebastian!" King Triton nearly shouted. "Now leave and check up on my daughter!"

"Y-Yes, sir!"

Sebastian swam out as fast as he could. As soon as his advisor left, the sea king gave a heavy sigh and pinched his forehead in frustration.

"Oh, look, a lonely king, sitting alone on a lonely throne. How fitting that you would keep others at a distance..."

Sensing danger, King Triton summoned his trident.

"Who goes there!?"

"Down here"

He looked down, seeing a witch surrounded by a purple bubble that is maintaining her form.

"Another intruder!?" King Triton shouted. "Are you in league with those Keyblade wielders!?"

"Those two? Please!" Arfoire scoffed. "If anything, I should thank you for effectively banishing them. Now, nothing will stop us from claiming this world as our own!"

"Then, are you in league with Ursula!?"

Arfoire snickered.

"You dare!?"

He fires a blast at the witch, who only raised a hand and erected a magical barrier to block it.

Said witch chuckled. "This ought to be amusing. I hope she's happy that I'm fulfilling my end of the bargain here..."

Atlantica – Seabed

"Why, Daddy?" Ariel cried. "Why do you have to be so mean? And after we helped you remember Mommy's wishes..."

"Ariel..." Flounder tried to comfort his friend.

"Ariel"

Flounder looked behind to see Compa, along with all her friends.

"You guys..."

"Is she doing alright?" Donald asked.

"She's been crying for a while, now." Flounder stated. "I dunno what to tell her."

The party looked to each other. However, one swam to her.

"I got this"

He swam on to her, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Hey, Ariel"

She stopped her crying for a bit, to see Goofy, looking at her with a sad smile.

"I get that you're feelin' sad right now, but I can say that your daddy's been lookin' out for ya, even if he can't really say why he does the things he does."

"Does he really?" Ariel managed to say, sniffing in between words.

Goofy nodded. "Dads are among the hardiest of folks. At times, they gotta make ends meet in order to keep their kids safe and happy, even embarassin' themselves at times. Can ya think of a time your dad did somethin' funny?"

Ariel stopped to think for a few minutes...and then started to laugh a bit.

"There, ya see!" Goofy smiled. "Now I know I may not be the brightest tool in the shed, but can ya at least talk things out with your dad? I'll be right here with ya if you need help."

Ariel wiped off the last of her tears. "I think so. Thank you, Goofy."

Goofy gave out his signature chuckle. "Don't mention it!"

"Man, Goofy's really good at this..." Sora looked on, amazed.

"It's almost like he's a father himself" Compa said with a smile.

"Well, he is" Donald stated offhandly.

"HE IS!?" The rest of the party, excluding IF, shouted with comical white circles for eyes.

"I figured he was" the guild agent facepalmed. "What with all the advice he's been giving out lately."

"C'mon, fellas!" Goofy urged the party, ignorant of their conversation. "Let's get to Ariel's dad!"

"Everyone!"

The whole party turned to see a red crab racing to them.

"Sebastian?" Flounder called out.

"What's wrong?" Ariel asked, sensing his panic.

"It's da King!" Sebastian said, catching his breath. "He's been attacked by an evil witch!"

Everyone gapsed in surprise at that.

"Did this witch look purple and old?" IF asked the royal adviser.

"I think so, mon!" Sebastian quickly replied.

"I-is it that Ursula you told us about?" Flounder stammered.

The crab shook his head. "Dis one had legs and a pointy hat, mon!"

"Arfoire..." Sora groaned, recognizing the description mentioned.

"But what's the purple hag doing here?" Donald wondered.

"We'll find out once we get to her" IF suggested. "C'mon, let's go to the King!"

"Awww, do we have to?" Neptune complained.

"Save your complaints for later" the guild agent insisted. "Right now, we gotta stop Arfoire!"

As everyone swam away, Neptune was still hesitant, but eventually gave in.

"Oooooohhh! Fine!"

And so, she swam after them too, despite her misgivings...

Atlantica – King's Throne

"I have to admit, you fight fiercely for a king" Arfoire complimented the Sea King, who despite running out of breath, refused to yield. "But you are just that, a mere king with the powers of one. My power surpasses that of your station. You will fall, and this world will follow soon after!"

"Over my dead body!" King Triton dared, readying another blast from his trident.

"That can be arranged..."

"Daddy!"

The two looked up to see Ariel swimming into the Throne Room.

"Ariel, no!"

"...or perhaps I'll arrange hers first!"

Seeing an opportunity, Arfoire fires off a dark, spectral spear at the unsuspecting Ariel...

"...Daddy?"

...but the hit never came, piercing through the King's back instead!

"Oh?"

"Your Majesty!"

"Oh no!"

Eventually, Sora and the rest of the party, accompanied by Sebastian and Flounder arrived on the scene.

"Daddy, no!"

King Triton grunted, feeling the pain from Arfoire's back attack. The wounds he received from their scuffle didn't help, either. "Ariel...at least...you're safe, my...daughter..."

Flounder panicked. "W-We've gotta get help!"

"Right! Come, boy!" Sebastian urged as the two made their way to get medical treatment.

"Can't you do anythin', Compa?" Goofy asked the nurse.

She hummed, bringing out her toolkit. "I'm dunno if my tools work, but I'll at least try to stop his boo-boos from hurting!"

While the King was suffering from his treating wounds, his trident floated down to where Arfoire is.

"So, this is the source of your power" Arfoire chuckled, examining the magical trident. "How impressive!"

"You...You monster!" Ariel shouted. "Give Daddy's trident back!"

The evil witch snickered. "And why would I do that?"

"Hey, I may not like the guy..." Neptune started. "But don't you dare steal his stuff, Arforite!"

"For Gamindustri's sake, it's AR-FOIRE!" the witch complained. "Will you ever get my name right, you ingrate!?"

"I don't think she ever will..." Sora sweatdropped.

"It's an ingrained instinct for her at this point" IF followed. "*But that word...Gamindustri...why does it sound familiar?*"

Arfoire groaned. "Like I need to stay here any further. Ursula, I have the trident, like I promised!"

A puff of purple smoke appeared behind the witch, revealing an evil octopus-witch hybrid about as old as Arfoire herself.

"Great!" Neptune complained. "Now, there's TWO purple hags to worry about!"

"Ahahahahahaha!" Ursula laughed as she held the King's trident in her hands. "Now I have the ultimate power of the seas! Once the Keyhole is located, this world will be mine!"

"Ursula" one of the eels that spawned named Flotsam, reported. "We cannot seem to find the Keyhole around here"

"There's nothing else mystical around here" another eel named Jetsam, stated. "Only the King's trident exuded magical power"

"WHAT!?" the sea witch complained. "The sea kings have been guarding this place for generations! It must be here!"

"I'm afraid I'm with your...poopsies on this one" Arfoire said rather teasingly. "There was no sign of the world's heart around here. They must have hidden it somewhere else..."

"Hey!"

The four turned to see Neptune and the rest of the party (except Compa as she's treating the sea king's wounds) with their weapons raised and combat-ready.

"We can't stay here" Flotsam warned.

"We must retreat!" Jetsam declared.

Ursula clicked her tongue. "Fine. We have the trident at any rate. We can start our search elsewhere! Let's head back!"

Arfoire then sneered. "You heard her, fools! If you wish to retrieve dear daddy's trident, you must come find us...Assuming you can...swim your way with your tails between your fins!"

"Oh yeah!?" Donald shouted, priming his staff with magic. "Why don't we finish this now!?"

He unleashed a **Blizzaga** against the two witches, but they vanished in a puff of smoke, their evil laughter ringing throughout the chamber as the duck's attack missed it's mark.

Sora growled. "Got away again..."

"Calm down" IF reassured. "They haven't gone far. We'll find them"

Donald sighed. "This just got a lot worse..."

Atlantica – Ursula's Lair

With the King's pleas, the party headed forth to the evil sea witch's lair, which housed the transformed bodies of those unfortunate enough to accept her deals.

"This place gives me the creeps..." Compa shivered.

"Aye, no doubt about it" Sebastian agreed. "Dos folk down d'ere be the ones who were unlucky enough to be duped by that vile sea witch. Any who accept her deals and do not fulfill them are to be cursed to belong to her dis way for all time..."

"That's terrible..." Goofy said.

"But how does she get away with that?" Sora wondered.

"Considering the terms of her 'deals'..." IF guessed. "She must've sabotaged them in some way. That way, it looks like they're not fulfilling the deal despite their best efforts."

"So, she's ripping them off, basically" Neptune summed up.

"Pretty much" IF shrugged.

The group continued to swim through until they spot a dimly-lit room.

"There!" Ariel pointed to the room ahead. "That must be where she lives!"

"Yeah!" Sora nodded.

"She'll be tough..." IF warned everyone.

"P-shaw!" Neptune boasted. "If we can handle ourselves a wild shark, a sea hag will be a piece of pudding!"

"That's...not how the saying goes..." Compa commented.

"Anyway!" Donald urged. "Let's get her!"

But as the party swam forward, Neptune, Compa and IF were stopped by another IMB (Inconvenient Magic Barrier)

"Wha-" Neptune noticed. "This again!?"

"That could only mean one thing!" Compa guessed.

IF groaned. "Another round against the purple hag, then."

Said purple hag's voice rang out in the hallway. "I'll teach you little girls to show me some respect!"

The area around them began to fill with smoke, blurring their vision and their other sense.

"What in the-"

Atlantica – Lone Arena

As the smoke vanishes, the girls found themselves in a large-circular arena, but more importantly...

"Hey!" Neptune looked down to see a pair of legs below her. "We've got legs again!"

"It's not just that!" Compa looked at herself, seeing herself back in her clothes. "We got our clothes back too!"

"Did she transform us back to our real forms?" IF wondered as she noticed her legs as well. The only thing she's missing is her blue coat that she left behind in the Gummi Ship.

"Or maybe the author just can't write underwater combat?" Compa wondered.

"C'mon, that's just ridiculous..." IF sweatdropped.

"Haa-hahahaha!" Arfoire's laughter rang throughout the arena. "You like it? I figured I'd make things a little easier for you, since you will all fall under my power regardless!"

"Why don't you show yourself already!?" IF dared the witch.

"We're not scared of an old witch like you!" Compa shouted.

"Hmph, if you all insist"

Purple smoke started to manifest at the northern edge of the arena, and as it faded, Arfoire emerged from the remains.

"So, what gives this time?" Neptune wondered. "You seem to sprout around at random. First, the gorilla jungle. Then, the panther-head cave. Now, here under the sea. What's your game here, R4-D2?"

Arfoire growled. "Again, with the misnaming...If you must know, I'm here to satiate my curiosity"

"Even though you're working for Maleficent?" IF snarked.

Arfoire chuckled. "I'll have to correct you on that one. None of us here are working FOR that evil fairy."

"What do you mean?" Compa asked.

"While we are all gathered together by her, none of us agreed to work for her. Working WITH her, on the other hand, is an acceptable proposition." Arfoire clarified. "It's the same with that boy Riku"

"What are you on about?" Neptune furrowed her eyes. "And what's Riku gotta do with this?"

Arfoire chuckled. "Maleficent is currently one of the more powerful beings among the worlds right now, as far as commanding the Heartless is concerned at least. But, if she's defeated, the tides would change, causing everything she's ever worked for to crumble overnight."

"I see" IF nodded. "So, their alliance is shaky at best"

"Why tell us this?" Compa asked the witch. "What do you gain out of all this?"

"I mentioned working with her, yes?" Arfoire continued. "Whether she fulfills her goal or not is not a concern to me. My goal, or at least my path to it, has always been independent of hers. I simply joined along to see if anything occurring here could speed up my own plans."

"And what are those plans, Arforicchi?" Neptune asked. "What are you even doing here with us, anyway?"

The witch facepalmed. "Again with the-Ugh! Like I would tell you fools! Besides, I've heard from a little birdie that you have begun to improve. I've come to see for myself how far"

She then summoned her dark spear.

"So, you want a fight?" IF readied her qatars. "Fine then, let's finish this up quick, girls!"

"Yeah!" Compa readied her syringe. "We still gotta catch up with Sora and the others!"

"One more thing" Arfoire suddenly said. "Do you feel strange, Neptune?"

"Huh?" the girl with the key looked around. "Me? Strange? Not really? Do I smell? I thought I scrubbed all the whale stink out!"

"Not that" Arfoire shook her head. "I'm referring to your heart. Have you ever felt a tinge or a spark inside of you?"

"A tinge?" She thought hard, but the only instances she felt them were she's around Sora, Noire or that Newtype.

Noticing the girl's changing faces, Arfoire laughed. "So, something DOES light up inside you, I see! Well, then, this bodes well for me!"

Neptune summoned her Keyblade and readied her stance. "Okay, NOW you're confusing me!"

"You don't need to understand, Neptune" Arfoire grinned. "Just know that I will obtain what is rightfully mine! And you will not stop me!"

"Oh yeah!" Neptune charged straight at the witch. "Not on your life! **CROSS COMBINATION**!"

However, just as Neptune was about to launch her final hit, Arfoire lined up her technique straight at her!

"Don't think I don't know your techniques, Neptune! **SYLHET SPEAR**!"

She launched a spectral spear straight at the girl, pushing her back!

"Owie!" Neptune groaned in pain. "That hurt!"

"And now, another!" Arfoire then closed in and swung her poison-enchanted lance in arc. "**VENOM STORM**!"

"Grk!" The girl with the key winced as she knelt. "I'm...not feeling too hot..."

"Nep-Nep!" Compa rushed to the girl in the parka. "Hold on!"

"Not a chance!"

Not letting up, Arfoire fires off another spectral spear at the defenseless nurse, halting her in her tracks!

"She's getting smarter" IF mumbled, channeling magic onto her qatars. "Then feel the wrath of the fallen stars! **GRAVITY HOLD**!"

IF's **Gravity** spell halts the witch's attacks, giving her allies time to recover. "Go, Compa! I'll keep her busy!"

"You think you can handle me!?" Arfoire dashed forth, closing the distance against the guild agent. "**RAINY RATNAPURA**!"

IF raised her guard beforehand, blocking the incoming attack. "She's not letting up...!"

"Then I'll even the odds!"

Neptune dashed forth, unleashing her second technique against the evil witch.

"**CRITICAL EDGE**!"

Unleashing a shorter, but more powerful attack, she manages to deal meaningful damage to the evil witch.

"Not bad..."

"There's plenty more where that came from!" Neptune boasted.

"We ain't letting up here!" IF channeled lightning magic onto her qatars "**FURIOUS LIGHTNING**!"

"Time for your medicine, witch!" Compa charged up magic into her syringe. "**AERO BULLET**!"

"I got more!" Neptune boasted, wreathing her Keyblade in Fire magic. "**BLAZE BREAK**!"

"You dare fight ME with magic!" Arfoire's barrier began to crack under the pressure. "Then it's time to raise the ante!"

She raised her magic spear, changing it to that of a large battle axe.

"Oh, come on!" Neptune complained. "Since when does SHE get the weapon swaps!?"

"Careful, Nep!" IF warned the girl. "She's coming straight for you!"

"**ZERSTORUNG**!"

Spinning her battle axe, she heaves it against Neptune, sending the girl blasting back.

The girl barely got up, coughing. "I thought I was gonna barf up my lunch there..."

"Nep-Nep!" Compa ended up rushing to her friend's aid...again.

"That's the price for underestimating me!" Arfoire boasted.

"Then how about a piece of this!?"

IF charged straight at the witch, delivering ten hits of fury right at her.

"**HEAVEN DEMON**!"

But Arfoire barely flinched. "Is that all?"

"Physical attacks aren't working..." IF noted, charging magic into her weapons. "Alright then, **BLISTERING COLD**!"

The guild agent unleashed her blizzard magic, which again, barely fazed her opponent.

"Blizzard magic, hm?" Arfoire noted as she took some of the ice that was created. "I'll show you how to properly use it."

Crushing some of the ice, she threw them up and hit them with her battle axe, sending them flying against the guild agent.

"That is not how you use magic properly!" IF complained as she blocked the incoming ice attack.

"Then how about this!?"

IF's eyes widened in shock as the witch managed to close the distance while she was distracted!

"**GETTER RAVINE**!"

Arfoire spun her battle axe around the guild agent, ending the attack in a slam attack that sent her down to the ground!

"Iffy!" Compa prepared another round on her syringe. "**BLAZING AMMO**!"

But Arfoire swatted the attack away as she continues to bear down on the fallen guild agent.

"Not feeling confident, are we?" the witch mocked.

IF tried to get up, staring defiantly at the evil witch. "Go to...the Abyss..."

Arfoire, seeing the act of defiance, shifted her battle axe back to it's spear form. "Then you have sealed your fate. Farewell, insect!"

"Iffy!"

Arfoire sends down the spear to IF's chest...

"Hm?"

...only to find it blocked by Neptune, who is now glowing brightly, her Keychain shimmering with pure light.

"N-Nep?" IF looked up, seeing her brightly-glowing friend.

"You won't take another step..." Neptune said in a low voice, lower than her usual tone. "I won't let you hurt my friends!"

She then deflected the spear and pushed Arfoire back.

"This surge of power..." Arfoire gasped in surprise. "Could it be...?"

Raising her Keyblade, Neptune immediately zipped through to Arfoire, sending her into the air and then repeatedly sliced through her in a series of aerial dash attacks.

"Woah..." IF looked in surprise. "Since when did she have an attack like that?"

"Iffy!"

Compa immediately rushed to her best friend's side, patching up her wounds.

"What's happening to Nep?" IF asked the nurse.

"I don't know." Compa admitted. "One moment, she was sitting still to recover from that last attack, then the next she got up, started glowing and moved to defend you, Iffy."

"That is strange..." the guild agent mumbled. "And the way she's moving...it almost reminds me of that Newtype we've been fighting. Could Nep really be...?"

Once Neptune landed, she tossed her Keyblade up for a brief moment, grabbed it back and zipped through Arfoire one more time, before turning around and slammed her blade against the evil witch in an explosion of light!

"How..." Arfoire couldn't believe it! "You were supposed to be an amnesiac...without memories!"

Neptune just stared at the evil witch, her eyes glowing blue and her irises have turned into a strange symbol.

"Nep!/Nep-Nep!"

IF and Compa ran to check up on their friend.

"I see..." Arfoire chuckled. "Your desire to protect them caused you to unconsciously tap into your true powers, but because you're not aware of them, your **Hard Drive Divinity** only partially manifested for you"

The witch then summoned a ball of dark energy and sent it against the girl with the key, who proceeded to deflect it.

This, however, was a distraction, as Arfoire used the opening to hop away from the party.

"I've had my fun for today" the evil witch shouted. "I've already learned what I needed from you. Next time we meet will be the moment you will breathe your last! Hah-hahahahaha!"

She then vanished in a puff of smoke, never to be seen again.

"What's her deal!?" IF complained. "She just went and isolated us, fought us and then left when Nep gave her the what's-up! I swear, she might be having a mid-life crisis or something."

"Nep-Nep!" Compa approached the glowing girl. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine" Neptune answered, her tone still lower than normal. "Compa, Iffy, how about the two of you?"

"Uhhhhh..." Compa could only stare at the girl with the key, her deep, serious voice contrasting the cutesy appearance she normally exudes.

"We're fine, Nep" IF nodded along. "You are Nep, right?"

Neptune(?) sighed. "I see. That's...a relief..."

As her glow faded, Neptune passed out like a light...

Atlantica – Ursula's Lair

"Wakey-wakey, Nep-Nep!"

Neptune groaned as she slowly opened her eyes, seeing her friends surrounding her.

"Look who's awake!" Donald said.

"G'mornin, Nep-Nep!" Goofy greeted.

"Mornin'" Neptune yawned. "What happened? Where are we?"

"We're in Ursula's Lair, right now" Ariel answered.

"Oh, okay" Neptune nodded, but then panicked after a good three seconds. "Wait! Did we get captured!? Will our souls be taken in by the purple hags!? Oh, poor, unfortunate souls~!"

"It's alright, Neptune" Sora reassured. "We dealt with her, I think"

"I mean, we did as de King advised, and blasted her cauldron with magic" Sebastian said. "But..."

"Why do I feel that she's still around here, somewhere?" Flounder loudly wondered.

The royal wizard huffed. "At least her so-called poopsies are taken care of"

"You feeling alright, now, Nep-Nep?" Compa asked.

"Yup!" Neptune said, raising her arm. "This Nep's fully energized!"

"That's good" IF sighed in relief. "Do you recall what happened earlier?"

"Well..." Neptune pondered, crossing her arms. "We got split up by Arforite again, and then we fought her..."

"We heard about that from IF and Compa" Sora commented.

"That witch seems determined to split us up in inconvenient moments, huh?" Donald complained.

"...and...then that's it" Neptune finished. "Next I knew, I was here"

IF and Compa looked at each other, and then back at Neptune.

"You sure about that?" the guild agent asked again.

Neptune nodded. "What, did something else happen?"

"Well, basically blah-blah-blah" Compa summed up neatly.

"Get out!" Neptune's eyes widened as saucers. "I had a cool, awesome-sauce move AND I don't remember it!?"

Compa nodded. "And your voice sounded kinda deep, too. It felt kinda weird, considering you still look like the same, cute Nep-Nep"

"Worry about that later!" Neptune shook her head as she placed her hands on Compa's shoulders. "Do you recall how I did that move? What about you, Iffy?"

"Way to get your priorities straight, Nep..." IF sighed. "But to answer your question, we didn't really get to see it."

"You were zipping around so fast, my eyes can barely keep up!" Compa followed.

"Awwww, man!" Neptune sunk down. "Must I wait until I reach a higher level for that secret move? Or do I have to keep using skills so I can learn that?"

"Let's worry about those later!" Donald urged the group. "Right now, we must go after Ursula!"

"Who?" Neptune asked.

"The witch who took Father's trident!" Ariel answered.

"The other purple hag" Sora followed.

"Oh, right, the plot" Neptune remembered. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go bag us a witch!"

As she and the others swam off, Donald could only groan.

"That girl, I swear..." he complained.

IF sighed with a shrug. "We may as well get used to her brand of silliness now. I get the feeling it's not gonna change..."

Donald sighed as he and IF went after the party.

"But that power she had...She looked like she didn't know about it. But the way it felt, could it really be...?"

Atlantica – Open Area

"You sure she's around here?" Neptune asked the party.

"This is about the only area we haven't combed over" IF insisted. "She has to be here"

Compa gulped. "Guys, do you feel that?"

Suddenly, black smoke emerged below them as evil laughter rang from below. "Now, the sea and all it's denizens...Bow to my power!"

"Swim up!"

Heeding Ariel's warning, the group swam up as a large, yet familiar figure emerged from the smoke.

"Ahahahahahaha!"

It was Ursula, enlarged by the power of King Triton's trident, even having a crown on her head to signify her control over the seas.

Neptune gasped at the size of her. "She's become...gargantuan! This must be her final form!"

"Which means this is all the power she has left against us!" IF noted as she unsheathed her qatars. "Let's go, guys! Full throttle!"

Sora and Neptune lead the charge, swinging their Keyblades against Ursula's face.

"Hahahaha!" the evil sea-witched laughed. "Your strikes barely feel a thing to me. Now, get ready for this!"

She breathed in and blew out some bubbles, which exploded into magical energy!

"Dodge them!"

At IF's warning, the party dodged the bubbles, but...

"Ah!"

Compa was struck by a sudden lightning bolt!

"What's up with the weather today!?" Sora complained.

"It must be the trident!" Ariel shouted. "She's using it to call down a lightning storm!"

"Geez, this power's no joke for that sea king to keep his kingdom safe for generations..." Neptune complained.

"But she's still not moving" IF noted. "Keep hitting her, guys! We got this!"

The attacks didn't let up! However, between the lightning storms and the party still adjusting to the underwater combat, it seems to be looking a bit uphill for them.

"Haaaaaaaa..."

Ursula then temporarily called off the lightning storm and started sucking the party in.

"She's sucking us in!" Compa cried.

"Wording, Compa!" IF chastised.

"Remember that swimming trick I taught you!" Ariel urged as she began to swim away.

"Right!" Sora began to perform a Mermaid Kick, giving him a boost of speed as he began to swim further away from the evil sea witch.

"Follow his lead, guys!" IF urged the rest of the party, swimming just like Sora is.

After a good seven seconds, Ursula stopped her inhaling, the lightning storm resuming as she did...

"Insolent fools!"

"Time for a **Tornado**!"

"Wha-"

Goofy then began to spin himself along with his shield against the evil sea witch in a furious assault!

"I'll help!"

Donald lit his friend's shield in fire, causing the transformed turtle to unleash a flaming tornado against Ursula!

"You'll pay for what you did to Daddy!" Ariel growled as she began to follow Goofy's lead and launch a spinning attack against the sea witch.

"Time to follow up!" Compa opened fire on the sea witch with her syringe. "**GRAVITY SHELL**!"

"O frozen gods, embrace all in your chilling touch..." IF chanted as a pillar of ice formed around the sea witch's head. "**BLISTERING COLD**!"

"They're not letting up!" Neptune noted as she swam towards the sea witch. "You with me, buck-o?"

"All the way!" Sora cheered, casting an Aero barrier on both of them.

The two of them led coordinated attacks on the witch's head...

"**SONIC FIN**!" Seven dashes against her face!

"**CRITICAL EDGE**!" Three powerful slashes against her target!

The two managed to unleash their most powerful techniques against the sea witch, which only served to anger her.

"I won't suffer for this!" She then charged up the trident... "Now taste my wrath!"

...and unleashed a concentrated lightning storm against the party!

"Everyone okay!?" Sora cried out.

As he looked around, he noticed that only Ariel, IF and Compa are getting up. Donald, on the other hand, has taken the unconscious Neptune and Goofy away to a safe space.

"I'll take care of them!" Donald called out as he brought out some Potions (the duck ran out of MP). "You guys have to finish this now!"

"He's right" IF urged. "It won't be long before she could do that again!"

"But how do we beat her?" Compa wondered.

"Maybe we should go for the crown?" Ariel asked, pointing to the crown on her head.

IF hummed. "It's worth a shot. If nothing else, we should at least go guns blazing!"

"In that case!" Compa shouted. "It's about time we try that skill, huh?"

IF smirked. "Just as the doctor ordered! Sora, Ariel?"

The two nodded.

"We've got a little trick of our own, too!" the red-haired mermaid boasted.

"Then keep her busy!"

As IF and Compa got into position, Sora and Ariel started to swim forth against Ursula.

"Oh? Back for more, have you?" Ursula boasted. "Come to take back Daddy's trident, are you?"

"That trident does not belong to you!" Ariel fought back.

"Oh, but I feel your pain, my dear" the sea witch 'empathized'. "Tell you what, let me keep this and I'll take you out there to see the other worlds. What say you?"

"Again with the bargains..." Sora mumbled, annoyed.

Ariel, however, shook her head. "No. As much as I want to see the worlds outside, I can't do so in good conscience while Daddy is left to suffer."

"Even though he spurned you?" the sea witch asked.

"He didn't!" Ariel shouted. "He may be too much of a worrywart, but he's still my beloved Daddy! The Daddy who cared for his daughters! The Daddy who remembered how much he smiled whenever Mommy sang! He's always been Daddy to me, no matter what, and that won't change!"

Goofy, who has woken up, couldn't help but shed a tear from the distance. "Aw, Ariel..."

Her face lit up with determination. "And now, as his daughter, and for my friends, I will claim back what is ours!"

Sora nodded.

Ursula scoffed. "Such impetuous spirit. Fine then, I'll just claim your soul by force instead!"

"That won't happen!" Sora looked to the red-head. "Ready, Ariel?"

She nodded, and then the two suddenly dove down.

"Huh?" Ursula wondered. "What are you two...?"

As she looked down, she saw a blur of red swimming back up at full speed, releasing a splash of magical water across the area.

"What is this!?"

As Ariel dove back down, she went and tossed Sora up, swimming at full speed and doing the same thing Ariel did earlier!

"What are you fools doing!?"

As Sora dove back down, he went and tossed Ariel up, repeating what she did before!

"Stop that!" the sea witch complained, annoyed at all the water splashed on her way.

But they didn't stop, as Ariel dove down, Sora swam up again.

"That's it. That's it!" Ursula screamed. "I'll send you ALL to the depths!"

As Sora dove back down and Ariel began to swim back up, a concentrated lightning storm was about to hit, but Ariel didn't stop, as she swam up, releasing another geyser of water and dove back down before the lightning could hit her!

"Stop...dancing, you fools!" Ursula begged.

"Awwwww, the sea witch didn't like the show..."

The sea witch looked behind to see Compa, who just waved at her.

"Then let's give her an encore" IF declared from the other side. "Ready, Compa?"

"Ready, Iffy!"

"What are you fools doing!?"

"With the stars' guidance..." IF started, channeling gravity energy into her hand.

"and with this heart's love..." Compa continued as she put two fingers on her lips.

"...we'll change the world!"

The two unleashed all their charged up energies, sending a blast of gravity magic on one side and a light-infused giant heart from the other.

"**HEART FORCE**!"

The force from their Combination Skill is so strong, that Ursula released her grip on King Triton's trident!

"No!"

The trident, which now shrank down from it's massive size, floated further away from the sea witch, until...

"Gotcha!"

...it fell into the hands of Neptune!

"The heroine comes back at the thirteenth hour, or something!" the girl with the key boasted. "Now finish this fight, Sora, Ariel!"

"Right!"

"Time for the big finale!"

For one last performance, Sora and Ariel both dove back up together, unleashing a torrent of magical water against Ursula...

"No..."

...but during the performance, Sora managed to slice through Ursula's crown...

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

...defeating the sea witch once and for all!

"Good riddance!" Donald boasted, despite being out of it for the last portion of the fight.

"Huh" Goofy said with a raised eyebrow. "I guess the author can write underwater combat after all..."

Atlantica – King's Throne

"I know I had my misgivings..." King Triton started. "But thank you all for saving both my kingdom and my daughter..."

"It was nothing" Sora said humbly, rubbing his nose. "We just did what we could, that's all."

Neptune, however, was looking away, her arms crossed and her face grouchy.

Donald sighed. "Are you still not over that?"

"It's hard, you know" Neptune admitted. "If you're supposed to be the ruler of this place, shouldn't you focus on making sure you have ALL options available?"

"What do ya mean, mon?" Sebastian asked.

"I mean, I get that you gotta make hard choices at times." Neptune scratched her head. "But don't you at least wanna consider how your people feel about this? How your family feels about this?"

King Triton paid close attention to her words.

"If I was the Queen of a place, I'd make sure that all the people under me would have a fun and happy time, no matter when or where. And whatever choice I had to make, I wanna make sure it's one where a loved one wouldn't have to suffer, especially because of my choices..."

"Neptune..." Ariel said.

King Triton nodded. "I can see the point in your words. However, it reeks of idealism, spoken by one who has yet to experience true loss or pain. Keep this in mind, young Neptune. There may come a time where you will be faced with a decision. It may not come soon or it may never come at all. But when it does, you will be faced with a choice that, no matter what happens, one side will inevitably suffer. Be it yourself or your loved ones. That is the essence of sacrifice."

"Daddy..." Ariel said glumly, clutching onto the trident tight.

"If I may..." IF interjected. "Why share the words of wisdom, Your Majesty?"

"Hmmmm, I wonder..." King Triton thought of it for a moment. "Perhaps I wish to help make amends from my behavior from earlier. As king, I do what I must to protect my kingdom. As a father, I do what I must to protect my family, especially my daughter."

Silence filled the room for a good three seconds.

"But as Neptune said, my actions have led to my daughter's tears, and not only that, I had nearly assured our world's destruction by leaving the Keyhole unsealed. Which leads to my next favor..."

He then looked to his beloved daughter.

"Ariel, please accompany them back to your grotto. The trident holds a similar power that the crystal had. It will open the Keyhole, the core of this world."

The King looked to Sora and Neptune.

"Sora, Neptune. I know again that I am being impertinent, but I implore you to seal the Keyhole. Please, if not for me, do it for my kingdom and my daughter."

"Well, Neptune?" Sora asked his fellow Keyblade wielder.

Neptune, after a deep sigh, agreed. "Okay, we'll do it. Though, I gotta say, you're an okay guy, Mr. King. Not great, but okay"

King Triton nodded. "That is acceptable. Thank you again, young heroes"

Atlantica – Underwater Cavern

As the party left for the grotto, something still bugged Neptune, judging by her loud humming.

"What's wrong?" Donald asked the girl.

"Well..." Neptune said aloud. "I know what I said about being a what-if Queen, but... I can't see myself being one..."

"What makes ya say that?" Goofy asked.

"I mean...look at me" Neptune pointed to herself. "I'm lazy. I slack off. I prefer to nap or eat pudding than do menial work. Sure, I don't mind doin' stuff to help folks or fightin' the good fight, but I can't see myself bein' everywhere at once for them. That's why."

"Neptune..." Sora said.

"Nep..." IF started. "I don't think what he said just applies to you or anyone as a leader."

The girl with the key looked at the guild agent with raised eyebrows.

"It can apply to anyone, really. Whatever you choose to do or not do, it could end up having an effect on those around you, whether you like it or not. That's why it's good to have every option available whenever possible, like you said. But as King Triton mentioned, there will come a time when you can't really use all those options. Time and circumstance can affect what you can or can't do. So, the best thing to do in times like that is to make the best choice possible."

Neptune hummed for a moment, as she felt a hand on her shoulder.

"You want my advice, Nep-Nep?" Compa said. "Maybe you should ask your heart what it wants to do."

"My heart?" Neptune asked.

The nurse nodded.

"Why?"

"Because I feel that, whatever my heart wants, is what I myself want as well, if that makes sense..." Compa tried to answer.

"What my heart wants..." Sora mumbled to himself.

"We're here!"

At Ariel's shout, the group arrived just outside of her grotto.

"Let me open this for a moment..."

As the red-haired mermaid opened the rock leading to the inside, Neptune was left to her thoughts.

"What my heart wants, huh..."

NEPSTATION

Neptune: Nepstation’s live and we’re coming to you with a big splash! I hope you’re all ready for a wet dose of news today!

Goofy: Hey, Maxy! I’m on TV!

Neptune: *giggles* As you can see, our current co-host is very excited today! So, shall we get to the news, Goofster?

Goofy: *chuckles* Let’s do this!

---

an image of an underwater kingdom is shown onscreen

Neptune: It seems the Heartless’ invasions don’t stop nor discriminate. Just recently, an underwater kingdom is reported to have been attacked by these foul creatures!

Goofy: Gawrsh, I sure hope they’re doin’ okay...

Neptune: Quite so! Thanks to the powerful king of the sea, the underwater kingdom is reported to be safe and sound. Indeed, all it’s citizens can swim freely knowing their ruler is protecting their kingdom with all his might!

Goofy: *chuckles* Speaking of underwater kingdoms...

---

an image of two mermaids and a large green note in the middle appeared onscreen

Neptune: To calm the uneasiness of the common populace, the king's adviser has arranged for a musical festival for everyone there. From the merfolk to even the smallest anemone, everyone there is invited!

Goofy: Are they gonna hold a concert there?

Neptune: I sure hope so! I've been meaning to stretch my musical muscles for a good while now. *deeps breath* Under the sea~!

Goofy: *chuckles* Reminds me of the time me and Maxy went to a concert once.

Neptune: Did you have a good time there?

Goofy: *chuckles* Did we ever!?

Neptune: Ehehe! So, if you happen to be in the area, please hit up the underwater musical festival for some finny fun! You won't regret it!

Goofy: Okidoki! Now for the last bit of news!

---

an image of a blonde woman wearing a crown, her eyes crossed out, is featured onscreen

Neptune: This is actually a request from a recent viewer, named Bunny CKM, asking if anyone has seen this woman anywhere.

Goofy: It's said that this lady's known for her blonde hair, spirited attitude and...

Neptune: Flirts with the ladies! Oooohhh~! Someone's feeling jealous.

Goofy: Poor Bunny...

Neptune: Man, if anyone's got someone like that, get some spirit beads from your local priestess and give it to them! That way, when they go off or are being unruly, you can just silence them with something like 'SIT, GIRL!' or whatever!

Goofy: Hmmmmmm, that would be painful...

Neptune: So, again, if you happen to see this lady, hit us up over at Nepstation, and we'll make sure these two meet again!

Goofy: Having a friend close is quite comforting in these trying times...

Neptune: You said it, Goofster...And that's the news section for today!

Goofy: Now for today's topic!

Sora: Hey, Goofy! Someone’s calling you over from here!

Goofy: Oh? I wonder who could it be? *leaves*

Neptune: Right on cue, buck-o! Get over here and let’s get talkin’!

an image of Sora and Neptune’s Keyblades appear onscreen

Sora: Oh? We’re talking about **Keyblades** today?

Neptune: Yup! Our mystical, awesome-sauce weapons! Though ours don’t look all imposing, don’t underestimate it! It’s a sword, a wand, an all-purpose key (duh!), and so much more!

Sora: More?

Neptune: Well, word down from the grapevine is that our weapons can actually turn into other stuff too, like guns or spears or staves or whatever!

Sora: Wow!

Neptune: Cool, right!? What would you turn yours into?

Sora: Hmmmmm, how about a ship?

Neptune: A ship?

Sora: Yup! Like a pirate ship! I’ve always wanted to steer one of those! Hoist away, Captain Sora!

Neptune: Look at that! Truly an innocent dreamer, you are...

Sora: Well, what about you? What would you turn yours into?

Neptune: I dunno...Honestly? I’d turn mine into a pudding-making machine! That way, I can have all the pudding I could ever want, whenever I want!

Sora: That’s...a wild idea...

Neptune: Be thankful our ideas are quite tame, because the legends of these things can get pretty wack, I tell ya.

Sora: Right. It is said that the Keyblade can be a bringer of peace or destruction, and the legends tend to vary from place to place.

Neptune: Man, imagine that. A bunch of people wielding Keyblades gathering together and one day decided to wreck stuff up, causing a universal catastrophe! How irresponsible!

Sora: Well, we won’t fall for that! We use ours to fight off bad guys and save people! We’re doing good! Right, Neptune?

Neptune: Of course! Saving lives and making them happier is our lifelong motto!

Sora: Right! Well, that’s all we have for you today!

Neptune: And so, from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 11: Chapter 9: Spooks (Gambles) of Halloween Town

Chapter Summary

> Our party's next destination lies in Halloween Town, a world filled with spooks, fright and...score settling?

Halloween Town – Town Gates

"So now we're in Spooksville, huh?"

The party has landed in yet another peculiar world. This time, it is a spooky world, filled with ghosts, terrors and fright!

"Technically, it's called Halloween Town..." IF corrected Neptune, pointing to the scarecrow near them. "The sign over there says so..."

"Oooohhhh" Compa moaned. "I can tell that the people living here are gonna be scary..."

"Not to worry!" Donald boasted. "With our disguises, we look just as terrifying as them."

Goofy nodded. "Yeah. We can just scare 'em right back if we want to!"

Sure enough, the party has arrived in the world in various Halloween costumes. For Sora, a vampire. For Donald, a mummy. For Goofy, a Frankestein's mosnter. For Neptune, a were-beast with purple fur all across her person. For Compa, an undead nurse. And for IF, a goddess of the underworld draped in red (with her hair being golden yellow to boot!).

"I dunno" Neptune wondered. "Some of our outfits don't exactly scream 'scary'"

IF sighed. "You tell me. This outfit feels more gloomy than scary..."

"To say nothing of dear Compa..." Neptune giggled as the nurse's face felt red.

"I-I don't wanna be gazed upon like this!"

"Well, WE weren't the ones who chose these outfits, didn't we?"

Their gazes turned to the one in the mummy costume.

"Wak!" Donald tried to defend himself. "It's not what you think! I can't really decide what my magic turns you into!"

Neptune hummed. "I smell a liar~"

"Ooooohhh, Donald..." Goofy said in a scolding tone. "Ya don't want Daisy to find out about this..."

"Please! I swear, I did not intend it to be like this!"

"Really?" IF rolled her eyes as she unsheathes one of her qatars. "If I find out you're lying, I'll carve you up for duck stew." She then unsheathes her other qatar to prove her point.

"Wak!"

He panicked, covering behind Sora.

"Wow, ducky went all chicken on us, huh?" Neptune snarked.

"Haven't seen him like this since our musketeerin' days..." Goofy mumbled to himself.

"Okay, guys, calm down" Sora reassured the group. "Let's go see what this world's about."

"Maybe we can join in on the festivities, right!?" Neptune said with stars in her eyes.

IF sighed. "I just hope the townsfolk's approachable..."

Halloween Town – Town Square

"I spoke too soon..."

The party entered through the massive gate to find a bunch of **Search Ghost** Heartless lined up across the streets.

"Jinxes, Iffy!" Neptune warned the guild agent, much to her chagrin.

Yet, even as the party drew their weapons...

"They seem...quiet..." Compa noticed.

"Yeah" Donald agreed.

"They're not even reacting to the Keyblades..." IF wondered. "What's going on?"

A voice is heard clearing their throat.

"And now, introducing our main host, the Master of Terror, the Pumpkin King, the King of Nightmares!"

As the Search Ghosts danced across the street, a rather tall skeleton man emerged from the green fountain, making his splendid entrance.

"JACK SKELLINGTON!"

The skeleton man went down from the fountain in a rolling jump, landing with perfect grace, earning cheers from his audience.

"Thank you! Thank you, everyone!" he thanked, bowing as he made his exit. "So, how did I do?"

"You did splendidly, Jack!" the announcer, who happened to be the Mayor of this town, praised. "We may be set for this year's Halloween."

Jack thought for a moment. "Perhaps. But I think we can make do with more adjustments! Let's see what the doctors have to say! His new apprentice, in particular, has some fancy ideas!"

Halloween Town – The Doctor's Lab

"And then we apply this here..."

A woman wearing a white coat and a large hat covering most of her teal hair can be seen transferring the contents of a vial into a larger flask.

However, just as a few liters were transferred into it, the flask exploded, causing the contents to spill over the table.

"Are you doing your inane experiments, again!?" a loud voice boomed throughout the laboratory. "This is the 69th time already, apprentice!"

"I am well aware of that, good doctor" the woman replied. "However, you are also aware that, as a fellow scientist, nothing shall halt my pursuit of my magnum opus. A perfect recreation of the miracle drink!"

"If that is your capstone project, then by all means, do what you must!" the doctor, confined to a wheelchair, said throwing his arms in the air. "Just don't destroy everything in my laboratory! It takes AGES to replace the things you broke!"

The woman sighed. "Even though, for one, I always replace what I broke with gusto, even recycling them for new inventions. And secondly, the three spawnlings tend to be the ones who break your instruments."

"Doctors!"

The metal door opened, revealing the magnificent form of Jack Skellington.

"Ah, good tidings to you, Pumpkin King" the woman bowed. "I assume you wish to express another wonderful idea for the celebration?"

"Indeed, I do, MAGES." Jack said joyfully. "Now listen..."

As Jack discussed his ideas, the party arrived inside as well.

"You think it's okay for us to walk in..." Compa wondered.

"I mean," Sora pointed to the door. "they left the door open..."

"Hmmmmm..." the woman, MAGES., hummed. "Fascinating. However, before we can proceed, we will need to acquire the materials to this"

Her gaze turned to the object laid on the operating table.

"Ah yes!" Jack exclaimed. "The most important ingredient to our success! For the Heartless to dance to our tune, they need a heart!"

Sure enough, the object in question is, indeed, a living, beating heart.

"Of course" the man in the wheelchair, Doctor Finkelstein, said as he moved to the operating table. "But in order to finish this, we need the rest of the ingredients..."

He inspected the beating heart, but noticed something wrong...

"We need the key to this blasted thing! Does anyone know where the key is!?"

Hearing this, the party huddled together.

"Do you hear that?" Neptune started. "Dancing Heartless! Now that is something worth checking out, huh?"

"I don't know..." Donald said, worried.

"I'm going with Donald on this one" IF expressed. "We don't know what the Heartless will do once they sense the heart."

"But don't ya think this festival could be fun?" Goofy asked.

"I wanna have fun!" Compa cheered.

"I'd like to see the Heartless dance too!" Sora commented.

IF sighed. "Looks like we're outvoted on this one, ducky. Sorry..."

Donald sighed as well. "At least we tried..."

As soon as the party broke the huddle, Sora and Neptune approached the local residents and offered to unlock the beating heart, which they did.

"Simply incredible!" Jack exclaimed. "Thank you for your aid, uh..."

"Sora!" the boy introduced himself as he points to his friends. "Neptune, Donald, Goofy, Compa, IF"

"Nice to meet ya!" Neptune greeted. "I saw your performance a while ago. It was amaze-balls!"

"Really now?" Jack laughed. "That's quite the words for complimenting, but thanks all the same!"

"Do you really plan to use this heart to help direct the Heartless in town?" IF questioned.

"Indeed" MAGES. answered.

"How did they arrive in this town?" Goofy wondered.

"They just came in droves one day, like a wave of lifeless beings moving en masse" Jack answered. "As we began to teach them our routines for Halloween, they followed along with gusto! But we wanted more! We wanted them to dance and sing with feeling!"

"Hence, our creation into this heart" the woman with the hat continued. "We believe that with this device, we can have the Heartless do our bidding, within reason, of course."

"Within reason, huh..." IF murmured.

"But this heart is incomplete!" Doctor Finkelstein said. "We need the last set of ingredients and only one person I know who has them now..."

He then opened his head and started picking on his brain!

"His head opened!" Compa exclaimed. "Guys, his head opened and he's picking on his brain!"

"Yes, Compa" IF sighed as she patted the nurse on her head. "We know"

MAGES. chuckled. "Believe me, that habit of the doctor's caught me by surprise as well. I almost readied my banishment spell before everyone tackled me down to the ground, saying this is normal."

"B-B-Banishment spell!?" Compa sputtered.

"You shouldn't go slinging high class spells like that!" Donald scolded the magician.

"Ah, judging by your familiarity with such a spell, I assume you are a wizard" MAGES. noted the duck's behavior. "Which also means that all of you here are not from this town as well, aren't you?"

The party, except for one, gasped in surprise.

"W-What did you say?" Sora exclaimed.

"Wait! As well?" Neptune noticed.

"That means you're a Drifter, too?" IF said nonchalantly.

"Drifter? That seems a peculiar term" MAGES. noted. "Still, you don't seem particularly fazed by this revelation compared to your compatriots"

"We've already met a fair bunch of them across the other worlds we've been to" IF shrugged. "Not to mention, you seem very much out of place here compared to the other residents in this town. Th-"

"Nonsense!" Jack butted in. "The Mad Magician here is welcome in our town as much as any other! Why, it's thanks to her ideas and innovations that our last few celebrations have been spectacular!"

"And they have been welcoming of me ever since" the Mad Magician continued. "Of course, I simply did not idle by in this fair town, so I offered my services to them."

"What kinda services?" the royal captain asked.

"Participation of the annual Halloween Celebration, of course" the Mad Magician answered. "Aside from that, I offered ideas to help improve their celebrations and even made inventions here on a whim."

"Wow" the boy with the key gasped in amazement. "You're quite talented…"

MAGES. chuckled in appreciation. "I must have this much if I am to finalize my greatest piece. It is also for that reason I sought apprenticeship with Doctor Finkelstein over there."

IF sighed. "If you say so..."

MAGES. chuckled. "The townsfolk here can be quite...different, but I assure you, despite their appearances, they are as friendly as they come. They would not welcome strangers like you and I if they weren't"

Compa nodded. "I agree! This town looks scary, but everyone looks quite happy to celebrate Halloween! It's actually kinda fun!"

Goofy chuckled. "I'll say!"

"Sally!" the doctor called out. "Where is that useless girl?"

"You called?"

Everyone turned around to see a woman whose body parts and clothing are all literally stitched up.

"Ah, hello, Sally!" Jack greeted. "What brings you here?"

"Well, it's just..." Sally trailed off, but shook her head. "It's nothing. Anyway, do you need of me?"

"Yes, do you happen to have 'that' with you?" the doctor asked.

Sally nodded, producing a bouquet of wilted flowers from her pocket.

The doctor moved in to check on the object. "Yes, this is just what we needed. We can begin the procedure! Assistant, ready the device!"

"At once!"

As the duo prepared their experiment, the patch-made woman approached the party. "Excuse me, is anyone of you named Neptune?"

"That would be moi" the aforementioned girl pointed to herself. "Why do you ask?"

"Hold up" IF interrupted, placing her arm in front of the girl with the key. "How do you know Nep's name?"

"Um, well..." Sally stammered.

"Begin the experiment!" the doctor shouted as the nearby device whirled to life.

"Why don't we take this outside?" Compa suggested.

Halloween Town – Outside the Laboratory

"Okay, back to my question" IF continued. "How did you know her name?"

"Well, someone told me to give her a message should I ever find someone with that name" Sally answered. "She said that she'll be waiting here for you."

"Who asked?" Goofy asked.

"Was it a purple hag?" Sora pestered.

"Or a lady with white hair?" Donald also pestered.

"The second one, yes" Sally answered.

Neptune gasped. "The Newtype! And if she's asking for me, that means..."

"Means...what?" Sora wondered.

"She's asking me out on a date!" Neptune said with starry eyes. "Quick! Do I look good? Does this outfit make me look fat? Is my pudding ready?"

IF sighed. "Settle down, Nep." She then turned to Sally. "How can you be sure that the Newtype's the one who approached you?"

"Well..." the patch-made woman starteed. "I was hiding out in the Graveyard, when suddenly, this lady with white hair came in and saw me. She was actually worried about me and told me to go straight home, saying that there are dangerous monsters lurking in the darkness."

"The Heartless..." Donald murmured.

"But aren't they supposed to be docile?" Goofy whispered.

"Something tells me that's not gonna last" IF muttered. "What else did she say?"

"She didn't say anything else, but..." Sally recalled. "She seemed...pensive"

"About what?" Sora wondered.

"I don't know" Sally sighed.

"Well, we're not gonna stand around here, waiting and guessing!" Neptune chirped. "Let's go find ourselves a hot Newtype! Where did she say I'm supposed to meet her?"

"Well, about that..."

Before Sally could answer, an explosion could be heard from the lab!

"What happened up there!?" Sora shouted.

Suddenly, the steel door was kicked open, and out came three children, laughing as they took the manufactured heart in their hands.

"Get back here with that!" the doctor yelled. "That heart is very important!"

"To think those spawnlings could go this far..." MAGES. bemoaned.

"We should go after them!" Compa urged as the aforementioned kids ran past her and the party.

IF nodded. "I agree. Trouble like that means anything but good news..."

"Then allow us to join you!" Jack exclaimed as he and MAGES. descended down the staircase. "These children are part of my town, and therefore, my problem to solve. I cannot burden you with this alone."

Sora looked to Donald, who nodded. "Sure. Let's go!"

"Hold up!" Goofy suddenly said. "If the experiment's gone kaput, what'll happen to the Heartless?"

Screams are suddenly heard throughout the town square.

"Does that answer your inquisition?" MAGES. snarked.

"Okay!" Neptune said after doing some stretches. "Let's pound us some Heartless and get that heart!"

With a loud cheer, the group of eight charged forth, determined to end this incoming disaster!

Halloween Town – Oogie's Manor – Near Oogie's Room

"And after several battles and hardships, we now approach the climax of this chapter!"

IF sighed. "What's with the sudden narration, Nep?"

"That probably means the author did another jump cut" Compa noted.

"And quite a big one at that" Goofy said. "So, how did we get here again?"

MAGES. cleared her throat. "I can provide a good summation, if you will allow me..."

Halloween Town – Oogie's Manor – Evil Playground – A Few Minutes Ago

"Can't catch us!" the boy in red, Lock, taunted as he threw another jack-in-a-box against the party.

"This is fun!" the girl in the witch outfit, Shock, cheered as she spun around with reckless abandon.

"You all suck at this!" the boy in the green mask, Barrel, bellowed as he...well, barreled against the party.

IF groaned in frustration. "I've had it! These kids are way too energetic!"

"Not to mention the knick-knacks they throw at us!" Compa complained, removing some tacks from her behind.

"I'm afraid that's how they operate..." Jack bemoaned. "Lock, Shock and Barrel are among the best pranksters in our fair town..."

"And they clearly know their stuff!" Goofy complimented.

"Don't compliment them!" Donald scolded his friend.

"Get back here, you little pranksters!" Neptune shouted, still giving the children chase.

"How do we get them to settle down...?" Sora wondered, running out of breath. "I'd rather not waste our items and energy before we fight this Oogie guy..."

MAGES. hummed. "I believe I can be of assistance here, if you will allow me"

"Got something in mind, Magey?" Compa asked.

"It better not be another high-class spell..." Donald warned, crossing his arms.

MAGES. chuckled. "I assure you; it is perfectly safe. Observe"

Channeling energy into her staff, the three pranksters were encased in gravity orbs, sending them airborne.

"Woah!" Lock shouted.

"What is this!?" Shock complained.

"This is so cool!" Barrel cheered.

"Wow..." IF managed to say through her gaping mouth.

"Why didn't you lead with that?" Donald facepalmed.

"I'm afraid my magic discipline is different from yours" MAGES. explained. "While yours rely on the spiritual and magical foci, mine lies on the theoretical level"

"Theo-retical?" Sora asked.

"Mathematics, scientific methods, numerous theorems, and plenty more" the Mad Magician expounded. "For this particular spell, I needed to analyze the spaces around this room in order to apply the necessary force to summon and maintain these orbs."

"Interesting..." Compa said as she nodded.

"To put it in layman's terms..." MAGES. summed up. "I've laid a trap for them and waited until the right moment."

"I...see" Sora nodded along.

"You don't get it, do you?" Neptune asked.

The boy shook his head. "You?"

The girl with the key shook her head. "Nada"

"Hey!" Lock complained.

"Put us down!" Shock demanded.

"I think I'm gonna lose my lunch..." Barrel said, feeling his stomach turn.

"Oh, no!" Jack scolded the pranksters. "Not until you tell us what Oogie wants with that heart!"

"And where he is!" Donald butted in.

Halloween Town – Oogie's Manor – Near Oogie's Room – Present Time

"And so, we managed to glean the information to the bag's room and the heart's location all at once" MAGES. finished.

"Oh, I remember it all now!" Goofy said.

"Hopefully, those little trikes will stay put" Neptune sighed.

"At least we had a chance to catch our breath" Donald said in relief.

"Yeah" Sora nodded. "Now though, we got a heart to get back!"

"We don't know what tricks this Oogie Boogie will pull on us" IF warned the group. "Stay on your toes, everyone"

After the brief respite, the group entered through the green door, finding themselves in...

Halloween Town – Oogie's Manor – Torture Chamber

"Oogie!" Jack called out to the bag of bugs on the other side of the room. "Return that heart to us, right now!"

Oogie laughed. "Like I'd do that. With this, the Heartless will obey my commands. Like so!"

He then proceeded to...

"He swallowed it!" Compa exclaimed. "Guys, he swallowed the heart!"

Neptune looked like she could throw up. "Blegh! So gross!"

The bag of bugs laughed again. "Oh, Heartless~!"

At his back and call, came two flying creatures with torn wings, called **Gargoyles**, one among the local Heartless found in this world.

In addition to them, two thin mummy-like creatures, called **Wight Knights**, also heeded the call...

...and that's it.

"This is it?" Oogie looked to see no other Heartless coming in.

"Bruh" Neptune managed to say.

"Guess that's all he could bring out, huh?" Sora observed.

"It appears the heart's a failure, then..." MAGES. bemoaned.

"So, it would seem..." Jack noted.

Seeing this caused the bag of bugs to rage. "Nobody disrespects me! NOBODY!"

In his rage, his jump caused the whole party to be dropped into the wheel itself by seemingly harmless explosions!

"Great, we're in the wheel now!" IF clicked her tongue.

"What do we do, guys?" Compa asked around, her syringe on her hands.

"Let's take care of the Heartless, first!" Sora ordered.

"Watch your step, friends!" Jack warned. "Oogie is not only a master gambler, but a devious cheat! This room will no doubt have traps to keep us on our toes!"

"Gotcha!" Neptune nodded, charging forth against one of the Wight Knights with a **Blizzara**-infused attack. "**FROST CRUSHER**!"

"Alright-y then!" Oogie shouted, bringing out two red dice. "Let's see how lucky I'm feeling today!"

Spinning around, the bag threw the dice onto the floor, landing on a 1 and a 3.

"Oh~! I wonder what this will do~?"

Suddenly, three menacing buzz saws began spinning across the arena!

"Everyone, jump up!"

With IF's advice, the party was able to avoid most ot the damage coming their way.

"Gyahahaha!" Oogie boasted. "You fools can't beat me!"

"Cheaters never prosper, you sack of bugs!" Compa fought back, firing shot after shot from her syringe.

"Oh!" Oogie narrowly dodge a shot, and started running around. "I don't recall making a house call today!"

"Well, get used to it!"

As Sora finished up with a Gargoyle, he accidentally stepped on one of the glowing switches, causing the part of the platform he and MAGES. were on to ascend!

"What the!?" the boy shouted.

"It appears we have ascended." the Mad Magician noted the obvious.

"And cut off too..." the guild agent groaned. "Great..."

Oogie laughed. "Careless fools! Now for a little Oogie shower!"

Stepping on a large circle, a pink mist rained down on the bag of bugs, restoring his vitality.

"Geez!" Neptune complained as she finished off a Wight Knight. "Who thought making this his private BATHROOM was a good idea!?"

"We ain't done with the game yet, folks!"

Oogie then proceeded to throw flaming dice against the party, which exploded on impact, damaging Goofy and Jack in the process!

"Hot!" Goofy's butt ended lit on fire for good measure! "I'm on fire!"

"He's upping the ante, friends!" Jack noted, gracefully dodging a fire dice coming his way. "Stay frosty!"

"I'd do what he says, fellas!" Oogie taunted as he threw another set of red dice, this time landing on a 4 and a 3. "'Cuz this show's getting started!"

This time, three large blades landed and began rolling around the platform!

As they did, the platform Sora and MAGES. were on landed back down.

"We better get moving!" the boy urged.

"Aw, leaving so soon?" Oogie taunted as he stepped on a switch. "Let me have my people lead you OUT!"

Suddenly, three cowboy robots made with slot machines began shooting their guns, firing upon the royal wizard and captain, who thankfully shielded themselves from harm.

"Hey!" Donald complained. "You're not playing fair!"

IF gritted her teeth. "He's clearly not. But judging by how the platforms work, we might have an opening"

As the party moved around, MAGES. joined up with the guild agent. "Have you formulated a strategy, Guild Agent?"

"I think so. One thing, though" IF asked the Mad Magician. "How long did it take for that platform to go down?"

"I estimated it around three minutes" she answered, swatting a summoned Gargoyle away with her magic.

IF then dodged and dealt a swift **Chaos Edge** against a summoned Wight Knight. "And Oogie's movements?"

"I have noticed the bag's patterns as well." MAGES. fired another blast against another Wight Knight. "I can tell when he will most likely stop."

"Okay then..." IF inhaled. "Everyone, listen up!"

This got the party's attention. "Donald, Goof, Compa, the four of us are on support duty. Keep an eye on everyone and get any spawning Heartless out of our way."

"Okay!/Got'cha!/Roger!"

"Sora, Nep, Jack!" The guild agent called out. "The three of you go with MAGES. Follow her instructions and stick together. DO NOT split up!"

"Got it!/Roger doger!/Okay!"

"Got a plan, eh?" Oogie mocked the group. "Well, bring it on! I'll raise the stakes on this game!"

The bag of bugs continued his assault, throwing flaming dices at the party. At some points, he even throws his red dice, which lets him call even more Heartless (but no less than four). But with the party's coordination and proper use of MP and items, they kept up the fight!

"Time to roll the dice!"

Feeling lucky, Oogie decided to roll the red dice again!

"Oh no, you don't!"

But in an act of gutsiness, Goofy jumped up and deflected two of the red dices!

"Hey, now that's not fair!" Oogie complained.

The dice in question landed on a 1, in which nothing happened...

"Great, now I'm stumped!" the bag of bugs complained.

"He's standing still..." MAGES. noted. "Now, young lad, step on the button!"

"That's Sora!"

Despite his complaint, he stepped on the nearby glowing button, causing the platform Sora's group is on to ascend...

"Uh-oh!"

...which leads them right to where Oogie is!

"We got you now, Boogie-man!" Neptune cheered as she pointed at the bag of bugs.

"It's time to your final bow, Oogie!" Jack declared.

Oogie squirmed. "C-Can we just settle this on poker?"

Sora thought for a moment, and then gave his answer. "Nah! MAGES.?"

"Gladly"

She then used the same technique against Oogie, sending him flying up!

"P-Put me down!"

"He's wide open!" IF called everyone. "Take him down, now!"

"Got it! **GOOFY DISCUS** AWAY!"

The royal captain threw his shield, further disorienting the bag of bugs.

"Have a taste of my **THUNDAGA**!"

And a shocking gift descended upon the vile bag!

"**BLAZING AMMO** GO!"

A scorching shot smacked him right in the middle!

"**GUSTY STORM**!"

A glyph of **Aero** magic hit him square in the face!

"How about a little chill to your step, Oogie?"

Keeping up, Jack summoned an ice crystal that kept Oogie locked in place.

"**CROSS COMBINATION** TIME!"

Neptune then goes in for the seven-hit combo!

"Three hits and…**RIPPLE DRIVE**!"

And Sora finishes up with a sphere of red energy from his Keyblade after a three-hit combo!

The bag of bugs could not withstand the relentless assault of the entire party, and then...

"Any last words, voracious gambler?" MAGES. taunted.

"Ooooooohhhhh"

But Oogie was too frazzled to give a decent reply.

"Then it is your funeral..."

She floated up in the air, summoning magic runes behind her...

"Enter your revelation...**MECHANICAL PARADOX**!"

...and unleashed them upon him, dealing stupendous damage!

"Oooohhhh..."

As Oogie struggled to stand, he began to feel lighter somehow...

"Huh?"

...turns out his sides were torn open in the attack, causing all his bugs to flow out of his body.

"NOoooooOOOOooooooooo..."

Neptune and Compa's faces went green at the sight.

"Excuse us..."

"We have to puke..."

The two girls turned around to vomit, as the bugs kept falling and falling and falling...

...until the bag of bugs is completely empty, leaving only the heart he consumed out in the open.

"I suppose one of you will retrieve the heart?" IF asked around.

Jack, to everyone's surprise, shook his head. "The experiment is a failure and the Heartless that ran rampant are dealt with. I guess it's back to the drawing board for next Halloween..."

Halloween Town – Oogie's Manor

The party left the manor, and the experimental heart, without another word...

"Hey, I just remembered something!" Neptune suddenly said, causing the group to stop.

"What is it, Nep-Nep?" Goofy asked.

"My date with the Newtype!" Neptune panicked. "Ohnononononono! She's gonna be SO upset with me!"

"Now that you mention it..." Sora recalled. "Did Sally tell us WHERE she would meet up with Neptune?"

"We kinda left in a hurry after we saw the kids ran away with the heart..." Donald mentioned.

"Well, we can just ask her" Jack reassured. "Besides, I think I owe her an apology for ignoring her pleas..."

"Maybe we don't have to ask her for that..."

Everyone turned to IF, who pointed at the speck of white that is fast approaching them.

"There you are!"

Sure enough, the white-haired Newtype emerged, looking quite different than before!

"Oh, hey! Two worlds no see!" Neptune said nervously. "Okay, um, I'm so sorry for botching our first date, but I didn't know where you were and-"

"There's no time!" the Newtype said in a panic as she approached Neptune, putting her hands on her shoulders. "Neptune, did you get the artificial heart?"

"The heart?" Neptune said, cocking her head.

"We left it behind" MAGES. answered for her. "The experiment was deemed a failure, as the Heartless continued to run about wildly even with it."

The Newtype groaned in frustration. "Then where is it!?"

"Why are you so panicked, Ms. Newtype?" Compa asked.

"If we don't dispose of it, it's going to-"

Suddenly, the ground began to shake around them.

"Earthquake!" Goofy yelled.

"What's going on!?" Donald also yelled.

The Newtype gritted her teeth. "Shoot! It's too late!"

"What's going on here!?" Sora demanded.

The sight in front of the Newtype caused her eyes to widen in surprise. "You all may want to turn around..."

Everyone did, and as they gaze at where Oogie's vile manor once stood...

"JAAAAAACKKKKKKK!"

...now stood the large bag of evil himself, seemingly merged with his own manor!

"Wow! How did he do that!?" Lock said in awe.

"He's turned into a giant!" Shock said in...well, shock.

"That's so...AWESOME!" Barrel shouted in excitement as he and the kids are being escorted away by a moving bathtub.

"This is bad..." IF bemoaned. "Gambling bags of bugs merging with their own evil manors is not on my bingo card for this world, but here we are..."

The Mad Magician scanned around the manor. "It appears there are dark spheres littered around him. Perhaps they hold sustenance to his being here."

"So, we'll just go there and smash them, right?" Donald said, readying for another battle.

"Maybe, but I doubt the Heartless will make this easy for us..." Compa pointed out, eyeing the swarms of Heartless gathering around the fused manor.

"We can handle a couple of Heartless!" Sora boasted. "Move in, take out the spheres and get out in time for Halloween, right?"

"Technically, it's still a long way to Halloween, but I admire your gumption, Sora!" Jack complimented.

Neptune then noticed the Newtype moving forward. "Hey, where are you going?"

"Trying to find out where that heart is" the white-haired woman answered, floating over the destroyed bridge. "Do any of you sense it?"

No one answered, all but one...

"We cannot say..." It was MAGES. "...perhaps it is being held within the merged creature over there"

The Newtype clicked her tongue. "It's worth a shot. I'm going in!"

"Wait!" Neptune pleaded.

"We'll talk later, Neptune!" the Newtype shouted as she began to fly straight towards Oogie's mouth. "I'm going to destroy that heart! Do whatever you want until then!"

Neptune crossed her arms. "You don't get to boss us around! Not when you haven't told us why you wanted to meet up with me here!"

IF sighed. "I doubt she's gonna make much progress on her own there, tough though she is. We should go deal with those spheres while we're here."

Sora nodded. "Besides, we still need to find the Keyhole here!"

Jack and MAGES. raised eyebrows at that. Keyhole?

"How do we go about this?" Donald asked the guild agent.

"MAGES." IF turned to the Mad Magician. "How many of these spheres did you see?"

"From my peripheral..." she scanned around again. "I could see...about seven."

"So, how do we handle rhis?" Goofy wondered.

"Some of them appear quite close to each other. Six of them are in pairs while one lies isolated near the top" the Mad Magician reported. "Perhaps pairs of our own will get the job done today, as we are a group of eight at the present."

"Okay then..." IF took a deep breath. "Listen up, team! Here's how we'll split up!"

Team A – Oogie's Manor – Near the Feet

The first team, consisting of Sora and IF, approach the first two spheres, which are guarded by Gargoyles.

"These flying guys sure are everywhere..." Sora noted.

"Yeah. Good thing I made us a team here" IF said. "When it comes to aerial combat, we're currently the best ones at the field."

Sora chuckled. "You think so?"

Another Gargoyle, backed by two Wight Knights, entered the scene to halt our team's advance.

"Why don't we show those losers exactly why?" IF pointed to the Heartless reinforcements.

"Sounds like a plan!"

With courage and confidence, the duo charged against the Heartless and the nearby spheres with their Combination Skill...

"**DOUBLE RAVE**!"

With one sphere down, the duo then spotted another nearby, guarded by a squad of Search Ghosts.

"Hit them from range?" Sora asked as he and his partner landed.

IF nodded, readying another spell. "Clear the way for me?"

The boy grinned as lightning sparked from his weapon. "Way ahead of you! **THUNDARA**!"

Lightning rained from the skies as the Search Ghosts were wiped out, leaving the sphere vulnerable.

"O great flames...cremate the remains of the evil that plagues this dark land...**DEMON FLAMES**!"

A pillar of fire then erupted beneath the second sphere, frying it into a crisp!

The guild agent rubbed her nose in victory. "And that's how it's done!"

"Yeah!"

Sora then raised his hand and IF met it in a high-five clap!

Team B – Oogie's Manor – Near the Stomach

The second team, consisting of Neptune and MAGES., are nearing the next set of spheres, three of them separated by a set of retracting steps.

"Geez, the Boogie-man sure ain't making this easy for us, huh?" Neptune complained.

"I imagine he wouldn't" the Mad Magician agreed. "As a gambler, he feels more thrilled when lives are ever closer to danger."

"A thrill seeker, huh?" the girl with the key said. "I kinda get where he is going' but..."

MAGES. chuckled. "I understand. It wouldn't do us any good if we are to fall here. Although..."

Their conversation was timely interrupted when a group of six Wight Knights were called on to the platform.

"I think we kept our hosts waiting for long enough"

Channeling magic into her staff, the Mad Magician makes her move.

"Perish. **SHAVE BEAM**!"

Summoning a dome of energy, she sends the Heartless reinforcements helplessly into the air!

"Nice! Time to finish 'em!"

Taking the chance, Neptune hopped up and struck down each of the weakened Heartless one by one...

"HIIIIYAH!"

...and ended her assault with a downward slam against the nearby sphere.

"We got one down!" Neptune cheered. "Victory!"

"Excellent, but there's still more to-" MAGES. eyes suddenly furrowed. "Purple lass, to your right!"

Looking to her right, she sees a fireball heading straight for her.

"Yikes!"

She immediately blocked the incoming attack, pushing her back.

"Geez, since when do living manors throw fireballs at us!?" Neptune complained.

"That must be what that cage is for!" MAGES. clicked her tongue. "Comrades, watch for the fires! The manor is not docile!"

As soon as she said so, more Search Ghosts spawned in front of the Mad Magician. "Yet our enemies are continuing to intensify their hold here…"

"Don't you worry, Magey-cakes!" Neptune then brought out a green orb from her pocket. "For times like this, we need a pal to count on! Come out, Bambi!"

Team C – Oogie's Manor – Near the Head

"Seems like Oogie still has fight left in him..."

Jack and Donald are currently surrounded by numerous Gargoyles and Search Ghosts, which are guarding two nearby spheres of darkness.

"How close were you two back then?" Donald asked, siccing a Gargoyle with **Firaga** magic.

"Not much" Jack shrugged, unleashing **Gravira** magic against two Gargoyles. "He's always quite the troublemaker with his gambles. He even spouted some bull-plop about making it bigtime, but I surely didn't expect this!"

"Guess bad apples tend to grow around, no matter the world..." Donald mumbled to himself.

"I'm guessing you had troubles at home, too?" the Pumpkin King asked.

The royal wizard nodded, casting a **Thundaga** on the nearby Wight Knights. "One I can recall was banished by the Queen after a Festival Award Ceremony for causing trouble and attempted to attack the Queen herself. Haven't seen him since"

Jack chuckled. "That must be quite rough, isn't it?"

Donald shrugged. "Not for me. I never even liked him. Two of my friends, though, they had more of a history with him."

"That sounds personal" Jack noticed. "I will not pry for now. Why don't we show these rude hosts our brand of entertainment instead, eh?"

Donald smirked. "Sounds good!"

The two then unleashed a slew of magics, from large chunks of ice, to thunder storms to bursts of gravity, against the air waves, taking two more spheres with them!

"Come back again when you're better!"

Halloween Town – Oogie's Manor – Inside Oogie

"That heart should be here somewhere"

Noire is currently flying inside the bag of bugs, who is actually devoid of bugs, but instead dark barriers stood in her way.

Or, at least they did.

"Those guys must be dealing with whatever's generating these barriers. Likely those spheres I saw on the way here..." Noire believed. "Then again, I didn't tell them not to get into my business..."

She sighed. "Not like they would listen anyway..."

Suddenly, she heard barking. She looked around and saw a form of spectral white approaching her.

"Hey, you're that ghost dog from before..." Noire said, gazing upon the floating ghost dog with a small pumpkin for a nose. "Do you know where the heart is?"

The ghost dog, Zero, barked and then flew off.

"I think he knows. I better follow him"

She flew off after him. After a good minute of flying, they stopped, seeing the manufactured heart encased in a dark globe.

"That must be it!" Noire noted, readying her blade. "Thanks for the help, boy. Go on out of here. I'll take care of this!"

Zero barked, and then flew off.

Noire, in the meantime, channeled her energy into an attack!

"**VOLCANO DIVE**!"

Slamming her blade, enhanced with fire, against the globe, she...

"Tch. Barely a dent on it!"

Noire clicked her tongue. This could take a while...

"We dealt with the spheres on this end!" A voice of a young boy rang out. That must be Sora.

"How's things on your ends?" A voice said with reliability. Must be IF.

"We super got things handled here! Thanks to our dear new companion Bambi!" That was definitely Neptune. That cheer in her voice is unmistakable. But who is Bambi, though?

"It wasn't much of a challenge. The young deer's gifts proved quite invaluable" An unfamiliar voice boasted. This must be this world's resident Drifter. MAGES., right?

"We got stuff done here, too!" A squeaky voice reported above. That must be Donald.

"Our performance was one for the ages!" A confident, yet friendly voice said. This must be the Jack Skellington character she heard about from that patched-up woman.

"Hey!" Noire called out to the others. "Can you guys finish up out there? I still got one last barrier to get over in here!"

"W-We're trying here!" A loud, feminine voice shouted. That was definitely the nurse Compa.

"But they just keep comin'!" A male voice shouted as well. This must be Goofy's, judging by how he spoke his words.

Team D – Oogie's Manor – Former Observatory

"Then hurry up and finish it!" the Newtype shouted from inside. "Forget the Heartless, just destroy the sphere!"

Compa groaned. Even as she and Goofy take out Heartless after Heartless, another immediately takes their place!

"They must be gettin' desperate!" Goofy noted as he took out a Wight Knight.

"But the sphere's just right there!" Compa shouted as she blasted another Gargoyle. "How do we even get close!?"

The royal captain furrowed his eyebrows as he scanned the area.

"Okay then"

He then unsummoned his shield and grabbed onto Compa's syringe.

"Um, Goofy!" Compa cried. "I'm not sure if you can use this..."

"Awww, don't worry!" Goofy reassured the nurse. "We'll just ram this on the sphere together!"

"Together..."

She looked ahead, seeing the Heartless continuing to move around like insects. Not to mention, the Newtype might be in danger right now!

"Okay!" Compa nodded fiercely, holding onto her giant syringe. "Let's go for gold, Goofy!"

The two took a step back as they aimed the syringe right at the sphere. Sensing danger, the Heartless attempted to swarm the duo.

Goofy started. "Ready..."

"Set..." Compa followed...

"GO!"

The duo then charged through, knocking back any Heartless that isn't vanquished by them as they aimed straight for the sphere!

"And now..."

With the syringe piercing the sphere...

"It's time..."

..the duo placed their hands on the handle...

"...for your medicine!"

...and pressed it hard, unleashing a beam of energy right at the sphere in point-blank range, disintegrating it for good!

"We got it!"

"We did it!"

The two high-fived at their victory and their new Combination Skill, the **Goofy Treatment**!

Halloween Town – Oogie's Manor – Inside Oogie

Just as the last sphere was vanquished, the last barrier housing the artificial heart was dispelled.

"Great!" Noire cheered. "Everyone, get out of here. I'll finish this!"

"Hold up, you're not going to-"

"Don't finish that sentence, Neptune!" the white-haired woman scolded. "I won't die from something like this. Besides, we still have to talk after this!"

"Then you better get out alive, ya hear!?" Neptune shouted back. "I still don't know what to do for our date, after all!"

Noire sighed, feeling her cheeks flushing up. "What are you even saying? Whatever..."

The Newtype ignited her blade once more, ready to end this conflict.

"Once more! **VOLCANO DIVE**!"

This time, her attack rang true, smearing the heart in a pool of flame.

"That should do..."

Sensing inevitable collapse, Noire flew up and fled the area...

Halloween Town – Manor Ruins

The party gathered together as the fused manor began to shake and dissipate from the living realm...

"Guess he's done for, huh?" Neptune wondered as she and her fellow wielder held on to Gravity spell orbs.

Suddenly, a large keyhole lit up on the ground where the manor once stood.

"Shall we?" Sora asked. Neptune nodded without another word...

...And together, raised their Keyblades as a beam of light shot up to the moon and dissipated against the Keyhole, sealing the world's heart away from the dark forces that could consume it.

"I see" MAGES. mused. "So, this is the Keyhole you all spook of"

"Yup" Donald agreed. "With it locked up, this world will be safe from the Heartless for a good while"

"Guess we won't be seeing the Heartless dance, huh?" Compa bemoaned.

She then felt IF's hand patting her head. "At least we're all safe and sound. I think that's more important right now."

The nurse giggled. "Yeah. You're right about that, Iffy…"

"Well, whatever the case is" Jack started. "You all aided us in keeping our fair town safe. Thank you, friends. Halloween Town and I will never forget all you've done for us"

Compa cooed. "Don't mention it. We're just happy to help!"

IF, not paying attention to the conversation, asked around. "Hey, did anyone see the Newtype?"

Everyone shook their heads. Neptune, however, gazed upon the sky, looking for any sign of the Newtype.

"You think she'll show up?" Sora asked his fellow Keyblade wielder.

"I hope so..." Neptune shook her head. "No, I know she has to show up. Lady's stubborn as a mule, after all!"

Sora chuckled. "Don't let her hear you say that"

"Hey!" Donald shouted, pointing up to the night sky. "Look there"

Everyone looked up to see a falling star bearing upon them. Wait...

"Is that...?" Compa asked.

"It appears to be hurling towards us" MAGES. noted.

"No, more like charging at us..." Goofy said.

Luckily, the 'star' landed right in front of them. And as the smoke clears, it revealed a familiar figure.

"Who were you calling a mule!?"

Sure enough, the Newtype made it out safe and sound! She even closed in and stretched Neptune's cheeks in frustration.

"There you are!" Neptune managed to say. "Speak of the Newtype and she shall appear or something!"

The Newtype sighed, letting the girl's cheeks go. "What am I going to do with you? Anyway, there is something I have to ask of you."

"Wait!" Sora interruped.

But the Newtype was a step ahead of him. "Before you ask, no, I don't know what Riku is up to."

"Why not?" Sora asked.

"He's been actively avoiding me. Or rather, Maleficent kept calling for him. I couldn't keep watch between her and her Heartless roaming around."

"Is he okay, at least?" the boy continued to prod.

"Physically, yes. Emotionally, I'm not so confident about that."

Neptune, on the other hand, was busy inspecting the Newtype, who arrived in new clothing.

"Wow, I didn't think you'd dress for the occasion!"

Sure enough, instead of her usual black suit, she was wearing a red kimono adorned with white flowers and even has fake white fox ears on her head.

"I mean" the Newtype stammered. "This world's know for it's outlandish appearances, and I figured I'd adjust myself with the locals. It's not like I have plenty of free time to sew new clothing or anything!"

"So basically, you have a lot of free time on your hands" Sora teased.

"Watch your tongue, boy!" the Newtype scolded.

"Don't yell at him!" Neptune smoothed over. "He's just applying my lessons in the School of Transcribing Tsunderes."

"The what?" the Newtype asked, feeling incredulous.

"It's something I made up in order to better understand people like you, pretty lady!" Neptune chirped. "And Sora's a quick learner. I could not be any prouder!"

This only served to anger the Newtype even more.

"But, I gotta say, I dig the costume, pretty lady!" Neptune complimented, examining the outfit like a professional tailor. "Those ears are pretty cute!"

"Oh? R-Really?" the Newtype stammered, her face a little red as her previous anger left her mind. "It took me a few days to get this one done. I'm glad I put in the effort. Besides, your outfit's...cute, too..."

"D'awwwww, thank you!" Neptune said with a big smile. "Rawr~!"

"Those two are getting along so well!" Compa cheered.

"Should we...give them some space?" IF wondered, noting the good atmosphere they're having.

"I think we should" Donald agreed. Goofy nodded.

The Newtype heard them, and snapped out of her reverie. "Wait! This isn't the time to talk about outfits! Neptune, I have a request for you!"

"Sure!" Neptune nodded. "Name it and I'll do it!"

This caught the Newtype by surprise. "I didn't even name my request!"

"Well," Neptune started. "You came all this way for me, so it must be super-duper important, so, let's hear it!"

The white-haired woman smirked.

"Did you forget who you're dealing with?"

The Newtype readied her sword once more.

"Seriously!?" Neptune complained. "This is, like, the third time, already!"

"And I told YOU already" the Newtype snapped back. "There's something I need to confirm from you. Twice now I haven't been able to find out. And you know what they say about third times, right?"

Neptune groaned. "Can't we just settle this over some pudding or something?"

The Newtype didn't reply. Instead, she reached something from her pockets and tossed them to Neptune, who grabbed them.

"**Elixirs**, huh?" the girl with the key noted as she sighed. "Really not gonna budge on this, are you?"

"Afraid not" the Newtype responded. "Now drink those up and fight me, Neptune. You and the boy over there, too!"

Said boy felt offended, immediately summoning his Keyblade. "That's Sora to you!"

"We'll help too!" Compa shouted.

"No!" the Newtype denied. "The rest of you stay out of this!"

"But...!" Donald tried to protest.

As if on call, another IMB (Inconvenient Magic Barrier) erected right on the archway, blocking the rest of the party from interfering...

"Aw come on!" the royal wizard complained.

"What do we do!?" the royal captain panicked.

"It's okay!"

The rest of the party looked to Sora and Neptune, the former looking back with a thumbs up.

"We got this!"

Neptune sighed again. "I guess some people really can only understand through actions, huh?"

She then tossed Sora one of the Elixirs and drank the other one in a few chugs. Once she tossed the empty glass away, she drew out her Keyblade and got ready to fight. "Al-righty! No punches pulled. Let's go all the way, pretty lady!"

The Newtype smiled. "Wouldn't have this any other way!"

Neptune started the match by charging forth with a classic Neptune combo.

"Hah!" Forward slash.

"Hiyah!" Swing to the right.

"And now, **PROTAGONIST SLASH**!" A swing to the left and then a stronger one to the right!

This combo pushed the Newtype back, leaving her open!

"**SONIC BLADE**!"

Sora sees the opening and unleashes his technique, striking the Newtype with numerous dashes on the ground.

"Not bad!" the Newtype responded to their assaults with one of her own. "But I'm not out yet!"

Charging up her blade, the Newtype unleashes her attack...

"**TORNERAID SWORD**!"

...sending a burst of energy from her sword against the two combatants.

But...

"Saw that coming!"

...the two leapt up to dodge the incoming attack!

"That's not the only move in my arsenal!"

The Newtype charges forth to Neptune, unleashing another strike.

"**TRI-COLOR ORDER**!" Three forward thrusts!

"**JUMPING ARTS**!" A five-hit combo of slashes and kicks!

As the two exchanged blows, Sora readies his next move...

"FLAMES!"

...shooting a wave of **Firas** against the Newtype, who responded by halting her assault and flew around to exhaust the fireballs.

"How about this?"

Neptune, seeing another opportunity, channeled magic into her Keyblade...

"**THUNDER**...**BLITZ**!"

...and smashed it into the ground, unleashing a small thunder storm against the Newtype!

"Clever...!"

Sensing a chance, the Newtype opted to charge at Sora!

"But you're wide open! **DROP CRUSH**!"

The Newtype leapt up and attacked Sora, sending him flying back!

"GAH!"

"Hang in there, buck-o!"

Neptune's Keyblade lit up with healing energy...

"**CURA**!"

...healing Sora of any damage inflicted.

"Thanks..." the boy with the key thanked.

Neptune gave him a thumbs up. "No problem-o!"

"Don't celebrate too soon! **TORNERAID CHAIN**!"

As the duel continued, the rest of the party kept watch.

"Hey, is it me..." Goofy started. "Or are those three kinda enjoyin' this?"

"What makes you say that?" Compa asked.

"I believe I can provide a hypothesis" MAGES. answered. "There's a saying that people will one day find someone who they believe will be their rival, their match from an opposing side."

Meanwhile, Neptune attempted to attack the Newtype from behind, which said Newtype readied for and blocked her assault. Sora then attempted to attack on the other side, forcing her to deflect the girl and repel the boy's assault.

"Now, these two don't necessarily need an antagonistic relationship. However, they can gauge their progress through these repeated encounters, to see if their opposing half has been improving themselves since their last encounter."

As he pulled back to recover, Sora switched to spells, trying to nail the Newtype with Gravira magic. But she saw this coming, weaving through the Gravity orbs with ease. This, however, left her open to Neptune's Aero-filled Wind Slicer attacks, which forced her to weave around more to dodge the barrage of spells coming her way.

"So, you're saying the reason that Newtype kept challenging Nep is because she sees her as someone who can match her?" IF asked.

The Mad Magician nodded.

"I see" Jack exclaimed. "To truly gauge improvements, one must be able to assess not only themselves, but the ones they fought alongside with, and even against as well!"

"You get all that?" Donald asked the Pumpkin King.

He nodded. "Most of our routines are done with partners or even in groups. We gauge how well we do by watching each other perform on stage as well."

"Is it really that simple?" Compa wondered.

IF shook her head. "I don't think it's that simple. Still..."

They looked on to the match. The Keyblade wielders started to catch their breath as they consume Ethers, all the while their opponent is maintaining her aerial advantage.

"...there's no denying that they're forming a connection even through this fight. I'm sure Sora can understand that, considering his relationship with Riku."

"'Actions often speak louder than words'" Compa quoted.

"Feeling out of breath already?" the Newtype taunted her opponents. "At this rate, I may just claim my win!"

"Don't count...us out yet!" Neptune said in between breaths.

"Yeah!" Sora primed his Keyblade. "We still...got a few tricks up our sleeves!"

"Then bring it!"

Responding to the taunt, Sora proceeded to throw his Keyblade straight at the Newtype.

"Desperate, are we?"

She deflects the blade, but Sora simply summons it back...

"What!?"

...and then throws it again!

"What is he doing!?"

He didn't let up! For every time his Keyblade is deflected, Sora just resummons it back and throws it again!

"Persistent, aren't you!?"

"Then how about..."

After a fourth failed throw, Sora puts more strength into his fifth and final throw...

"...THIS!?"

"You wield..." the white-haired woman managed to say as she faced the incoming attack. "...such strength. But...!"

The Newtype managed to deflect the last attack! Sora's **Strike Raid** was completely deflected!

"It will take more than that to defeat me!"

She then dashed forward and began her ultimate charge!

"Aw smokes!" Neptune panicked. "She's going for her ultimate attack!"

Sora growled, immediately casting Aero shields around...

"Too slow!"

One slash...

"Grrr!" Sora winced in pain...

Two slashes...

"That's gonna hurt..." Goofy said in worry...

Three slashes...

Compa clenched her fists. "If only I could help them in there..."

Four...

Donald moaned as he covered his eyes. "I can't look..."

Five...

"Could this be their final bow?" Jack wondered in a forlorn tone...

Yet IF and MAGES. stayed quiet, continuing to observe the match...

Seven!

And then the Newtype flew up, eyeing the smoky area generated from her attack...

"And now, your end!"

...and then threw her sword down right at the epicenter!

"That was my **Infinite Slash**!" the Newtype boasted as she landed... "Now see the difference between us!"...and snapped her fingers, causing several slashes to land around her sword!

"GAAAAAAAAAAH!"

As the smoke clears, the Newtype sees the young boy lying on the floor, his right hand clutching his chest.

"SORA!" most of the party screamed.

But the Newtype narrowed her eyes and looked around, noticing something odd...

"Where did Neptune go?"

Just as she was about to turn around, she felt a presence looming behind her...

"CURSES!"

"Eat this! **GRAVITY SLAM**!"

...and took a direct hit from her **Gravira** magic attack, bringing her down to the ground!

"Never took you for a sneaky type..." the Newtype bemoaned. "Still, what kind of fighter are you, leaving your partner out to die alone?"

Neptune raised an eyebrow at her. "Whaddaya mean? Sora's doin' just fine"

"Huh?"

She then looked forward and saw the boy, standing up with his weapon armed and ready for another round!

"How!?" the Newtype shouted as she pushed Neptune away, causing the girl to hop back to her friend's side. "You took my attack head on! You shouldn't be able to stand after that!"

"Yeah..." Sora admitted. "I would've, but I had a little thing to help me out. It came from you, in fact!"

"Came from me?" the Newtype muttered, only to gasp in surprise afterwards, noticing shards of broken glass to his right. "Of course! The Elixir! I didn't see you drink yours! You must've kept yours close for later use. How clever..."

Neptune snickered. "And now, you're totally beat and right where we want you! Ready, Sora?"

The boy nodded.

"Yeah! Let's do it!"

The two Keyblade wielders charged forth, unleashing a barrage of attacks that the Newtype is attempting to meet!

"They're not letting up!" the Newtype grunted. "Curse that Gravity attack for slowing me down!"

"As long as we're still here..."

"...we're not gonna give up the fight!"

After a grand total of twelve hits (six per wielder), the two raised their Keyblades, imbuing them with powerful light magic, and sent them right down to their opponent!

"**TWIN ARCANA**!"

"AAAAAAHHHHHH!"

The thirteenth blast sent the Newtype flying back. It was a bit too much for her...

"Haaahhh..." the white-haired woman struggled to catch her breath. "To think...that the two of you managed to drive me this far...into a corner..."

"I told ya, miss Newtype" Neptune boasted, slinging her Keyblade above her own shoulder. "No punches pulled"

"So, you did..." the Newtype said as she stood up. "Still, it's hard for me to believe that the two of you managed to defeat a being like me. How disgraceful..."

Sora and Neptune looked to each other, and then upon looking back to the Newtype.

"Why do you keep fighting Neptune, anyway?" Sora asked.

The Newtype closed her eyes for a bit, and then she answered. "Because I was hoping to sense a 'spark' in her..."

"A...'spark'?" Neptune said, tilting her head.

"So, to speak" the white-haired woman nodded. "You see, beings like me have this...sort of innate 'spark' within us. Every confrontation we had until now has been tests to see if you held that 'spark' within you"

"What 'spark'?" the girl with the key asked.

"I...cannot exactly describe it" the Newtype tried to explain. "All I gathered is that this 'spark' is what defines our existence. At least, it defines mine as a Goddess"

"A Goddess?" Sora wondered. "To what exactly?"

The Newtype kept silent on that.

"C'mon, lady" Neptune shook her head. "You think that lil' lovable Neptune here is a Goddess? Top of the food chain level of existence and all that?"

The Newtype chuckled. "Now that I began to think about it, you being someone like me is ridiculous. I can never see that happening..."

"I smell an insult there..." Neptune snarked.

Sora nodded. "Definitely an insult."

"It's not an insult. It's a fact" the white-haired woman replied as she began to fly up again. "I see it was a waste of time to seek you out, after all. Forget everything I said. Enjoy your journey ahead or whatever. We likely won't see each other again..."

"Wait!"

As the Newtype flew off into the sky, Neptune could only look on glumly. "...And we haven't even gone on our date yet..."

Sora felt sad at the sight of his fellow wielder's depressed state. "Neptune..."

"*I said that this was a waste of time, but...*"

The flying Newtype clutched her own heart as she flew.

"*That still didn't answer why my heart beats so much when I'm near her...Is there something I'm overlooking? That can't be! Right?*"

Halloween Town – Town Gates

"You don't have to see us off, you know?" Sora mused.

Jack laughed. "Nonsense! As thanks for your assistance, it is the least we can do for you all!"

"Are you sure you don't need one of these?" IF asked the Mad Magician, holding onto a teal cellphone.

"It will not be necessary" MAGES. replied. "I have already learned certain communication spells that should allow me to reach out to your comrades from the Refuge World you speak of. It should be of no issue to me."

"If you're sure" the guild agent said, putting the cellphone back into her cape. "Just remember that it's not just them, but the other Drifters in others worlds too. Try not to spook them out if you're gonna reach out to them."

The Mad Magician nodded. "I'll endeavor to keep that in mind"

"I sure hope their festival's a great one!" Goofy chuckled.

"I hope we can go see it!" Compa stated.

"C'mon, guys" Donald urged the group. "We have to go"

As the group left, MAGES. suddenly shouted at one of them.

"Young lass in purple!"

The group stopped for a moment.

"Nep-Nep" Compa called to the girl with the key. "Magey is calling for you"

Neptune turned her head to the Mad Magician.

"Ah, good, you responded"

"Well, I'm not a corpse" Neptune joked offhandly. "What do you want?"

"I don't think I've ever seen Nep that depressed before..." IF said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"She must've really looked forward to that date..." Goofy said glumly.

"Yeah..." Sora said, nodding.

"Was she really asking for a date though?" Donald said, shaking his head.

"You must be truly deprived of spirit if that so-called Newtype's rejection has gotten to you..." MAGES. noted. "Anyway, what ails you?"

"Well, apparently, the pretty lady thought I didn't have the 'spark' or whatever and decided not to see me again..." Neptune complained. "What's her deal, anyway!? So what if I'm not a Goddess!? Do I need to be one to be in her radar or something? Is plain ol' me just...not good enough?"

The Mad Magician went into thought for a moment...

"May you lend me your palm?"

"Uhhhh, okay?"

She laid her right palm out, which MAGES. took and inspected.

"Hmmmmm. Hmmmm."

"Uhhhh, are you gonna say my fortune or something?"

"Patience, young one. You must not be so rash."

"S-Sorry..."

The Mad Magician chuckled despite Neptune's meek response. "Do not apologize. For you have a great many things that await you further on your path. You may stumble. You may find obstacles that may trip you, so to speak, but if you continue to push forward, so long as you stay true to your heart, you may find everything that you seek. Never lose faith, lass. Not in your friends. Not in others. Not in yourself. Eventually, in time, everyone, even those who once opposed you will see the radiance that belies in your heart, not the radiance they believe that you should have."

This saying only served to confuse Neptune, who turned to the party. "Do any of you get what she's saying?"

Most of them shook their heads in confusion...

"Do you, Iffy?"

...except one...

"Probably"

"So, will you-"

IF shrugged. "If I told you the meaning, it would lose the point. You'd learn best from finding out the meaning yourself!"

"Aw, come on, Iffy!" Neptune complained. "This isn't a school exam! Just tell me!"

The guild agent sighed. "If you keep that up, you'll never learn what she means."

Neptune pouted at the response.

Despite this, IF chuckled, patting the girl's head. "You'll understand what she's trying to say soon enough. Now, come on. Your pudding isn't gonna keep you waiting, you know!"

"Pudding!"

And just like that, Neptune rushed ahead in anticipation of her favored Pudding Time.

"One mention of pudding and her mood changes completely..." Donald said, shaking his head.

"Well, I am feelin' hungry myself!" Goofy chuckled, rubbing his tummy.

"Then let's have a pudding party to freshen our spirits!" Compa offered.

"Sounds good!" Sora agreed as he and the rest of the party followed Neptune. "Neptune definitely needs a good cheer!"

"I didn't know you could do fortunes, MAGES." Jack said as he approached the Mad Magician.

The Mad Magician chuckled. "I don't. However, I feel that I should at least try to raise that girl's spirits, at least"

"What prompted you to do that?" the Pumpkin King asked.

"Hmmmmm, I wonder"

Her gaze turned to where the party was, waving Neptune goodbye as they returned to the Gummi Ship.

"Maybe, I'm just doing what those two have been doing. Listening to my heart and telling them what it said. A curious thought, is it not?"

Jack Skellington smiled. "Curious, indeed."

MAGES then made some gestures from her left hand as she mumbled something. "Loochs tneve emag noitamina cisum."

NEPSTATION

Neptune: Spooks and thrills fill the night! Tonight is the night of dread! Tonight is the night of fear! Tonight is the night...of Nepstation! Mwahahahaha!

MAGES.: My, that’s certainly a spirited way to start your broadcast today.

Neptune: Why, yes, indeed, my Mad Magician friend! Now, why don’t we start with the news?

MAGES.: Very well, we shall.

---

an image of a group of undead townsfolk raising pitchforks and torches against a group of Heartless appears onscreen

Neptune: The recent rise in Heartless activity has caused some of the world’s own residents to take action. In fact, in one such town, the local undead have risen from their graves to repel the Heartless back!

MAGES.: To arise from their eternal slumber to defend their home once again. Such dedication to their homeland...

Neptune: You said it!

MAGES.: In fact, cries and rallies of ‘Get Our Town Back’ can be heard throughout the area should you happen to be nearby. A truly inspiring, if ghastly sight of the dead fighting against dark monsters.

Neptune: Goes to show you can’t mess with people’s homes once they get their act together, huh?

MAGES.: Indeed. This should serve as an important lesson to all our viewers. If you have the will to act, then utilize it! The end will only come if you choose not to act!

Neptune: Better to fight and die, then die napping and all that, huh?

MAGES.: Quite. Now, let us proceed to the next segment of the news.

---

an image of a tall skeleton man, his head blurred, inspecting a pumpkin door appears onscreen

MAGES.: The Halloween preparations are currently underway. However, the local organizer is currently in a stump for ideas. I was hoping to forward this request to Nepstation to see if you all have some suggestions. Ones that can make this Halloween more...unique compared to the last ones...

Neptune: A suggestion for a Halloween festival, huh? Oh~! How about an animal-themed one? We have an extensive list of unique animals we can pick from.

MAGES.: Ah, you refer to mystical beasts such as nekomatas and kitsune, aren’t you?

Neptune: Yup-yup! My costume is pretty beastly too, FYI!

MAGES.: *chuckles* Then I shall take your suggestion under advisement. Dear viewers, send all your ideas down our merry way, and they shall be noted!

Neptune: I can hear our suggestion box crying in ecstasy over being filled right now...

MAGES.: Indeed. Now, then, onto the final segment of this broadcast...

---

an image showing the logo of the School of Transcribing Tsunderes appears onscreen

Neptune: Our school about learning the art of conversing with tsunderes is proceeding pretty well. Thanks to the number of new applicants signing up, we're planning to expand our horizons further from a small niche class to offering similar classes, good for those who wish to hone up their conversational skills.

MAGES.: Fascinating. What other classes have you considered offering, if I may ask?

Neptune: For one, there's the class for Dealing with Shy Introverts. Then there's Calming the Hair Trigger for those with loose tempers. And then, there's Speaking the Mystic's Language!

MAGES.: Hmmmmm, that last one is quite the curious one. Still, if the first class does exist, I may consider registering for that myself.

Neptune: Oh-ho-ho! We've got another one! Alrighty, once I got the plans finalized, I'll inform you right away when registration opens up!

MAGES.: *chuckles* I look forward to that.

Neptune: And that is all for the news today! Now, it's time to get into today's topic.

MAGES.: And this is the part where I bid you all adieu! Loochs tneve emag noitamina cisum. *poofs away*

Sora: Huh. I didn't know she could do that.

Neptune: Me either. Anyway, here's today's topic!

the words Changing Forms appears onscreen

Neptune: As we discussed before, in certain Worlds, we have to change our appearances so we don't look out of place while we go Heartless Busting and Keyhole Locking. For instance, in the previous episode, we became a bunch of sea creatures. In this episode, we got swanky Halloween costumes!

Sora: I'm pretty sure those were more than costumes. Donald told me he's still adjusting to his mummy form while we were there.

Neptune: See? We gotta keep up appearances because World Order and stuff! Still, if it's an excuse to put us in stylish outfits and appearances that my parent companies never did yet,

I’d say go for it!

Sora: You think we’ll get more changes in other worlds soon?

Neptune: Maybe. Maybe we get to become sea pirates or become techy-civies! Oh, or we could become lions!

Sora: Lions?

Neptune: You know? Apex predator of the wild? Fierce kitty-cats of the Safari? The literal species of our first Summon!?

Sora: I get that, but...couldn’t we become something like...I dunno, dinosaurs?

Neptune: Woah! Now you’re thinking big, buck-o!

Sora: Then again, it’ll be difficult to move around as a dinosaur, let alone any other animal...

Neptune: Eh, we’ll cross those bridges when we get to them. Don’t worry about it.

Sora: If you're sure...Well, I guess that’s all we got for today. Pretty short one today, huh?

Neptune: I guess our dear author’s running out of ideas...Anyway, this has been Nepstation, and from all of us here...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 12: Chapter 10: Pirate's Gigue (Raid)

Chapter Summary

> As the party's journey continues, they were suddenly beset by a flying pirate ship, leading them into the magical world of Neverland, where a sudden reunion awaits them...

Neverland – Captain Hook's Ship – Deck

"So, to recap, we were heading off like usual," Neptune started. "And then, a FREAKIN' PIRATE SHIP CAME AND KIDNAPPED US MIDFLIGHT! Did I get it all right?"

Sora nodded. "Pretty much. Wonder where the others are, though?"

Sure enough, the two of them are up on the deck of a pirate ship. One thing is for certain, they are not on the Ocean Between anymore, but on another world.

"Donald! Goofy!"

"Compa! Iffy! Where are you guys!?"

"You sure you should be asking about them?"

Sora and Neptune turned around to the source of the familiar voice.

"What about your old friends?"

"Riku!?" Sora called out.

"Okay, what's your game this time, rude boy!?" Neptune demanded.

"Hmph. Instead of asking about them, you should be asking..."

Riku then stepped aside...

"...about her"

...to reveal a red-haired girl sitting behind him.

"Kairi!?"

"She better not be a phantom this time!" the girl in the parka shouted.

"Oh, she's very real, I assure you" Riku replied.

"Oh yeah!" Neptune fought back. "Then why does she look like she's hasn't had a wink of sleep in ages?"

"Didn't I tell you?" the silver haired boy said, shaking his head. "Her heart's still missing. That's why she's like this"

Sora, however, wasn't paying attention to the conversation. All he could think about now was the girl sitting over there.

"Kairi!"

As he ran to her side, he was stopped by a man wearing a red pirate outfit, with a large black moustache and a mean left hook, literally.

"Not so fast!" the pirate said. "No shenanigans aboard my vessel, brats!"

But it wasn't just him. Two **Pirate** Heartless, scallywags wearing red with swords on their hands, blocked their left flank, while the pirate from earlier, along with another man, likely his first mate, are in their right flank.

"Riku" Sora demanded. "Why are you siding with Maleficent and the Heartless?"

"The fairy had a deal and I accepted it" Riku answered offhandly. "As for the Heartless, they obey me, Sora. Now I have nothing to fear."

Sora growled in anger. "You're stupid!"

"Yeah!" Neptune followed in anger. "Don't you know abusing dark forces is the fastest way to failure!? It's Failed Villainy 101!"

"Pretty soon, they swallow your heart!" Sora followed up.

"Not a chance" Riku boasted. "My heart's too strong"

"Arrogance is also another fast way to Fails-dom!" Neptune commented.

"Why do you care?" Riku asked the girl.

"Uh, because you're the best friend of my friend?" Neptune answered incredulously.

"Hmph. Well, I've picked up a few new tricks as well."

He then extended his right hand out...

"Like this, for instance!"

...causing the duo's literal shadows to pop out in front of them, gazing at them with their yellow eyes!

"Woah!" Sora gasped.

"F-F-F-FREAKY!" Neptune panicked.

"This is my strength. Remember it well!" Riku boasted one more time. "You can go see your friends now"

Suddenly, the tile below them opened up, causing them to fall!

"WOAH!"

"FALLING!"

Neverland – Captain Hook's Ship – Hold

"Ya don't say?" Goofy asked.

"Yeah." Sora answered with glee. "We found her. We finally found Kairi!"

"And you're sure she's not an illusion this time?" IF asked to make sure.

"Yup yup!" Neptune nodded. "All real for everyone to see! Though she looks kinda out of it..."

"She must be ill." Compa said. "Why don't we go up fast so I can treat her?"

"If what Riku said is true, then Kairi's lost her heart." IF recalled. "I doubt a few treatments can help out in this case..."

"Still, we should get up there and try talking to her." Goofy suggested. "Maybe that'll help?"

"I like the sound of that!" Sora agreed. "Let's go!"

"That's great, but first..."

Donald then screamed at the top of his lungs.

"WOULD YOU MIND GETTING OFF!?"

Sure enough, the whole party is piled up on top of each other like a stack of hay. What a way to reunite, huh?

"Whoops..." Sora apologized.

Neptune followed suit. "Sorry..."

A while after getting up, the party noticed two figures near the door...

"I told you getting in here was a cinch!" a floating young man wearing green said.

"Getting in is simple" a blonde girl with a large red sword mentioned. "Now getting out with that girl in a creature-infested ship is the hard part"

"Aw, please!" the flying man scoffed. "Pirates or creatures, Hook is easy enough to deal with as is! This won't be any different from what we usually do"

"I don't know about that" the girl shook her head. "Those weird creatures look dangerous. Far more than Indians or mermaids or even pirates could ever hope to be"

"Then why didn't you just stay back with the boys, Sting?" the flying boy said, shaking his head. "I can totally save Wendy by myself. Lost Boy Creed #6. Never risk your peers any more than you have to!"

The girl, Sting, groaned. "See that? That's what I'm worried about. You may be confident and all, Peter Pan, but you clearly didn't come in here with a plan, didn't you?"

"Oh yeah?" the boy in green, Peter Pan, fought back. "Then how about you? Surely you have an 'amazing' plan in mind, do you?"

Sting fumed. "I-I so do! But I'd rather be cautious when it comes to that codfish! It's not like I didn't come in here with one of anything!"

The two continued to argue for a while, leaving the party bewildered.

"Uh, shouldn't we do something about this?" Neptune asked the party.

Compa nodded. "Allow me"

The nurse approached the arguing pair. "Um, excuse me?"

The two stopped their arguing upon hearing Compa.

"Do you two know your way around this ship?"

"Who are you?" Peter Pan asked the nurse.

"I'm Compa!" said nurse introduced herself. "I'm a nurse-in-training at the moment, but do you two know the way around this ship?"

"Why should we answer you?" Sting replied. "For all we know, you could be part of that pirate's crew!"

"Hmmmmm..." Peter took the time to inspect her and her companions behind her. "You all don't look like you're from here, aren't you?"

This got the party nervous. "H-How can you tell?" Compa dared to ask.

"Well, you guys aren't exactly the first visitors we got around these parts" the flying boy answered.

"The last time we got visitors like those was 10 years ago, I believe" Sting said. "Though here in Neverland, time never seems to be much of an issue."

"Neverland?" Goofy asked.

"A place of wonders where kids never grow up!" Peter answered. "Just look for the second star on the right, straight until morning and you'll find us"

"What are you two doing here, anyway?" Sora asked the pair as he approached them.

"Why should we answer to you!?" Sting complained.

"Calm down, Sting" Peter Pan scolded the girl. "We're looking for a girl named Wendy here. Last we heard, that dastardly Hook took her hostage and brought her here."

"You wouldn't happen to know where she is, do you?" Sting asked, casting a suspicious eye on the party.

"What did she look like?" Donald asked this time.

"Brown hair, wore blue" Peter explained.

The party turned to IF, who matched his description.

Sting sighed. "Not her. The girl we're looking had a brighter blue dress than hers."

"Nada" Neptune shook her head. "We saw a red-haired girl wearing white and purple though"

"Don't know any girl like that" Peter said, crossing his arms. "Do you, Sting?"

"You're asking me?" Sting said incredulously. "I barely know anyone in this world until 10 years ago!"

"Guess that makes her a Drifter too, huh?" Neptune whispered to the guild agent, who nodded.

Peter Pan grunted. "Then did we make a mistake?"

"How should I know!?" Sting complained. "You're the only one here who actually understands that little pixie!"

"Pixie?" Goofy wondered.

Before that question could be answered, a dot of sparkling light entered the room.

"Speak of the pixie and she appears!" Neptune gasped at the sight of the moving light.

"Oh, it's Tinker Bell!" Sting exclaimed at the tiny pixie that entered the room. "Right on time! We were just talking about you."

The little pixie bounced up and down in joy over that.

"Did you find Wendy?" Peter Pan asked, to which the pixie responded...somewhat.

"Do you get what she's trying to say?" Sora asked IF, who shook her head.

"Up in the cabin, huh?" Peter said. "And another girl's there too?"

"Guess that's what she meant, huh?" Donald guessed.

"Did she have red hair?" Sting asked the pixie, who nodded.

"That's gotta be Kairi!" Sora shouted.

"Then the other girl's Wendy, right?" Goofy wondered.

"But why would Hook go out of his way to kidnap her, then?" IF speculated. "We know Kairi's here because of Riku, but for Wendy..."

"Do you think she could be important to Maleficent?" Compa wondered quietly. "Like Alice and Jasmine?"

"If she is, then we can't let them have her!" Donald exclaimed.

"Then let's go save both of them!" Neptune cheered as she clapped her hands. "Raiding a pirate ship's gonna be fun~"

IF sighed. "This isn't the time for games, Nep. We've got serious issues to solve here..."

"We appreciate your gusto, but..."

Sting and Peter Pan looked to the sole door in the room.

"...the door's locked, and we don't know where the key is..."

The guild agent chuckled. "Key, you say?"

The pair's eyes widened as saucers when they saw Sora and Neptune's weapons.

"T-Those weapons!?" Sting exclaimed. "T-They're just like...!"

"They look similar to the ones they used 10 years ago..." Peter Pan murmured, Tinker Bell bouncing up and down in agreement.

IF took note of their reactions. "Guess that means Keyblade Wielders were still around 10 years ago. I wonder..."

"Um, since we're all going the same way, why don't we all team up?" Compa suggested. "My grandpa used to say 'Teamwork makes the dream work!' What say you?"

"What do you think?" Sting asked her partner. "You said you fought one of them before, right?"

"Yeah, but he wasn't a bad person" Peter answered. "Just misled. Besides, he and the other two were definitely friendly. You would know."

"Doesn't mean those two here are..." Sting doubted.

"I doubt Hook's got any use out of them" the flying boy rationalized. "Otherwise, they wouldn't be here, right?"

The girl with the red sword sighed. "Good point. Fine!"

She turned to Compa. "We'll work with you all, but only until we save the girls and deal with Hook"

Compa nodded. "That works for us, then. Here's to working together, uhhh..."

"Sting" the girl introduced herself, crossing her arms.

"Peter Pan" the flying boy introduced himself, extending his hand to the pixie. "And this is Tinker Bell. What are your names?"

Neverland – Captain Hook's Ship – Middle Cabin

After a round of introductions, the group of eight traversed through the pirate ship, filled with Shadows, Pirates and even the shadows of Sora and Neptune taunting them on occasion.

"Geez, you two weren't kidding when you said your shadows are around, huh?" IF said.

"That doesn't sound too bad" Peter boasted. "Besides, I fought my own shadow once."

"You did?" Donald exclaimed.

"Yup. Had to chase it down and everything" Peter said, rubbing the back of his head. "It's how I met Wendy, by the way"

"From what I heard, she offered to sew the shadow back to him, and then he offered her and her little brothers to come with him to Neverland" Sting recalled.

"From the sounds of it, Wendy and her brothers don't live around here, do they?" IF guessed.

"Yup" Peter Pan answered rather happily.

"So, you kidnapped them!?" Donald exclaimed, causing Tinker Bell to bounce up and down.

"No, they wanted to go to Neverland!" Peter defended himself. "So, I sprinkled them some of Tink's Pixie Dust and boom, we flew here!"

"Oh, awesome!" Neptune nodded, but then stopped. "Wait, pixie dust?"

Sting sighed. "Tink's dust, when sprinkled, gives people the ability to fly like Peter here does."

"Since when do pixies emit dust?" IF questioned.

"Eh, don't think too hard about it" Peter said as he grabbed Tinker Bell by her tiny wings. "Why don't I just show you all?"

He then started sprinkling some of the dust on the whole party, Sting included, who crossed her arms in a huff.

"This is, what, the third time, this happened to me..."

And as Donald hopped up and attempted to fly, he ended up crashing back down to earth, much to Tinker Bell's joy.

"...and just like the last times, I couldn't fly..."

Compa tried to fly but couldn't. "I can't get off the ground like that."

Sora tried too, hopping around. "Nor I"

"Maybe there's a trick to it?" IF guessed.

"What trick?"

"You know, Nep, like..."

As IF turned to her friend, she noticed one weird thing...

"...Wha..."

"Hey, don't leave me in suspense, Iffy. What's the trick?"

"Um, Nep-Nep?" Goofy tried to say.

"Hey, no fair!" Sora complained. "How come YOU got to fly!?"

"Nep-wha?"

Sure enough, Neptune was flying up in the air, pixie dust surrounding her very being.

"There you go!" Peter said excitedly. "At least one of you believes hard enough to fly!"

"Really?" Neptune wondered as she flew around the room. "That's all it took?"

"How can you just say that so casually!?" IF complained. "How can SHE fly but the rest of us can't!?"

"I mean..." Neptune started. "Magical girls could always fly. So, I just thought of myself as one when I felt all that pixie dust flying around. Didn't think it would work though..."

"Well, I'm sure the rest of you can learn, eventually" Peter believed. "It'll take some time, but I'm sure the rest of you can fly, too! Lost Boy Creed #10! All you need is faith, trust and pixie dust!"

Sting sighed. "Try telling me that. I've been sprinkled with so much of the dust, I'm surprised I haven't gotten allergies from it..."

"Peter?"

Everyone stopped when they heard a voice from the ceiling!

"Wendy?" Peter Pan called out, looking around. "Where are you?"

"Up here!"

The group headed to a nearby grate, where they see the face of a brown-haired young girl peering behind it.

"Wendy!" Peter called out.

"Are you okay?" Sting asked.

"Yes, you two. I'm fine" Wendy answered. "But we could use the help. Those strange creatures Captain Hook summoned are trying to force their way in, and this cabinet may not hold the door for much longer..."

"Wait, Wendy" Sora called out. "Is there...another girl with you?"

"Oh, yes!" Wendy said. "She's right here with me"

"Red-haired? White and purple clothes? Seems kinda asleep?" Neptune asked rather quickly.

"Yes. Yes. And yes" Wendy answered all three questions. "In fact, she hasn't uttered a single word since she was brought here."

And then, loud thuds can be heard from above ground. "I believe they are coming back again! Peter, Sting, do hurry!"

"Then don't move from that spot!" Sting shouted. "Come, comrades, we must go save them!"

IF sweatdropped. "Since when did you get to give out orders like that? Ah well..."

"C'mon, lover boy!" Neptune urged, dragging the young boy who had his hand stretched out to reach Kairi. "We gotta hustle if we wanna save her!"

"Oh, yeah!" Sora, snapping out of his reverie, nodded quickly.

The royal wizard sighed. "I sure hope we don't have to make hoops around this ship to get across..."

Neverland – Captain Hook's Ship – Captain's Room

"Why do we have to go around the whole place to get to one room!?" Donald complained.

"Seriously, ducky" Neptune snarked. "Do YOU need a lesson about jinxes, too?"

"Either the crew was lazy or the Heartless made a mess of this place..." IF guessed. "I doubt the captain on this ship is clever enough to make us wander around like this..."

"Hook's a mean ol' codfish" Peter said, shaking his head. "I doubt he can be too clever out of a fight."

Sting sighed. "Sure, he wouldn't..."

Goofy looked around for another passageway. "Still, we gotta be close to Wendy and Kairi about no-"

"Kairi!?"

Everyone turned to where Sora was looking, to where they saw Riku carrying the unconscious Kairi like a princess as he stepped back and disappeared into the darkness...

"Riku!?" IF exclaimed.

"What the nep!?"

Suddenly, the animated Shadows of Sora and Neptune appeared, with shadowy Keyblades in hand!

"Looks like these two wanna fight!" Compa said, readying her syringe.

"Peter, you're the expert here!" Sting called out to the flying boy. "Any advice?"

"Not exactly an expert but..." Peter shrugged. "Just keep hitting them until they stop?"

"That's...not a good strategy..." IF complained, but the sounds of shadowy movement caused her to snap back to the incoming fight. "Here they come!"

Neptune's shadow struck first, lunging against her real counterpart while Sora's shadow simply walked around without a care in the world.

"Gak!" Neptune complained as her shadow sunk below ground. "Hold still!"

It then crept up behind Compa and did a quick upper slash from behind!

"Owie..."

IF clicked her tongue. "They're sneaky ones, I'll give them that..."

She then turned around and deflected an incoming attack!

"Everyone, watch the ground! These things have to come out at some time!"

The girl's shadow then emerged behind the unsuspecting duo, when someone charged in with his dagger, screaming like a morning rooster as he attacked!

"Peter Pan!?"

The young man grinned. "I got her in my sights! Help me out here!"

Neptune snickered as her Keyblade is wreathed in ice! "Way ahead of ya! **FROST CRUSHER**!"

Meanwhile, Sora's Shadow has begun to split up into three clones of itself and began to walk around the room.

"There's a lot of 'em!" Goofy shouted.

"How do we tell which is the real one?" Donald wondered.

"Haaaaaahhh! STRIKE!"

Sora channeled **Thundara** magic and dispelled most of the clones, leaving one left.

"That works!" Sting remarked. "Allow me!"

She then charged against the main Shadow, only to be blocked by Neptune's Shadow.

"What the!?"

"Great!" IF complained again. "These Shadows know how to work together, too!"

"Hiyah!"

Neptune attempted to attack Sora's Shadow from behind, but it suddenly dissipated!

"Huh?"

Neptune's Shadow then deflected Sting's attack and lunged at her original owner.

"Someone's feelin' antsy, huh?"

But while that clash was happening, a figure is attempting to attack her from behind!

"Nep-Nep, behind you!"

Hearing Compa's warning caused her to turn around, seeing a familiar shadow reemerging!

"No, you don't!"

But Sora swooped in and pushed his reemerging Shadow back with a Gravity Break!

"Thanks, buck-o!"

Neptune then deflected her doppelganger's attack, slipped right behind her and unleashed her attack!

"**DUAL EDGE**!"

The attack knocked the shadow back, forcing both of them into a corner!

"Peter! Let's finish this!" Sting called out

The flying boy nodded, speaking in a deep falsetto. "Time to settle this!"

Sting charged energy into her red sword and sent it against the two shadows...

"**STING SLICER**!"

...which causes the sent energy to split into numerous sword slices, pushing them back...

"**SWORDBILL**!"

...and then Peter Pan unleashed a rapid barrage of dagger thrusts against them...

"Now, you two!" the young man called out to the two Keyblade wielders.

"Finish this!" Sting shouted.

The two Keyblade wielders nodded and charged their Keyblades with **Gravity** magic.

"**GRAVITY BREAK/SLAM**!"

The combined Gravity attacks pushed the Shadows back down, never to emerge out to the surface ever again!

"Is that it?" Compa wondered.

"Yeah, that's about it" IF said, sheathing her qatars. "How's everyone?"

Goofy gave a thumbs up. "We're still rarin' to go!"

Donald nodded, chugging down a Potion.

"We're all good here, Iffy!" Neptune reported, to which Sora and Compa nodded.

Peter Pan, meanwhile, inspected the floor, taking note of the dark spots near the two with the keys. "Your shadows are back in place, so that's all good. Now..."

He then approached what seemed to be a crack in the floor.

"Ah" Sting noticed. "This must have budged during our little tussle."

Peter nodded, opening the tile, revealing a direct passage to the room Wendy was in. "Let's go!"

Neverland – Captain Hook's Ship – Deck

"I can't believe he ditched us like that!" Neptune complained as the party, now deprived of the flying boy, exited to the ship's deck.

"Well, he needed to make sure Wendy's doing okay" Compa reassured. "I'm thankful he was patient enough for me to administer some treatment before he went."

Sting sighed. "He's always like that. Impulsive and reckless. Then again, considering no one really grows up in Neverland, I'm certain he wants to stay that way."

"Still, where do you think Riku went?" Sora wondered.

"Maybe he went to Maleficent's hideout?" Goofy guessed.

Neptune nodded, clapping her hands. "I can just smell it. The climax of this story is getting closer by the second!"

"Then let's find the Keyhole here so we can get moving!" Donald urged the group.

"Keyhole?" Sting asked. But before her question can be answered...

"Well, look what we have here!"

The party looked up to see Captain Hook, the pirate captain of this ship, meeting with his first mate Smee, and four Pirate Heartless to boot!

"If you're here for your friend, he's come and gone!" Hook said, faking tears. "Quite a codfish, that Riku-running off with that unconscious girl without saying goodbye."

Sting huffed. "So, says the traitorous codfish here..."

"Sting, me matey!" the evil captain greeted. "It's been a long time! 'Twas a shame you left so soon. The old crew missed you, y'know?"

The girl with the sword huffed again. "And where are they now? Up and replaced them with empty minions? I'm surprised Smee over there stayed with you."

Hook scoffed at the remark.

"Run off where?" Sora demanded. "Tell me, where did he go!?"

"To the ruins of Hollow Bastion" Hook answered. "Where Maleficent resides now."

"Hollow..." Goofy started.

"Bastion..." Donald continued.

"That must be Leon's homeworld!" Compa finished.

"And where is this Hollow Bastion?" IF demanded.

"You'll find it just past this world. You can't miss it!" Hook answered. "However, none of you will be going there..."

He then took the lantern from Smee's hand, which contained...

Sora gasped.

"Oh snap!" Neptune shouted.

...Tinker Bell herself, who is trying to plead to the party for help (at least, that's what they think she's saying).

"Pixie-napped again..." Sting complained. "You're really playing the same old trick from a decade ago!?"

"You know what they say about old tricks in the book, old mate?" Hook boasted. "They still work!"

Sora gritted his teeth. This is bad! One wrong move and Tink's a goner!

"Sora!"

"Neptune!"

The two Keyblade wielders turned around to see all five of their companions being held down by **Air Pirates**, flying scallywag Heartless mounted with air gliders.

"H-How did they...!?" IF struggled to say.

"Cowardly scum!" Sting shouted. "Is this how you pirates follow your Code!?"

Captain Hook scoffed. "Hand over the Keyblades, you brats and I'll spare your lives!"

"Sora, Nep-Nep!" Compa called out. "Don't listen to him!"

"Fight back, you guys!" Donald urged them.

"Be glad I'm merciful, unlike the Heartless!" Hook boasted.

"Don't bother entertaining his ideas!" IF struggled to say. "Nep, take Sora and fly out of here!"

"But..."

She can't. Not when both her friends and Tinker Bell are still held hostage!

"So, which will it be, children?" Hook demanded. "The Keyblades, or the plank?"

Suddenly, he could hear the sound of a ticking clock coming from the ocean.

"Oh, it's him!" Hook panicked at the green Crocodile staring right at him. "It's the Crocodile who took me hand!"

"C-Calm down, Captain..." Smee tried to reassure his captain.

"But he's after me other hand! I can't stay here!"

He then tossed Tinker Bell's cage back to his first mate, and then ran up the ladder, leading to his quarters.

"Go away! Oh, I can't stand the sight of him! Smee, you take care of them!"

Once Hook gave his order, he retreated into the safe confines of his cabin.

"A-a-a-a-a-a-" Smee stuttered. "Yes, sir..."

"Urk! Why...so tight!?"

While all that was happening, the nearby Pirate Heartless had tied Sora and Neptune's hands to their backs to prevent them from summoning their Keyblades.

"So, i-if you could please move along the plank, that would be appreciated, eheh..." Smee demanded nicely with a chuckle.

Sting spat on the floor. "What cowards. Don't listen to this buffoon! Just go!"

But the Pirates had pushed the duo onto the plank, leaving them in the middle with only the Crocodile on one end and a horde of Heartless in the other, all the while the Air Pirates have flown their companions to the other side, ready to drop them to the waters...

"Guys!"

"Forget about us, Sora!" Goofy urged.

"Just go and fly away, Nep-Nep!" Compa cried.

"Nep, take Sora and go!" IF exclaimed.

"Sora, go find your friends!" Donald shouted. "And if you see King Mickey, tell him that we're sorry..."

"Guys..."

Neptune shook her head. "No! Nonononononono! I don't wanna! I don't wanna lose you guys!"

"What she said!" Sora shouted. "All for one and one for all! If you are going down, we'll go right after you!"

"Sora..." Donald and Goofy cried.

"Nep..." IF said.

Sting growled. "If only we could break free from this...If only we could all fly..."

"I wish we could fly!" Compa cried louder.

One of the Pirate Heartless began to move onto the plank, creeping upon the Keyblade wielders with it's sword, forcing them to take a few steps back.

"What do we do, buck-o?" Neptune asked desperately.

"I don't know..." Sora answered.

But her question was answered by someone else...

"Fly, you guys!"

The two looked to each other. Did they hear that right?

"Lost Boy Creed #9! Just believe and you can do it!"

Realizing what they need to do, the two nodded to each other, and with determined gazes, they looked to their now-airborne friends.

"Guys!" Sora called out.

"You must believe!" Neptune shouted.

"Huh?" IF said incredulously.

"Believe in what?" Compa asked loudly.

"Remember what Peter Pan said!" Neptune shouted. "About the secret trick to flying here!"

"Really now!?" Donald complained.

"This may not be the best time for that!" Sting shouted.

"What is it!?" Goofy asked.

Neptune looked to Sora and nodded.

"There are three things we needed!" Sora responded.

He took a step back...

"Faith"

Neptune followed with another step...

"Trust"

The two took another step, much closer to the edge...

"And...pixie dust!"

...and then they leapt...

"SORA!"

"NEP!/NEP-NEP!"

As the two leapt down, the Air Pirates released their captives, sending them down to the ocean...

"NO!"

Three...

Two...

One...

"A-Are they gone?" Smee looked down to inspect any possible remains...

Only to hear the sound of whirling in the wind.

"Looking for us?"

The first mate looked up to see one, two, no...

EIGHT PEOPLE FLYING IN THE SKY!?

The sight of them flying about was enough to make him panic, dropping the lantern containing Tinker Bell, which broke, freeing the tiny pixie.

"C-C-C-C-Captain!"

He ran back into the ship, leaving only the Heartless to contend with...

"We didn't think you'd come back" IF said to Peter Pan, who freed Sora and Neptune from the rope on their hands.

"Thanks for the save!" Neptune said, feeling her wrists. "We owe ya!"

"Hey, don't mention it!" Peter nodded as Tink flew back to Peter's side. "You guys didn't think I'd leave you and Tink behind, did ya?"

Sting sighed. "Figures you wouldn't. Lost Boy Creed #13. Never leave one another behind, right?"

Peter nodded. "Now you're getting into it!"

"Still though" IF giggled, feeling giddy. "We're really flying, huh? Like up here in the sky? I could only ever dream of this!"

"I know, right!?" Compa exclaimed, feeling very happy too. "If this is a dream, I don't ever wanna wake up!"

"Well, believe it, fellas!" Neptune chirped. "WE CAN FLY! WE CAN FLY~!"

"Oh boy!" Goofy exclaimed. "I can't wait to tell Maxy about this!"

"The triplets will blow their minds when they hear about this!" Donald said with childish glee. "Scrooge will no doubt be thinking of inventing something if he heard about this too!"

Sora, meanwhile, looked down to see the Heartless, rounding up and ready for a fight.

"Heads up, guys!" the boy called out to the group, his Keyblade at the ready. "We still got trouble down there!"

"Not to mention up here, too!" Sting said, pointing to the Air Pirates and the mini-flying **Battleships** flanking the pirate ship.

"I don't know about that!" IF boasted, bringing out her qatars. "Now that we have an aerial advantage, these codfishes are nothing but crocodile bait!"

"Iffy, you might be a bit too excited about this..." Compa sweatdropped, bringing out her syringe.

"But we have nothing to fear now!" Donald chirped, summoning his staff.

"We just gotta take the fight to 'em!" Goofy boasted, summoning his shield.

"Since when were we so impulsive today?" Sting mockingly asked, summoning her sword. "Ah well, I've been itching for a fight anyway!"

Peter brought out his trusty dagger, looking to Sora. "Ready, Sora?"

Sora nodded with a grin. "Let's nep them all up!"

Neptune grinned back as she rubbed her nose. "NOW you're speaking my language, buck-o!"

Neverland – London – Big Ben Tower

Riku gazed upon the night sky, staring longingly onto the moon. As Kairi sat near him, still unaware of her surroundings, the silver-haired youth attempted to grab the moon on his sight...

"Feeling wistful, are we?"

The boy turned to this left, hearing footsteps as a familiar witch came into view.

"It's you..." Riku said, noticing the newcomer. "What do you want this time?"

"Come now" Arfoire replied, shaking her head. "Surely we can't discuss matters like civilized people?"

Riku huffed. "Like I care. Just tell me what you want"

The witch sighed. "Straight to business, I see. You really don't trust anyone else now, don't you?"

"Kairi's the only one I trust" Riku said with a piercing gaze.

"Do you now? Well, I'm here to repay you that favor for getting Noire out of there."

Arfoire produced a dark-red crystal and tossed it to Riku.

"I have no doubt you will meet your...old friend again before too long. And when he comes, so too will a certain girl" Arfoire stated as she turned around and left. "Use that on Neptune when you see her. You'll thank me later once she's out of your hair. Haa-hahahahaha!"

Riku stared onto the dark-red crystal, which doesn't look anything special on the surface apart from the menacing red glow, but from what little he knows about Arfoire, it could be anything but good.

But what did it matter to him? As far as Riku is concerned, he and Kairi are all that's left now. No Destiny Islands. No friends...

No Sora...

Neverland – Captain Hook's Pirate Ship – Deck

"**Don't you DARE come near me**!"

Sting unleashed a mighty swing against a group of Air Pirates, sending them flying against a Battleship, destroying them all at once.

"That takes care of my end!" She then looked around. "How about the rest of you?"

"All clear here!" Goofy reported.

"Nothing on this side, either!" Compa shouted.

"Okay then, time for the next phase" IF uttered. "Peter, if you would"

Peter Pan, Neptune and Sora then approached the door to Captain Hook's room, signified by the skull and crossbones marked on the door. He gave a light knock, which caused the Captain inside to respond.

"Is that you, Smee? Did you get rid of them?"

Peter couldn't help but hold in his laughter. Pressing his nose, he spoke nasally to match his voice to that of Hook's first mate.

"Aye, cap'n! They walked the plank and the rest have been thrown overboard. Every last one of them!"

The impatient pirate captain then stormed out to check the damage frantically...

...all the while Neptune snuck up on him...

"**Stop**..."

...and proceeded to light his pants with a weak **Fire** spell while Sora silently casted a Stop spell on him.

Taking the chance, Peter then proceeded to tear the feather on Hook's hat and forcefully brought it down, as if he's wearing the sides of it on his waist!

"GAH! HOTHOTHOTHOTHOT!"

Once the Stop spell has ceased, the devious pirate captain proceeded to run about everywhere, trying to put away the fire on his pants, leading everyone else in the premise to laugh at his misery!

"Gah-Peter Pa-Blast you!"

Once he recovered, he turned to the source of his misery with maddened resolve.

"Ready to make a splash, you codfish?"

"Now it's your turn to walk the plank!" Neptune finished, raising her Keyblade.

Hearing this only incensed the evil captain. "You mangy brats! I'll send you to the depths myself! En garde!"

But rather than fight him head-on, the trio opted to fly away, causing Hook to give chase!

"Come back here, you cowards!"

"Then why not fight me, instead?"

He then sees Sting, planted on the ground and her sword at the ready.

"Hmph, at least YOU have a sense of fairness. Have at you!"

"We shall see!"

The two proceeded to clash. Between the heavy firepower of Sting's sword and the finesse of Hook's rapier, it seemed to be an even match despite the odds. However...

"Had enough?" Sting taunted.

"Not quite!" Hook then brought out a wrapped gift and threw it to Sting. "Present for you!"

Sting scowled as she dodged to the side, knowing what these 'presents' really are. "No thanks!"

The 'presents' exploded, revealing them to be bombs!

"Tch. Missed..."

"Over here!"

Hook ducked a slash from Neptune and proceeded to engage her in combat.

"Hey, you're not half-bad for a codfish!" Neptune taunted.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, lass!" Hook fought back.

"Oh yeah?" Neptune took a step back. "Then how about this? Ready, Goofster!?"

"Ready when you are, Nep-Nep!"

Flying up, Goofy proceeded to crash down to where Captain Hook is!

"Time to fly!"

Taking advantage of the confusion, Neptune proceeded to launch Hook up into the air!

While that was happening, Goofy quickly recovered and jumped up...

"Down ya go!"

...and slammed Hook down into the ground again!

"Ready!?"

"All together now!"

Rejoining Neptune back on the ground, the two charged up a mighty dash attack that sent the evil Captain flying into the water!

This is their Combination Skill, the **Goofy-Nep Buster**!

"YOU WILL NOT GET ME OTHER HAND!"

Due to his fear of the Crocodile, he immediately launched himself off the water and back to the middle of his ship in the air, where he sees a flying girl in front of him.

"Hi!" It was Compa.

"H-Hi..."

"Ready for your shots, Mr. Captain?"

Hook panicked. But before Compa could land her shot, the evil captain fell onto his ship.

"Aw, poo!" Compa complained. "I was too slow..."

Captain Hook proceeded to get up to recover from that insane episode he had just gone through...

"We're not done yet, vile traitor!"

...but Sting's call snapped him back to reality, continuing the fight!

"You brats think you can get the best of me!?" Hook shouted, deflecting Sting's assault. "Heartless, come out!"

At his call came four Air Pirates and two Battleships, flanking each of the ship's sides.

"Looks like he's got some playmates of his own" Donald commented, still flying in the sky.

"At least we know how to deal with them" IF responded as she flew to the duck's backside.

"Hey, you want to try out a new technique?" the court wizard suggested.

The guild agent smirked. "Better late than never. Let's do this!"

"O great spirits beyond..."

"Have a little magic!"

Donald imbued the guild agent's qatars with magic, who then proceeded to unleash a flurry of attacks, six to be precise, against most of the Heartless present.

"Ready for a big one!?"

"Feel the wrath of the elements!"

Her weapons imbued with even more magic, IF unleashed a powerful magical slash against the Heartless, resulting in a huge magical explosion that takes out Hook's reinforcements in one fell swoop.

This is their Combination Skill, **Elemental Fury**!

"This can't be!" Hook bemoaned.

Sting grinned. "Don't underestimate us bilge rats, 'Captain'!"

"Blast you!"

As Hook was about to land another hit, he ended up blocking an attack that are coming to him.

"You!"

"Miss me?"

It was Sora!

"Pesky brat!"

Sora grinned as he blasted him with a chuck of ice! "**BLIZZARA**!"

The ice hit the evil Captain dead on, causing him a great deal of anger. "That's it! Now you've gone and made me mad!"

But before Hook could do another swing, he noticed someone landing on the tip of his blade.

"Forget about me?"

It was Peter Pan, who proceeded to jump off the blade with such force that the evil captain began to wobble around.

"B-B-Blast you, P-Peter P-Pan!"

"You better keep your guard up!"

Sting took the chance to send Hook flying to the nearby wall with a mighty swing of her blade!

"I've had it with you, Pan! And you Keyblade wielders have given me nothing but trouble since the last decade! I'll make sure to rid the worlds of your kind!"

Sora ignored his words and continued his assault against the vile captain.

"HOH!" A **Sliding Dash** against his feet!

"YAH!" A quick **Slapshot**!

"AHA!" And then a strong **Blitz** to finish it up!

"Curse you! HRRRRGGGG!"

Hook has become so furious that he is now practically swinging his rapier wildly across every direction possible!

"This is bad!" IF warned the party. "Seems like the old codfish has hit his limit!"

"Then we'll just step things up!"

Sora, undeterred, charged his Keyblade with light magic and proceeded to hammer down Hook with his new technique...

"Let's go!"

...unleashing a thirteen-hit barrage of fast and furious attacks! This is his **Ars Arcanum**!

"Why you little-"

"Time to walk the plank, Hook!"

At Sting's declaration, she charges her blade with magic and unleashes her greatest technique against the evil captain!

"**STING SWORD CRASH**!"

The attack sent the evil captain flying up in the air, right in the direction of Peter Pan and Tinker Bell.

"Curse you, Peter Pan..." Hook cursed as he was being carried by the flying boy.

"It was good fun while it lasted, Hook" He turned to Tinker Bell with a bow. "Tink, would you like to do the honors?"

She nodded, and then flew up and then crashed down upon Captain Hook with a mighty dropkick (for her stature) with both of her feet, sending him down to the plank (once Peter Pan released him), exhausted and in pain...

As the evil captain looked up, he saw a red sword pointing at him...

"It's over, 'Captain'" It was Sting, looming over him like a giant.

"No..."

Getting up, Hook hit his limit, jumping up and down furiously.

"I WON'T GO DOWN LIKE THIS!"

He then lunged forward, attempting to attack the young woman...

"Whoops!"

...only for her to slide back, flying as the evil captain fell down into the ocean below...

"AAAAAHHHHHHH!"

...and come face-to-face with his worst nightmare...

"Grrrrr..."

...the Hungry, Hungry Crocodile!

"HELP ME, SMEE! SMEEEEEEEEEEE!"

The last of Captain Hook was seen running away from the Crocodile across the ocean.

Sting took the chance to wave him goodbye, sticking her tongue out as she did so.

"Bye bye, you stinky codfish!"

Neverland – Starry Sky

"Oh, man!" Neptune laughed as she flew up the sky. "Dealing with that old codfish was so much fun!"

Compa giggled. "I can't remember the last time I had this much fun!"

IF laughed as well. "Me neither. I honestly forgotten what it feels like to just smile and laugh from the bottom of my heart like this."

"There's always a good time as any to get back in touch with our youth." Goofy chuckled.

"Come on, Goofy..." Donald shook his head. "We're not that old yet..."

"They say youth comes by too quickly" Sting said. "That is why we must cherish it while we have it, isn't that right?"

"Youth, huh?" Neptune said wistfully. "What do you think, Sor—huh?"

"I'm flying..." he muttered. "I'm really flying, huh?"

IF chuckled. "What's with you, all of the sudden?"

"His brain must be catching up to what's happening right now" Donald snarked.

Sora began to laugh. "I still can't believe it. Wait until I tell Kairi about this!"

He then sighed. "I wonder if she'll believe me. Probably not..."

"Hey, you can bring her to Neverland sometime" Peter Pan offered. "Then she can try it out herself!"

"That's a fantabulous idea!" Neptune nodded in agreement.

"Assuming our resident wizard doesn't mind..." IF snarked.

"Ah, whatever!" Donald deflected. "Do what you want on that!"

"Guess the breaks in the World Order recently are starting to wear him down, huh?" Compa commented.

"I question the idea of such an Order existing in the first place" Sting wondered.

Sora cleared his throat, wanting to get back on topic. "Well, if you believe, you can do anything, right?"

"Belief is one thing, yes" IF nodded. "But you also must put effort into what you believe in to make the dream work."

"How so?" Neptune asked.

"Think of it like this" the guild agent attempted to explain. "If you put in the work yet you don't believe it to be your magnum opus, it will come out as a soulless work. If you have belief yet don't put in the effort, you end up with something subpar despite the feeling of passion into your work. In order to achieve your best, you must put in both effort and belief."

"Effort and belief, huh?" Sora said to himself. "Yeah. One thing I know now, is that I know I will find Kairi, and when I see her-I'll tell her about all the things we've seen. The flying. The pirates, and everything else we've been through."

"Hey, save some storytelling time with us, lover boy!" Neptune teased the young boy.

"H-Hey!"

Everyone had a good, hearty laugh as they continued flying into the night sky.

A sky filled with weary warriors who have regained their inner youth after several trials...

NEPSTATION

Neptune: We’re now live at Nepstation! The news that provides the latest buzz 24/7, even when everyone is asleep!

Sting: That would be troublesome. Who will manage the studio late into the night?

Neptune: See, there’s this thing we call night shifts, my current co-host. We have different people working in the day and in the night!

Sting: R-Right. I-I knew that! I’ve always known that!

Neptune: Right~! Now that that little tidbit is given, let’s get to the news!

---

an image of four people, their images blurred, all flying into the night sky, appears onscreen

Neptune: Some nightgoers have reported seeing mysterious flying objects late in the night. A few have even gone to say that they were apparently flying people at that! Certain night watchers continued to be baffled by these findings to this day!

Sting: Humph! Then they must double their security! You'll never know if those flying objects may actually be invaders from other worlds!

Neptune: Holy smokes, you're right! We gotta keep a close watch for them!

Sting: Don't take me seriously on that! We don't want to be seen as unfriendly here!

Neptune: Hrmmmmmm...Why is national security such a delicate situation!?

Sting: Still, we must not shoot recklessly. We do not want to ruin the eyes and lives of the children out there.

Neptune: Yeah. You're right! Speaking of children...

---

an image of a group of children wearing numerous animal suits, their eyes crossed out, appeared onscreen

Sting: We've had recent sightings of the so-called Lost Boys across the islands. Recent hearings state that their numbers seemed to have swelled in the recent years, yet their hideout continues to remain a mystery.

Neptune: I sense some pride in that tone of yours, my co-host!

Sting: And that is how it should be! Nothing can beat the tactics and strategies that I personally taught them in the past decade!

Neptune: Really? Tactics like leaving bear traps that lures their own to them or getting themselves caught by Indian and mermaid cages? Those will never work! Where'd you study tactics, girl!?

Sting: I-I still need improvements, okay!? *mumbles* I'm gonna get those brats, one of these days...

Neptune: Well, that should serve as an important lesson to ya, kiddos. Improvise, Adapt, Overcome! Even the greatest of plans can fall apart at time, you know?

Sting: *growls* I'll keep that under advisement...

Neptune: Ok—ay! Let's get to the last segment!

---

an image of a pixie with a large question mark next to her appears onscreen

Neptune: There's been rumors abound of a secret society of pixies that have been present since time immemorial. These claims state that certain pixies were sent out to watch over the state of the worlds alongside a chosen one. Of course, investigations regarding these claims have yet to be verified.

Sting: If such a society exists, surely they must have records of history spanning since the world's inception, do they not?

Neptune: That's what we'd all like to know, but the existence of these societies and such continues to remain a mystery. Who knows, it may not even be real!

Sting: I'd agree with you, but given the mysterious forces we have encountered lately, that query is put into doubt.

Neptune: *sighs* You tell me. Wizards. Faeries. Gods. Genies. Pixies. What's next? Living tomes?

Sting: You sure love tempting fate, do you?

Neptune: *chuckles* Well, that's all the news we got for you all today!

Sting: And this is the part where I leave the stage. It has been brief, but I did enjoy my time here. I hope our paths may cross again, everyone.

Neptune: You said it! Take care now!

Sora: So, our topic for today is...

an image of the Heartless Emblem appears onscreen

Neptune: That's right! Today, we're gonna talk about the creepy crawlies that lurk in the darkness. The **Heartless**!

an image of three Shadows appear onscreen

Sora: Don't let their appearances fool you. These guys came from the darkness in people's hearts. They are numerous, have different forms and shapes, and can come out of anywhere to steal a heart.

Neptune: Hm-hm! People's hearts are essentially their all-day diet. They find people, gang up on them, and once their hearts are filled with that dank darkness, they gobble up the heart and get more friends to their ever-growing population. Joy...

Sora: It's actually difficult to defeat a Heartless. Even if it seems like you took them out, they'll just reform themselves minutes later and start attacking again. You'll be lucky if the Heartless decided to go somewhere else...

an image of chibi Neptune and Sora with their Keyblades out defeating two Shadows appears onscreen

Neptune: But that's why we're here! According to folks, only our Keyblades can actually make sure those Heartless stay down for good! I mean, did you see the hearts coming out of them when we beat them?

Sora: Yup. When we defeat Heartless, we free the hearts they've been holding captive. Though...where do those hearts go, I wonder?

Neptune: Huh. That is a good question...

an alarm bell is rung

Neptune: And there's the bell. Guess this mystery will have to wait for another time, huh?

Sora: Probably.

Neptune: Still, the climax of this story is drawing ever closer! Hope you all get excited for what's to come!

Sora: Yup! So, from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 13: Chapter 11: Fragments of Sorrow (Memory)

Chapter Summary

> Our party returns to Traverse Town for some needed R&R. However, one stray daydream turns everything on it's head...

Traverse Town – First District

"Good golly!"

Cid could only exclaim in surprise at all the navigation gummis that the party managed to acquire throughout their journey.

"You kids have been going on out there, huh?"

"Well, you know us!" Neptune boasted. "Whether it's pudding or our friends, we go the distance for them!"

"Pudding aside" IF snarked. "Think you can get something to work with these, Cid?"

"Hmmmmmm" Cid thought for a moment.

"Will it take some time like before?" Sora asked.

"Yeah." Cid said as he stood up. "But once I got these babies adjusted and ready for installation, you kids should be good to go over at Maleficent's home base!"

"Hollow Bastion..." IF recalled.

"Truly a fitting name for a vile place filled with scum and villainy!" Neptune commented.

"Um, wasn't that world Leon's homeworld once?" Sora reminded her, causing the girl to cover her mouth in shock and shame.

"It was" Cid noted bitterly. "Now, I don't know how much of the old place is left there. Heck, we can't even remember WHAT our world was once called."

"S-Seriously!?" IF gasped.

"Yup." the engineer nodded. "Honestly, everything just happened so fast, some of us were wonderin' if we're all in some weird collective dream or somethin'. Sorry for the ramblin'"

The guild agent shook her head. "Don't be. Anyway, how long will it take for this to work?"

"Should take a while" Cid said, scratching his head. "Why don't ya kids take a breather? I'll call ya when I got an update."

"Gotcha!" Neptune saluted. "Let's head for Arty's house!"

Traverse Town – Third District – Vacant House

"So, we need more time, huh?"

Compa, along with Donald and Goofy, returned to the house with fresh supplies in the bags. The trio placed them in a high place for now so the residing dogoo wouldn't feast on it's contents.

"Considering we haven't been back in town for a long time, I'm not surprised" IF stated.

"But our next destination should be this 'Hollow Bastion' place, right?" Goofy wondered.

"It's gotta be!" Donald believed.

"The place for the final battle!" Neptune couldn't contain her excitement. "Once we get there, there's no turning back! We go all in or not go at all! Right, Sora!?"

She turned to see the boy lying down on the bed, his arm closing his eyes.

"Uh, Sora?"

"Sora!"

The boy got up from Donald's call, groaning as he did so. "How can you guys be so cheerful? We still haven't found King Mickey or Histy yet. Does it not bother you guys?"

"Aw, phooey" Donald could only reply.

"I mean, I'm still worried" Neptune said, scratching her head. "But hey! Histy's been doing fine as far as kidnapped people are concerned, so we can take our time a bit."

"Not to mention that Hollow Bastion's our next destination" Compa stated. "I feel that we'll at least find some clue about King Mickey's whereabouts and get Kairi and Histy back as well"

"How can you be so sure?" Sora asked the nurse.

Neptune gasped. "Can you see the future, Compa!?"

The nurse giggled. "Nothing like that. It's just...I believe it to be the case. No, I WANT to believe that's what we'll find there!"

"Just believe..."

Sora closed his eyes as he laid down again...

"I believe in you..."

?????? ??????? - ???????

Suddenly, Sora and Neptune found themselves flying into a bright light, which led them into a...library of some sort?

"Where...am I?"

"You tell me, buck-o"

Sora turned to see his fellow Keyblade Wielder right next to him, floating beside him.

"How did you follow me here?"

Neptune shrugged. "Dunno. One minute I was in the room with you guys, then the next I'm right here"

"Grandma, tell me the story again!"

The two then saw a little girl, with red hair and a white and purple floral dress, running up to an old lady sitting near the window.

"Okay, okay. Now, how did it go again...Ah, yes!"

As the old lady narrated her story, the duo began to receive images...

Strange images that tell a story all on their own, but neither of them could really process what they are seeing...

"But someday, a door to the innermost darkness will open. And the true light will return. So, listen, child. Even in the deepest darkness, there will always be a light to guide you. Believe in the light, and the darkness will never defeat you. Your heart will shine with its power and push the darkness away. Do you understand, Kairi?"

Sora's eyes gasped at the mention of that name.

"Kairi!?"

Suddenly, the old lady vanished from her seat!

"Huh? Grandma?"

Sora tried to reach out to the younger Kairi, but she eventually vanished too!

"What the nep is going on!?"

Eventually, the two of them were kicked out, leading them to be tossed into the corridor of light.

"Now, where are we going!?" Neptune complained.

"Kairi..." Sora muttered, staring at his hand.

"Sora, remain focused! We gotta-WOAAAAAHHHH!"

Eventually, they arrived at another destination...

??????????? - ?????????? - Main City

...One that was familiar to the both of them...

"Now, where are we?" Neptune wondered as she got up. "What happened to this place?"

"This place?" Sora looked around as he got up. "It looks...familiar..."

"Huh?" Neptune looked to her sole companion. "Whaddaya mean?"

"Hmmmmmm" Sora tried to think. "I think...I saw this in a dream before..."

"A dream..." Neptune then gasped. "Ya mean that weird dream you told me about!?"

"Run!"

"The monsters will kill us all!"

"The CPU's have fallen!"

"We're doomed!"

"Why does she hate us? What did we ever do to her!?"

The duo looked around as people began to run in a panicked frenzy.

"What's going on here?" Sora wondered.

"Hey!" Neptune shouted out to the crowd. "Mind telling us what the nep is going on!?"

But their cries weren't heard as the crowd continued to run.

"They're not listening..." Neptune said glumly.

"Well, we can't just stand around here" Sora urged. "Let's keep going. Hopefully, we'll find something out there..."

??????????? - ?????????? - City Park

As the two continued to wander around, they began to see some people ducking and covering on certain places in small groups.

They found one such group, consisting of two men and a woman, hiding near a tree.

"Are they gone?" the sole woman of the group asked.

"Dunno" one of the men said. "Those creeps could be popping back in at any moment"

"At any rate" the other man, wearing some sort of robes, said. "We should remain put for now. Until I receive contact from the Basilicom, you two are under my charge."

"Thank you very much" the woman bowed to the robed man. "Truly, this is the blessing from the Goddess. Our Lady CPU's followers are always reliable!"

The robed man laughed. "No need to worry, ma'am! As a proud follower of Lady ------ Heart, we will ensure the safety of all Planeptunians, nay, of all Gamindustrians we can find!"

"That's some big talk, coming from you..." the first man complained. "Didn't this all started because of what YOUR Lady Goddess unleashed!"

"P-please calm down..." the woman pleaded.

"No!" the man shouted. "The fact of the matter is, YOUR GODDESS unleashed ALL those monsters on us! And it's not just her own nation, the other nations are being attacked too! Soon, there won't BE a Gamindustri left to live!"

"Sir, I can understand your frustration..." the robed man tried to calm the other man down.

But...

"Understand?" the first man repeated in frustration. "UNDERSTAND!? It is you blind fools who don't understand! The Goddesses can no longer be trusted with this world! They had to be deposed!"

"P-please, sir..." the woman tried to plead again.

"And from what I heard, they were so close a few times too..." the man bemoaned. "If she had been killed, that would've been the end of it. This whole situation would never have happen-"

"SILENCE, YOU APOSTATE!" the robed man yelled at him. "Can't you see that the Goddess you oh so wished to depose are no different from us regular folk!?"

"What are you-"

"They cry. They weep. They feel pain like any other. And like us, they strive to learn more about their citizens in order to better serve them. Serve us! But because she couldn't control her powers, Lady - Heart has closed herself off in order to protect us! THAT'S what she has been doing!"

The man scoffed. "Fat load of good that did. Now look what happened. Planeptune's being destroyed. We are scattered and lost and who knows what'll happen to this world after! That's

why she has to-"

"DON'T YOU SEE THAT YOU'VE CONTRIBUTED TO THE PROBLEM AT HAND HERE!?"

The man was surprised by the robed man's declaration.

"Yes, she was flawed. Yes, she was scared. But she always strived to do her best for her citizens. But then, ever since that grassroots promoter was assassinated, our Lady has kept to herself ever since! I would not be surprised if she has carried some sort of resentment towards people like you! People who refused to believe in any one goddess!"

"Why you...!?" The other man growled...

"But..." the robed man continued, his tone becoming more sorrowful. "It wasn't just the Goddess who has doomed our world. We did too. You, who wished to dispose of them. We, who couldn't comfort our Lady CPU in her darkest hour..."

The woman could only cry at the current state of affairs as both men were too depressed to continue fighting.

"And all we could do is wait for the inevitable..."

Sora couldn't help but feel bad for these citizens...

"I wish we could do something for them. What about you, Neptu-huh?"

When he saw her face, tears were flowing out of her eyes.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"Huh?"

Neptune turned, noticing how coarse her voice sounded. She then wiped the tears off her face.

"S-Sorry, I guess their conversation got to me..."

"How so?"

"Well..."

She looked to the group of three from earlier, the two men now silent as they kept a lookout while the sole woman continued to cry.

"...You heard what they were saying, right? About how the Lady Goddess was supposed to defend their nation and all that? But then, she couldn't and then the people hated her. And now, those same people are left to suffer, just as badly as the Goddess did! Hearing all this...all this...it...struck a chord on me, you know? And the worst part is...I don't know why..."

Sora pursed his lips, wishing he knew the answer to those questions...

"I wish I could tell you something, but I think there's more to this place that we haven't looked at yet. Let's keep looking for now..."

As the two left the premises, the rogue man stood up and attempted to storm off…

"Hey!" the robed man shouted. "Where are you going!?"

"Away from you!" the rogue man yelled. "I swear, you CPU worshippers are all al-"

And then, all of a sudden, several Shadow Heartless spawned around them.

"What the…!?"

The Basilicom agent stood in front of the rogue man while the woman rushed behind said man's back.

"Stay back! Come at me, you monsters! In Lady ------ Heart's name!"

However, all that was left of this small group were the screams of terror that escaped their throats as their hearts were consumed by the darkness…

Gamindustri – Planeptune – City Streets

And so, the duo continued walking through the streets of the ruined city, seeing only panicked citizens crying for salvation...

"What is happening!?"

"What did we do to deserve this?"

"I don't want to die...I don't want to die..."

"Oh, Lady Goddess..."

"Someone...anyone...please, save us!"

"Don't come near me! Don't co-AAHHHHHHHH!"

"This is terrible..." Sora bemoaned as he looked around. "Everywhere we go, there's only people panicking here. I'd like to know more about this place and why they're so panicked, but it doesn't help that they can't hear us. We can't even touch them at all."

Neptune kept silent as the noise around her drowned her thoughts.

Sora shook his head. "Well, we can't do much here. C'mon, Neptune. Let's keep moving..."

Neptune could only look down, as if hesitating. "I don't wanna..."

"Why not?"

The girl proceeded to clutch her head as she choked out her next words…

"What if we end up meeting more people like them? People who are conflicted about this whole thing? People who just wanna survive but realize they can't? People who just...accepted that they're going to die along with their world? I don't wanna see their sad faces. I don't wanna see their despair! I HATE IT! I HATE ALL OF THIS!"

Neptune continued to cry as her fears began to surface.

"Neptune..."

The girl wiped her tears off. "Sorry 'bout that! I guess this place is a bit too much for me, huh?"

"Hey, I don't know what to do about this either…" Sora admitted. "I can't begin to imagine how the people in my world felt when it was consumed…"

The girl nodded. "I feel ya there…"

Neptune then pointed to a tall structure located in the center of the city.

"Hey! Why don't we go to that tall tower over yonder?" the girl asked. "I bet we're gonna find out what's really going on around there, huh?"

The boy nodded. "Good idea. Let's check it out!"

Neptune snickered. "Race ya there, buck-o!"

She then made a mad dash for the tower as her sole companion sighed.

"Off she goes. Still, I hope you're at least feeling a little better..."

Sora followed after her as they dove deeper into the city.

Gamindustri – Planeptune – Planeptower

Weaving through the crowd of people, the duo eventually found their way onto the large tower in the middle of the city, it's massive size known for all to see.

"You think there's something here?" Neptune asked her companion.

"You're the one who wanted to go here." Sora shrugged. "I mean, it's the biggest place around. There's gotta be at least something here."

"Well, why don't we take a closer look, then?" Neptune urged.

Sora nodded, but as they took a few steps forward...

"Woah!"

Several Shadows sudden rose from the ground, ready to attack them!

"Heartless!? Here!?" Sora complained, summoning his Keyblade. "Then this really is just like in that dream!"

"How in the nep did they get all the way here!?" Neptune wondered, also summoning her Keyblade. "Wait, don't tell me...?"

"Worry about that later!" Sora said, slicing through three Shadows. "Let's take care of this first!"

Neptune nodded, slicing through four of the Shadows with ease. "At least we can slice these guys down!"

But as they take some down, more Shadows are ready to take their place.

"There's no end to this!" Sora complained, casting Thundara to wipe out more of them.

Neptune groaned, wiping out three Shadows with a Blaze Break. "If only we could find their head huncho...!"

Suddenly, the ground shook as a large, yet familiar figure rose from the ground!

"That...Heartless..." Sora gasped.

"The freakin' tutorial boss!?" Neptune freaked out.

Indeed, the large lumbering Heartless standing in front of them is a Darkside.

"Hope you remembered how to deal with these guys, buck-o!" Neptune asked the boy.

"I remember beating two of these!" Sora recalled. "One in that place with the glass platforms, and another before the island was destroyed"

"Wow, that's a better track record than me" Neptune gasped. "I only got one in the glass platforms place."

The Darkside gathered dark energy into it's right hand...

Neptune screamed... "Incoming!"

...as she and Sora moved the heck out of dodge! "Move away!"

...and slammed it down, creating a pool of darkness on the ground.

"This is..." Sora figured out what the Darkside is doing. "Neptune, can you..."

"Way ahead of you, buck-o!" Neptune shouted, already jumping on the dark creature's arm.

Sora grinned as he turned his attention back to the rising Shadows that are ready to jump on him.

"I'm tougher than last time!"

Charging his Keyblade with energy, he unleashes a powerful dome attack that stuns all nearby Shadows, leaving them open to attack! This is his **Stun Impact**!

"You're through!"

He then proceeded to eliminate all the stunned Shadows in a flurry of attacks.

"Now that that's done, how's Neptune doing?"

"**CRITICAL EDGE**!"

Neptune landed back down after performing her technique against the Darkside's head.

"How's that!?"

Sora pumped his fist upon seeing his fellow wielder's act. "Nice!"

The Darkside retracted his right arm, and began to kneel down...

"He's kneeling down!" Neptune cried.

Sora growled. "That means he's gonna shoot at us!"

Sure enough, the Darkside's open-hearted chest began to glow, releasing several shots of darkness that targeted the Keyblade wielders.

"But we know how to take those down!"

Neptune nodded at Sora's statement. "Let's get blocking, buck-o!"

The two of them deflected the incoming projectiles, sending them back to it's head, but the Darkside was not done yet!

"Now, what is it doing?" Neptune wondered as she narrowed her eyes against the creature.

It raised it's left hand this time, and slammed it down to the ground...

"Jump!" Sora urged as he and Neptune hopped up to avoid the incoming shockwave.

They then see the Darkside grabbing what appears to be a large dark orb from below the surface.

"What is that?" the girl with the key asked.

The boy with the key groaned, not liking this. "Dunno. But it can't be good..."

The Darkside then released the orb, causing it to disperse into the sky, releasing several smaller orbs that rained down from the sky slowly...

"Those things can't be good!" Neptune shouted as she ran around to avoid the orbs.

"Better avoid them!" Sora urged. "For now...!"

The boy then readied his **Strike Raid** against the Darkside, primed to at least hit his arms at a distance.

"I can hit him at a range, too! **WIND SLICER**!"

Neptune then followed up with her **Aerora**-enhanced range attacks, piling on the damage!

"Nice! Let's keep it up, Neptune!"

While the two continued their ranged assault, the Darkside began to summon that dark pool again...

"Here it comes...!"

...which it did! Wasting no time, the girl in the parka jumped up on it's arm again, ready to finish this fight!

"Here's a new technique I've been working on!"

As she got close on the Darkside's head, she unleashed an upward diagonal slash on the left, then a downward diagonal slash on the right, and finished it up with a horizontal slash below...

"**DELTA SLASH**! GO!"

...and sent them against the Darkside, causing the lumbering Heartless to fall over.

"Aw-right!" Neptune cheered.

"We got it!" Sora then high-fived his companion...

But it was too soon to celebrate. Soon, more Darksides, and several Heartless began to rise from the depths in droves!

"Oh, come the nep on!" Neptune complained.

Sora growled as he scanned around the area. "There's too many!"

The Heartless then proceeded to piledrive on the two Keyblade wielders, leaving them trapped.

"Gah! Can't breathe..." Sora struggled to break free.

"No...Not here...Someone...help...us..." Neptune struggled as well.

"May this..."

The girl's eyes widened at the voice. "Is that...?"

"May this hold the last salvation of our world...May they fly away to parts unknown..."

Suddenly, a burst of light shot out from the giant tower nearby. This light then split up into three smaller lights as they flew away from the world.

Eventually, three more lights burst out far from the sky and flew away as well.

"May those who survive...continue to live in peace...their memories of this world be reduced to nothing but a dream..."

And then, pillars of light emerged from the ground, bursting forth into the reddened sky, contrasting the giant dark orb that gazed upon the fallen world...

"And perhaps...one day...this world will be restored...so that our sins...may be redeemed..."

Traverse Town – Third District – Vacant House

"HISTY!"

Neptune's sudden shout shocked everyone else in the room!

"Huh!?" Donald yelped at the sudden shout.

"Nep-Nep!?" Compa cried, approaching the girl with the key in worry.

"What's gotten into you, Nep?" IF said, concerned for her friend that is now sweating buckets. "Are you okay?"

"H-Huh?"

Neptune looked around, seeing her friends crowding her in worry, but...

"Sora!"

The girl in the parka ran to her fellow Keyblade wielder, slowly getting up from the bed with a groan.

"You okay!?"

"Y-Yeah..." Sora said, shaking his head as his cheek was licked by the resident dogoo. "What...even was that?"

"You tell me..."

"What happened?" Donald asked.

"Did something happen to you two?" Goofy wondered.

The two Keyblade wielders looked to each other for an answer, then they looked to their friends.

"You...could say that" Neptune answered meekly.

"What do you mean?" Compa asked.

"This isn't like you two to be so meek" IF noticed. "Whatever happened to you, mind telling us? Slowly, if possible."

Neptune looked to Sora, who nodded. "It's quite the long story, though…"

"We don't mind" the guild agent reassured, turning to the rest of their party. "Right, guys?"

They nodded.

"Then I'll keep track of this conversation." Jiminy declared, jumping out of Sora's hood. "Feel free to speak out your minds as much as possible"

Neptune nodded. "Thanks, Jiminy. So, basically, blah blah blah..."

"A dream with a younger Kairi and her grandmother, and then a nightmare about a world that fell to darkness" IF summed up. "Did you get all that, Jiminy?"

The cricket nodded as he continued to draw on his journal. "Just finishing up some touches here..."

"Still, how could you end up dreamin' about someone else's memories?" Goofy wondered.

"We got no clue on that" Sora said, shaking his head. "But..."

"What's up?" Donald said.

"It may have something to do with how we thought we saw Kairi at that old hut..." the boy guessed.

"Hmmmmm" IF thought aloud. "The fact that both of you claimed to see her there is already a bit strange."

"How so, Iffy?" Compa asked while clutching on to the dogoo.

"People usually don't get shared hallucinations, unless a spell is designed to do that" IF explained. "Is there anything else?"

"Well..." Neptune thought for a moment. "There was that one time we had weird dreams..."

"Weird, how?" Donald asked.

"Basically, I was dreaming about one of Sora's childhood memories..." the girl in the parka explained. "And Sora ended up dreaming about...something else"

Sora nodded at that.

"Differing dreams from two people..." IF mumbled. "This is getting stranger by the minute..."

"What did you dream about, Sora?" Goofy asked the boy.

"Well, here's the thing..." the boy tried to explained. "That dream I had back then, I just had it again today..."

"You mean the one with the city and the large tower you told us about a while back?" Compa asked.

Sora nodded.

"And this time, I was there with him in that dream" Neptune followed up. "We could even beat up the Heartless in there and stuff! That was really trippy!"

IF hummed. "Trippy is just underselling it. Jiminy, are you done sketching?"

The journalist nodded. "Just the finishing touches...and, there!"

Everyone looked to the cricket's journal, but...

"It's too small..." Neptune pointed out the obvious.

"Here!"

Goofy procured some monocles for them. "This'll help ya out!"

Taking the monocles, the party closely inspects the drawings on Jiminy's Journal

"Wow-zers!" Neptune gasped in amazement. "These are better than anything I could draw..."

"They are just sketches, mind you..." Jiminy pointed out. "But I made sure the details are as precise as possible. Are they accurate?"

Sora furrowed his eyes as he inspected the drawings. There are three of them, one of the city itself, another with some lines near the tower and a third one with more lines drawn across the sketches.

"Yeah." the boy confirmed. "The big tower is over there. And the lines showing the lights we saw are there too."

"Looks kinda...futuristic" IF managed to say.

"Yeah, the city there was kinda fancy" Neptune commented.

"So, this is the place you two saw in your dreams, huh?" Compa mused.

"Do ya know what the world is called?" Goofy asked.

"Maybe?" Neptune guessed. "I heard some folks there say words like 'Basilicom' and 'Planeptune' and even 'Game Industry'"

"Don't you mean" IF started. "Gamindustri?"

"Yeah, that!" Sora nodded.

"You know something?" Donald questioned.

"Not really" the guild agent clarified. "But that purple hag mentioned a 'Gamindustri' in the middle of her rant"

"Now that you mention it, she did, huh?" the nurse recalled.

"Not to mention, she knows about these dogoo fellas!" Goofy pointed out to the currently docile creature in the house.

"Does that mean that purple hag knows about this place, then?" Donald theorized.

IF nodded. "Possibly, but..."

She inspected the sketches once more.

"Whenever I look into these sketches, I feel like...I've seen them before..."

Compa slowly nodded. "Yeah...Me too..."

"Why don't we ask for some help here?" Donald suggested. "Perhaps someone can help interpret this for us?"

Neptune tilted her head. "Yeah, but who?"

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Area

"Hmmmmm...this is certainly fascinating..."

Within the confines of the training area, the party met up with Merlin and the Fairy Godmother, the latter who was asked regarding the nature of the dreams Sora and Neptune saw.

Right now, she is inspecting the sketches of the city Jiminy drew in his journal.

"A futuristic city...one that spew lights during the world's twilight hours...And a voice praying for their redemption..."

"Any ideas?" Neptune asked.

"Hmmmmmm..." the Fairy Godmother hummed as she sipped her tea.

"Nothing?" Compa bemoaned.

"Hold on, now" Merlin interrupted. "Let her finish her thought."

Eventually, just as she placed down her teacup, so too did the Fairy Godmother reach an answer...

"Tell me dears, do you recall what happened to the sky of that world?"

"The sky...?" Neptune wondered.

"Apart from the lights?" Sora asked, to which the godmother nodded. "Well, we saw a dark orb that grew larger and larger after we were pounced by the Heartless."

His voice lowered. "The same one I saw before my island was gone..."

"Then the reason is clear..." the Fairy Godmother started. "What you two have just witnessed was a clear memory of how a world fell."

"W-What!?/Huh!?" most of the party screamed.

"Based on what I heard from other Drifters" Merlin said. "One of the signs that the world is about to fall into darkness is the sight of that large dark orb in the reddened sky."

"It was quite the dreadful sight" the Fairy Godmother recalled with glum. "When I felt a disturbance in our world, I ran to check on poor Cinderella, only to find that she has been taken by an evil fairy surrounded by those dreadful Heartless."

"Maleficent…" Donald growled.

"Fairy Godmother..." IF said, her voice laced with sympathy.

"We're sorry about your loss" Goofy apologized.

The Fairy Godmother shook her head. "There's nothing to apologize for, dears. Back to the topic, between the dark orbs and the number of Heartless that spawned, we can say for sure that the world you just saw has now joined several others in the Realm of Darkness..."

"For sure..." the guild agent said, shelving the term 'Realm of Darkness' for later. "So, what about the lights?"

The Fairy Godmother turned to Neptune. "Neptune, dear, did that voice mention anything peculiar when you saw those lights?"

"Peculiar...?" Neptune thought for a moment. "Something about the last salvation of their world, and scattering them to parts unknown?"

"That must mean that whoever spoke had a plan to bring their world back from the Realm of Darkness" Merlin hazarded a guess. "And whatever it was, involved the creation of beings from those said lights"

"Wait!" Neptune interrupted. "But then she also said those who survive continue to live in peace, and their memory of this world be nothing but a dream..."

IF and Compa gasped loudly at the mention of that. "N-No way!"

"But she said that AFTER the first wave of lights, right?" Sora clarified. "When the second set of lights came in, I mean?"

Neptune nodded. "Yeah, yeah!"

"So, basically" Jiminy summed up. "Someone managed to plan out a rescue operation for their world by creating new beings and sent them away when their world fell, and then had more people evacuated just in case, right?"

"That surely seems to be the case, yes..." the Fairy Godmother surmised.

"But then..." Donald began to wonder. "Who were the ones that were created? Who were the ones that were evacuated?"

"We don't know..." Neptune shook her head in shame.

"Actually...I think I have an idea..."

Everyone turned to IF and Compa, the former clutching her head while the latter is supporting her friend.

"Then tell us, Iffy!" Neptune demanded.

"First, I need to repeat the terms you mentioned to us, Nep" IF started. "Basilicom, Planeptune, Gamindustri, CPU, Lady Goddess. These terms seem to indicate that the world you've seen has their own localized terms. Their own language, so to speak."

"What are you getting at?" Donald asked.

"That's the thing" Compa continued. "These terms feel familiar to us. Not just that, the city Nep-Nep and Sora described to us, the one they heard people call 'Planeptune', whenever we hear it, we felt a tinge of familiarity in our hearts about it."

"Familiarity?" Merlin questioned.

"Do ya think this Planeptune might'a been your hometown?" Goofy guessed, earning shocked reactions from everyone in the room.

"C-C'mon, Goofster!" Neptune stammered. "That's kinda a big stretch, isn't it?"

"No" IF muttered, still sweating buckets. "He might actually be right on the munny on this one"

Everyone then looked to IF with mouths agape.

"He is!?/I am?" the rest of the party (except Compa) and Goofy said all together.

IF nodded. "Whenever the image of the city pops up in our heads and we connect it to the term 'Planeptune', a wave of nostalgia swept over our minds about it. Almost like recalling home."

"So, you actually remember what your home is?" Sora asked.

The guild agent pursed her lips. "I wish I could say we do."

"What's stopping you, then?" the court wizard asked.

"How do you describe this?" the nurse thought for a moment. "It's like...you're about to grasp on something really close, but for some reason, you still can't reach to grab that something. That sort of feeling."

"Meaning they're in the cusp of remembering" Merlin stated. "They realize, with all these clues given, that this 'Planeptune' must be their hometown. Yet, due to their collective amnesia, they still cannot fully remember it."

"Do you recall anything else, dears?" the Fairy Godmother asked.

IF and Compa shook their heads.

Neptune groaned loudly at the prospect, scratching her hair in annoyance. "What is this!? We're so close to getting something, but we're just a few inches short!? This is annoying!"

"Don't give up just yet!" Donald tried to encourage.

"Yeah!" Goofy followed. "The fact that you managed to recall this much means we're on the right track!"

"They're right" Jiminy chipped in. "Once we get the final pieces of this puzzle, we may be able to figure out what to do from here."

"But" Sora wondered. "Where else can we go to make sure our answer is correct?"

Merlin and the Fairy Godmother looked to each other, and then back to the party. "Why not try asking your hearts that?"

The party looked to the Fairy Godmother at what she said.

"Our...hearts?" Neptune said slowly.

Merlin nodded. "You'll often find the answers you seek if you look back and retrace your steps. Perhaps someone you knew or met may have the answers you're looking for. Trace the connection and you'll see it."

"Trace the connection..." IF thought for a moment, then gasped. "That's it!"

"You figured something out?" Sora asked.

The guild agent nodded. "Remember those dreams you had?"

"What about 'em?" Neptune asked.

"Earlier, you said you had a dream about Sora, and right now, before you went to that city, you both had a daydream about Kairi, right?"

The two Keyblade wielders nodded.

"Now, I believe the reason you had those dreams is because of the connection one of you shared with them. You're both friends here, and Sora and Kairi are friends, too, right?"

"Yeah?" Sora tried to follow.

"So, the reason I was able to see Sora and Kairi's memories is because I'm friends with Sora?" Neptune tried to figure out. "But I never even met Kairi for realsies yet."

"True, but it doesn't change the fact that you saw her memories because of your connection to Sora." IF elaborated. "Because of that, the reverse also works the same way."

"The reverse?" Compa asked.

"Oh!" Jiminy shouted. "That means Sora's able to see what Neptune and those connected to her could see due to Sora's connection to her, is that right?"

IF smirked as she nodded. "Correct"

"I see..." Neptune nodded. "But wait, I didn't meet up with anyone else before I first came to this town. I was literally stuck in a pitch-black void, remember?"

IF shook her head. "Try to recall, Nep. There IS someone you met. Someone who guided you out, even if you didn't see them."

"Wait, are you talking about Histy!?" Neptune gasped. "She's the source of these dreams!?"

IF nodded. "That's what we believe, given what we know now."

"That's all the more reason for us to find her!" Compa stated. "She'll know what happen to us and our homeworld!"

"Sure thing, but..." Neptune said. "...we still don't know where she even is."

"Well, you mentioned that she was kidnapped by an evil witch, right?" IF jogged Neptune's memory.

"There's only two people we know who fit that profile..." Jiminy mentioned.

"Arfoire and Maleficent, right?" Donald answered.

Compa nodded. "And we already ruled out Maleficent, so that just leaves the old hag."

Sora groaned. "Great. That means we have to fight her again..."

"Yeah..." Neptune sighed, scratching her head with her fingers. "Ugh, all this thinking is stressing a girl out. This Nep wants to hit something!"

Merlin stood up from his seat. "Oh, in that case..."

Suddenly, a loud ringing is heard.

"Isn't that one of your phones, Iffy?" Compa asked her friend.

"Lemme check..." IF pulled out a pink phone and checked on the caller's ID. "It's from Rena"

"Rena?" Donald asked.

"Ya know, that adventurer gal from the Coliseum!" Goofy recalled.

"Oh yeah, the Coliseum!" Neptune chirped up. "We still haven't signed up for the other Gaaaaaaames yet!"

"Oh yeah!" Sora exclaimed as Jiminy hopped back into the boy's hood.

"Yes? Hello?" IF spoke to the phone. "Uh-huh. Yeah. Huh. Okay. Really? Yeah, sure. I'll tell them. Okay, bye"

She put her phone back into her coat and faced the party. "Looks like the old goat's been busy. The Pantheon Foundation Tournament's opened up and since we won the prelims, we're all signed up for it!"

"Ah-ha!" Neptune laughed. "Just what the goat ordered! Whaddaya say, fellas? Ready to go the distance to become heroes?"

"Do we ever!?" Donald jumped in joy.

"Then let's go already!" Sora shouted as he and the other two left the area.

"Wait for me!" Goofy followed after them.

"We should check our supplies first!" Compa followed suit as well.

IF sighed. "I swear, we were in such a serious mood for a while there"

The Fairy Godmother chuckled. "Everyone needs a good break once in a while. It seems for them; a riveting tournament is just the thing."

"We'll brainstorm some theories here with what you shared with us" Merlin stated. "We'll try to keep you informed if we ever reach a breakthrough"

IF bowed in gratitude. "Thank you so much. We appreciate it!"

"Ah, before you go, take these"

The Fairy Godmother produced two Summon Orbs and handed them to IF.

"These orbs..." the guild agent muttered. "We brought these to you a while ago!"

"And I've managed to unlock their power, dear" the Fairy Godmother informed. "You will need all the help you can get. These young ones will do wonders in the road ahead"

"Again, we can't thank you enough" IF bowed again in thanks.

"No need for that. Simply do what you have to and that will be enough for us." the Fairy Godmother said humbly.

"Now run along. You wouldn't want to miss your ride now..." Merlin advised.

"Good point. Thanks again!"

IF waved the two goodbye as she ran after the others.

"Those young ones..." Merlin said, stroking his beard. "Always so adventurous. Reminds me of young Wart"

"I have no doubt they will find something wonderful along the way" the Fairy Godmother replied. "Although, now that they mentioned it, didn't Leon and the others say they were going to another world to train?"

Merlin hummed. "Indeed. Fate certainly has an...interesting sense of humor, don't you think?"

The Fairy Godmother sighed. "It does indeed..."

NEPSTATION

Neptune: You’re tuned in to Nepstation, the news show that delivers the news rain or shine, bright or damp!

Compa: *giggles* It’s always feels energetic around here!

Neptune: You bet! We gotta jolt our viewer’s up so they’ll listen to the latest buzz! Now then, shall we do this?

Compa: Let’s do this!

---

an image of the World Map is seen onscreen

Neptune: Recently, the number of Heartless attacks has lowered. The worlds that once suffered under such distress are beginning to regain a semblance of peace.

Compa: That’s great to hear. However, just because things are quieting down doesn’t mean the danger’s over yet. Everyone, please make sure to keep emergency aids and rations with you at all times and if you’re heading outside, make sure to have a buddy with you. Going alone is just tempting Heartless to jump at you!

Neptune: You better take the nurse’s advice seriously here, folks! She knows the dangers better than most people I know! Anyway, onto the next segment...

---

an image of a dogoo being fed by two women, their eyes crossed out, appears onscreen

Compa: Recently, the dogoo that has been making noises throughout the neighborhood has been reported to be well-tamed. Citizens have stated that their new owners have been keeping it well-fed and took it out for walks around the town.

Neptune: I also heard that the little thing managed to fight off some weak Heartless during one of their walks. This little critter might actually be a tough one, huh?

Compa: Hm-hm! Never underestimate cornered prey, for it is at it’s most ferocious when backed into a corner, or so my grandpa used to say.

Neptune: Your grandpa’s a wise and travelled fella, huh? Got any more wise nuggets from him?

Compa: *giggles* I’ll tell you if I can recall any. For now, let’s head to our last segment...

---

an image of three differing Gummi Ships appears onscreen

Neptune: Recently, the production of Gummi Ship parts have begun to increase thanks to the skilled engineering of a local Drifter in town and the financial support of Scrooge International Trading Enterprises. While actual ship counts are still in the single digits, new and improved designs may be taking off into the Ocean Between before you know it!

Compa: That will certainly help with supply management and protection!

Neptune: You tell me! Those Heartless ships are trouble with a capital T, I tell ya! If we didn’t have that Shield Gummi, our ship would’ve been toast.

Compa: That’s because you keep pressing the boosters, Nep-Nep! We kept bumping into things and Sora couldn’t steer fast enough because of that...

Neptune: Aw, come on! It’s not everyday I actually manage to be awake when we’re flying the darn thing. Seriously, why does this game’s ship travel sequences have to be so darn slow!?

Histoire: Neptune, you’re getting off-topic again...

Neptune: Gack! Sorry about that, everyone! Anyway, we're all done with the news for the day! Thanks for keeping me company, Compa!

Compa: *giggles* Anything for you, Nep-Nep! Now, I'll turn over the seat to Sora for our next segment!

Sora: So, what's our topic for today?

the word Summons appear onscreen

Sora: Oh. That's interesting.

Neptune: Uh-huh! So, in our journey to save the worlds, we fight with our weapons, magic, items, what-have-you. But they alone ain't gonna be enough, so with some bibbidi-bobbidy-help from the Fairy Godmother, we got these Summons!

Sora: That's right. Thanks to these gems, we are able to call for help from other Drifters who lost their Worlds to the Heartless, and I tell you, they've been really helpful.

Neptune: I mean, they haven't appeared much in this fic, and to be frank, most players tend to skim on them unless they're doing Level 1 Runs or something.

Sora: *cries* You tell me...Oh, the pain...

Neptune: Just imagining my game having a Level 1 option would be horrifying. Most of our games don't play like yours, after all...

Sora: Anyway, let's delve a bit into our Summon friends.

---

an image of a proud lion appears onscreen

Neptune; First up is our proud lion, Simba. Fitting for his stature, he can unleash powerful roars that can intimidate and eliminate all who dare to stand in his kingly path!

---

an image of a young deer appears onscreen

Sora: Next up is Bambi. This one likes to frolic around the place, but don't let her playful nature fool you. Wherever she moves, prizes of all kinds start popping out! One of our allies from before can attest to that.

Mad Magician: Her frolicking has eased and aided in my concentration. Next time I see her, I shall grant her a boon of my own making.

---

an image of a jolly genie appears onscreen

Neptune: Coming up is our jolly blue magic man and fellow 4th-wall breaker, Genie! He may have been freed from his eternity of servitude, but don't let this nerf get you. He's still a powerhouse when it comes to magic! SHA-ZAM!

---

an image of a tiny, glowing pixie appears onscreen

Sora: The next one recently joined us on our journey. Tinker Bell may be small, but her pixie dust does more than grant us the ability to fly. She can keep us healed up and even bring us back from the brink if need be. She will be of great help in the fights to come!

---

silhouettes of two creatures appear onscreen

Neptune: And thanks to recent events, we got two more summons to tag along with us! Who are they? Well, you're gonna have to find out in the upcoming episodes!

Sora: C'mon, Neptune! Can't we leave a little something for them?

Neptune: Hrmmmm...Ah, might as well! For starters, one has a mean spout who can fly and the other's a family guardian. There. That's all I can give you.

Sora: Really? That's all?

Neptune: I can't say anymore. Besides, your first game's over 20 years old! I'm sure most people know who they are by now!

Sora: Right...Well, that's all we have for you today!

Neptune: And next time will be the Tournament of the Century! Join us at Olympus Coliseum as Nep Team Epic takes on the Pantheon Foundation Tournament and come out of it as true heroes!

Sora: Isn't this the first time we did an episode preview?

Neptune: Sure did! But come on, doesn't this tournament get you hyped!?

Sora: *laughs* Of course it does! We're so gonna win this!

Neptune: He-he-he! You bet we do! So, cheer us on next week, and from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 14: Chapter 12: Go for It (the Distance)!

Chapter Summary

> The Pantheon Foundation Tournament is underway, and Nep Team Epic is participating! What type of opponents will they fight in this tournament!?

Olympus Coliseum – Entrance

"Tournament time!"

"Tournament time!"

"TOURNAMENT TIME!"

IF sighed at the joyful singing that Neptune, Sora and Donald are exuding. "Rein in it, guys. We don't want to waste ALL our energy before the first round."

"Hey, guys!"

The party looked up to see two familiar faces greeting them.

"Glad you all could make it!" Rena greeted them.

"You guys certainly look tougher than ever" Hercules complimented them.

"Whaddaya expect!?" Neptune boasted as she put her hands on her hips.

"We're gonna win this tournament!" Sora shouted.

"And become real heroes!" Donald exclaimed.

"They sure are excited, huh?" Compa sweatdropped.

"Good to see you rookies are motivated!"

The party turned to see a familiar satyr descending the staircase.

"Hiya, Phil!" Goofy greeted the goatman.

"I see none of you have croaked since you last passed by here" Phil noted. "She told you about the tournament?"

"The Pantheon Foundation Tournament, right?" the guild agent asked.

"Right! It's the tournament made to celebrate the anniversary of the Pantheon's creation" the trainer explained. "And you rookies all want in?"

"Heck yes!" Neptune screamed.

"Sign us up, please!" Sora said with a pumped fist.

"Well, you're in luck!" Phil said. "Since you all won the prelims, your team's able to participate in this one."

"Really? Wow!" Neptune exclaimed. "Talk about our lucky day, huh?"

"Yeah, thank Hermes for that and some" the trainer said rather offhandly. "Now, I assume all seven of you are gonna sign up?"

"Yes, please!" Donald shouted. "Wait, seven?"

"It's in the tournament rules" Rena explained. "Teams can enter from one participant up to seven, just like in the preliminaries. I initially planned to enter alone, but since there's all the team slots filled up, I figured I'd sit this one out, but…"

"Rena really wanted to go at it, so I asked Phil for advice" Herc continued. "Wanna know what he said?"

"I told her to just wait up for you guys, since you got one slot open in your team" Phil answered offhandly. "I figure having one more rookie on your team wouldn't hurt"

"And…there you have it" the aspiring adventurer finished. "So…what do you say? Shall we work together."

"D'awwww, you don't have to be so polite!" Neptune cooed with star-sprinkled eyes. "We're all friends here! We wouldn't mind having you with us!"

Rena's eyes went wide at that. "R-Really!?"

"'Course not!" Sora followed. "You were really cool back there! We don't mind having you with us!"

"Hear, hear!" Compa cheered as Goofy chuckled.

"Eh, why not?" Donald shrugged. "We could use the extra muscle"

"I'll have to make some adjustments" IF noted. "But this is nothing new for us. Welcome aboard, Rena"

Rena gasped happily as she bowed in gratitude. "Thank you all so much! I promise I won't you all down!"

Hercules laughed at that. "Since we got that all sorted out, mind introducing them to the tournament, Phil?"

"Of course!" Phil nodded, clearing his throat. "Alright, listen up, rookies!"

Phil's Explanation – The Pantheon Foundation Tournament

First off, this tournament's a single elimination type, split into four brackets, meaning there'll be eight participating teams. It will be a combat tournament fought in the Coliseum's Arena, just like in the preliminaries. Once the first set of brackets are done, the next rounds between the four winning teams will fight each other, and once that's done, the two teams will face off for the finals. After that is done, the winning team will get to fight Herc here for the championship title. Easy to follow, right? Now for the rules!

Rule #1: All manner of physical and magical prowess is allowed. Teamwork between teammates is also allowed and encouraged.

Rule #2: No other manner of outside help is allowed. That means any summons or whatever are prohibited!

Rule #3: Still-participating teams are to remain within the Vestibule after winning their matches. No eyeing other matches until either you're out or you've won!

Rule #4: No cheating! Any form of it will result in IMMEDIATE disqualification!

And Rule #5: This may be a tournament, but it's still the games here in Mount Olympus, so let loose and have fun with it, alright?

Olympus Coliseum – Vestibule

"And there you have it!" Phil finished explaining. "Any questions?"

Neptune raised her hand. "Yeah. When do we get started!?"

Herc laughed at her gumption. "I'll be watching you guys from the stands! Break a leg, guys!"

Olympus Coliseum – Arena

"The first round of the Pantheon Foundation Tournament will begin! Starting off with Nep Team Epic vs. The Double A Staff Team!"

"Wow!" Neptune exclaimed "Who'da thunk you two would be our first match?"

"Well, as they say, Fate is a whimsical mistress"

"Whimsical...is a way to put it..."

The party looked at their opponents in front of them. Two very familiar figures stand before them today.

"Artisan!?"

"Aerith!?"

Aerith shook her head. "Not just that! We're the Double A Staff Team! Heck yeah!"

The two then stood behind each other and posed.

"Your team name could use some work..." IF snarked. "Then again, Nep Team Epic isn't any better..."

"What are you guys doing here, anyway?" Sora asked the duo.

Artisan cleared her throat. "Well, we came here to train in preparation to take our home world back. Aerith here suggested coming here to do just that."

"So, we went around and beat up some of the monsters and Heartless around here, and then we heard about this Tournament, so naturally, we signed up." Aerith continued.

"That's reckless of you. You're risking the World Order just by coming here, you know?" IF said, shaking her head in disbelief. "Just look at the poor duck. He's malding so badly he's about to shed his feathers..."

Sure enough, Donald is FUMING so much, and would've done so much more if Goofy and Compa didn't restrain him.

Artisan chuckled. "Well, at least you're motivated."

She then raised her staff, ready for battle.

Aerith does the same, twirling them as she does. "Don't hold back on us. Just because we use staves doesn't mean we're weak!"

"Looks like we're up against magic-users first" Rena stated, unsheathing her sword. "Well, I won't hold back just because we're acquaintances!"

Neptune nodded, summoning her Keyblade in turn. "Same here! I owe ya big, Arty. So, for that, get ready for a whole lot of Neppin'!"

Sora summoned his Keyblade as well. "C'mon, guys! We can sort out the World Order thing later!"

Donald, releasing himself from his friend's hold, summoned his staff. "Oh, I'll show them order, alright..."

Compa sighed. "I don't know who I should be more worried of in this case..."

The rest of the party summoned their weapons as the match is about to begin.

"Alright, contestants!" Phil called out. "You ready?"

"Then let the battles..."

"BEGIN!"

"Aw-right!" Neptune cheered as she leads the charge. "Time to draw first blood!"

But then her charged came to an abrupt halt thanks to a sudden bolt of lightning that struck her dead-on!

"AAHHHHHHH!" the girl screamed as she became charred from the lightning strike. "Forgive me, Zeus! I am not in your strike zone! I swear!"

"What was that!?" Sora exclaimed. "Where did that come from!?"

Aerith snickered as her staff is charged with magic. "There's more where that came from! **FIRAGA**!"

Swinging her staff, the flower girl unleashed her Fire magic against the defenseless girl...

"Aw snap!"

But a brave royal captain stepped forward and blocked the incoming attack! The two were pushed back a bit from the recoil, however.

"Thanks for the save, Goofster!" Neptune cheered.

Goofy turned around and gave a thumbs-up to Nep-Nep.

"I'm not done!" Aerith declared as she fired off another Firaga immediately!

"Ahhh!"

Thankfully, Goofy blocked it just as quickly, much to the party's relief.

"Anyone mind explaining what just happened?" Sora shouted.

IF clicked her tongue. "That's Artisan's brand of magic. She lays traps around the arena, and anyone who trips on them will get hit with whatever magic's embedded on them. That one she just used was her Thunder Wards!"

She then glanced at Aerith, noticing a glow of magic underneath her. "And that appears to be Aerith's **Arcane Ward**. So long as she stays there, she can cast the same spell twice with the same level of intensity!"

Artisan chuckled. "Observant as ever, IF. Then again, we've had our fair share holding back Heartless together. Who do you think helped you out with your brand of untapped magic?"

As if to back her claim, three icicles suddenly formed around Compa, trapping the nurse in place! She is trapped by Artisan's **Blizzard Wards**!

"Oh no! Someone help!"

Donald scrambled to get the nurse out with his Fire-imbued staff. "I'll get you out!"

Sora growled, bracing his stance. "Okay! That's it!"

The boy then charged forth, which caused the horned woman to shake her head in disappointment.

"Tsk. Tsk. Come now" Artisan chided. "There's no reason to be aggressive. Why don't you just sit down?"

As the boy charged, he stepped on a Gravity-embedded rune, causing him to drop down from the increased weight. Sora was crippled by a **Gravity Ward**!

"Ack!" the boy cried. "Is this how the Newtype felt?"

Aerith, meanwhile, was setting up a large glyph around the arena. "And...done!"

Her staff then lit up with energy provided from the **Radiant Ward** that she just set. "Now you guys might wanna start running, 'cause this is gonna hurt!"

She then spun around, waving her free hand around as green lasers fired from it, threatening to damage whatever is unlucky to be in their way!

"Thanks, Dona-" Compa then screamed..."GET DOWN!"

...and ducked along with the...duck, avoiding the laser coming their way.

"Since when can the healer fire frickin' laser beams!?" Neptune complained as she hid behind Goofy, who kept his shield raised as he too braced for laser fire. "She might just be the most OP healer in video game history..."

Aerith giggled. "I'll take that compliment!"

Artisan then charged her own staff with Fire magic. "But this is only the beginning! **FIRE WARDS**!"

She then tapped her staff on the ground, causing fire pillars to emerge around her.

"See if you can dodge this!"

The fire pillars then moved away and began to move against the scattered party!

"Everyone, move away!"

Between the fire pillars, the laser beams and even the other traps Artisan laid, things appear to be hopeless for Nep Team Epic!

IF groaned as she narrowly dodged a laser beam. "This is bad. Our first round and we're already running like headless chickens..."

Rena hummed, her eyes closed.

"Hey, Rena..." the guild agent called out. "Are you alright?"

But the aspiring adventurer didn't answer. She maintained her focus and continued to meditate...

"Okay!" Donald screamed as he prepared a **Thundaga**. "How about I show you how to use magic!?"

His magic fired, causing a lightning storm to appear above his two enemies, forcing them to move away.

"Huh?" Rena gasped.

"They moved!" Goofy exclaimed.

Seeing the chance, Compa immediately readied a blast. "Here you go! **FROZEN TREATS**!"

Following her lead, Neptune unleashed an **Aerora**-filled slash. "**WIND SLICER**!"

"Ah, geez!" Aerith hopped back, casting a flower-shaped shield in front of her. "**LUSTROUS SHIELD**!"

"Gkh!" Without any room to dodge, Artisan erected a small barrier to block Neptune's magic attack. "Looks like they're recovering now!"

"Alright!" IF cheered with a pumped fist. "Our team's on the attack. Let's keep it up, guys!"

Sora nodded, regaining his momentum. "Let's go, Goofy!"

"Okay!"

"I see" Rena understood. "*Those two needed to stay still to maintain their wards. The moment they were forced to move away, their concentration broke and thus, their spells weakened*." Her eyebrows furrowed. "*That means we need to strike hard and fast before they can set another trap!*"

As the two charged forth, IF looked to Rena, who broke out of her meditation. "Let's move, too!"

The adventurer nodded. "Let's!"

"Welp, this is bad!" Aerith bemoaned as she ran around. "That last ward needed a lot of time to setup!"

"Sorry 'bout this, Aerith!"

She then looked up and noticed a certain royal captain looming over her as he spun around like a tornado!

"Oh no, you don't!" Aerith tapped her staff onto the ground hard, unleashing a golden aura around her. She has unleashed the **Planet's Protection**! "I may be flustered, but I'm not out of options!"

She then glanced to the side to see her partner being assaulted by Sora, who was striking her with Keyblade attacks.

"HAH!" Downward slash!

"YAH!" **Slapshot**!

"AHA!" A **Blitz** to the-

"Not yet!"

Artisan hopped back and unleashed a quick lightning strike, a left-over **Thunder Ward**, forcing the boy to dodge.

"Shoot!" the boy cursed.

"Don't let up, Sora!" Rena called out as she charged the horned woman with a thunder-infused sword! "**THUNDEBOLT STRIKE**!"

Artisan dodged the incoming attack, but then felt someone behind her!

"You're wide open!" It was IF! "**CHAOS EDGE**!"

The guild agent delivered an overhead kick against her opponent, knocking her down to the ground!

"Arty!"

This got Aerith worried. Her aura can't last long and she's running low on MP. This is bad!

"Get back, Goofy!"

Hearing this caused the royal captain to stop his attack and run back, causing Aerith to gasp at what she just saw.

"Now for our payback!" Compa declared as her syringe is filled with Donald's magic!

"**TREATMENT BLASTER!**"

The blast hit the flower girl dead on, but due to her aura, she remained safe...

"My aura's running out. This isn't good..."

...until her Planet's Protection ran out. Thankfully, the Combination Skill that just hit her had stopped...

"Don't blink, Aerith!"

...only to be met with an electric triangle made of sword slashes! Neptune has unleashed her **Delta Slash** against her!

"Oof!"

The attack knocked her back and down onto the floor, joining her comrade in defeat.

"And with that!" Phil announced. "The first match is over! The victor is...NEP TEAM EPIC!"

"Aw man..." Aerith complained as she laid down in defeat. "We lost..."

"I suppose it shows how much stronger everyone has gotten..." Artisan noted as she was helped up by IF. "Or how much more training we ourselves need."

The flower girl sighed as she was helped up by Compa. "Looks like we still got a long way to go before we go save our world..."

"Still..." Artisan wondered. "How did you figure out our weakness? I thought our plan was perfect!"

"Haha! It was!" Rena admitted. "But then Donald started blasting lightning everywhere and you were forced to dodge. That's when I sensed your magic traps waning, and from there, we struck hard and fast"

"I'm amazed you guys noticed that and followed up immediately." the guild agent admitted to the party.

"Really?" Sora wondered. "We just saw an opening and took it. We didn't even realized the traps were weakened..."

"Even so..." The horned woman approached the party. "You people have grown much since we first met. Honestly, this goes beyond my expectations"

"Aw, shucks!" Neptune said, feeling giddy.

"But" Artisan suddenly said. "You all still have much to do, and much to learn as well. You can't afford to rest on your laurels when you're not even done yet."

"We know" Compa said.

"We're getting closer and closer to where we have to go" IF said. "We can't afford to stop now"

"Same here" Sora agreed, with Donald and Goofy nodding in agreement.

Artisan chuckled. "Glad to hear it. Now, we'll just get out of your hair so you can prepare for the next round."

Rena hummed. "I wonder who we'll face next..."

The semifinals of the tournament are about to begin! The winner of the first round, Nep Team Epic, will now go up against the winner of the second round Team Awesome Ninjas!

Suddenly, smoke appeared in front of the party, and from that smoke, emerged two familiar figures.

"Prepare for trouble!"

"And make it double!"

"Woah!" Neptune interrupted. "Didn't realize we're doing this bit! Thank goodness this is a fanfic, otherwise we'd be in legal trouble!"

"To denounce the evils of darkness and pain!"

"To extend our reach to the worlds beyond!"

Donald sighed. "Do they have to do this?"

Goofy chuckled. "I think it's kinda cool!"

"MarvelousAQL!"

"Yuffie Kisaragi!"

"We are Team Awesome Ninjas!" the two declared together. "Surrender your treasure or prepare to fight!"

"DO-GOO!" And it appears the stray Dogoo appeared too!

"Amazing!" Compa cheered, clapping her hands.

"Bravo!" Goofy cheered along too.

"Get serious, you two!" Donald scolded them.

"So, let me guess" IF said, raising an eyebrow. "You two are here to train and stuff, right?"

"Oh, it's not just that!" Yuffie replied, wagging her finger. "You know tournaments are big stuff here, right?"

"Yeah?" Sora followed along.

"And people who win tournaments get fabulous prizes, right?"

"Uh-huh" Neptune nodded.

"So, that's why we're here!" the Great Ninja exclaimed. "We're here to win it and claim our prize!"

"Judging by how you described it" IF guessed. "You probably thought there's gonna be prize money for this tournament!"

"Well, why wouldn't there be!?" Yuffie said.

"Not all tournaments need to have money for the prize" Marvy commented. "Though, if there is some, I could use it to help our Mr. Geppetto and Pinocchio."

"Yeah, uh" Phil interrupted. "There's no prize money for this tournament, ladies"

"WHAT!? What's the meaning of this!?" the Great Ninja complained. "I demand to speak to your organizers!"

"You're looking right at him!" the small satyr snapped back. "And I don't come up with the ideas for these tournaments, I just organize them!"

Yuffie groaned. "Don't tell me the Gods of this world are stingy as heck! This blows..."

"So, uh" Neptune wondered. "What are you two gonna do now? The money's the reason why you're here, right?"

"That may be..." Yuffie started. "But even if there's no cash to be won, we still have our pride as ninjas!"

Marvy nodded. "A ninja never leaves her job unfinished. Since we signed up for this tournament, we will fight to win!"

"So, our opponents are the swift and agile types this time..." Rena noted as she bowed. "This will be a good fight! May we duel fairly!"

Sora laughed. "Competitive and polite, huh?"

"Alright, contestants!" Phil called out. "The next round is about to begin..."

"WAIT!"

Everyone looked at Marvy, who grabbed the stray dogoo.

"He's not part of this tournament, so let me drop him off real quick."

Which she did in no less than five seconds...

"Okay, I'm good!"

Phil sighed. "The next round is about to begin..."

"NOW!"

"Ready or not, ninja ladies" Neptune taunted as she attempted to charge. "'Cause here I come!"

Yuffie grinned as she readied numerous shurikens on her hands. "Time for an appetizer!"

She then threw them around, causing the party to scramble around and dodge the shurikens!

"Aw, come on!" Neptune complained. "How come you always get to draw first blood!?"

"See the thing about ninjas?" the Great Ninja replied as she readied more shurikens. "We're quick and deadly!"

She then threw them, leaving the party no time to recover!

"T-They're everywhere!" Compa panicked.

"Then guard everywhere!" Donald shouted, casting an **Aeroga** on her. "This will help!"

"You guys doin' okay?" Sora asked around as he blocked the incoming projectiles.

"Yup!" Neptune answered, following Sora's lead. "Still, when will we get our opening?"

Goofy ducked as he kept his shield up. "I dunno! Got any advice, Iffy?"

IF, who was parrying the incoming shurikens, scanned around. "Just keep your eyes peeled. They're fast, so they can hit us from any angle!"

"That's right!" a cheery voice said. "We ninja can hit from any angle!"

The guild agent's eyes widened as she looked back...

"Like from behind"

...as Marvy went in for a back attack!

"No, you don't!"

But the cheery ninja's assault was halted by Rena's blade!

"Aw man" Marvy bemoaned. "Didn't think someone was paying attention here..."

"Don't think you can sneak around while I'm here!" the adventurer boasted.

But the cheery ninja smiled again. "But we ninja don't have just physical attacks, you know?"

Rena then sensed more shurikens coming her way, forcing her to block them. This act gave Marvy the chance to escape and rejoin Yuffie.

Seeing this caused her to grin, as she began to make some hand gestures.

"Now watch this!"

Suddenly, bursts of energy began to emerge near the party, forcing them to dodge out of the way!

"Is she hitting us with those!?" Compa yelled as she ran around.

"I didn't know ninjas could do that!" Sora complained as he dodged around the blasts.

Yuffie snickered as she continued her assault. "See that!? That's the Great Ninja Yuffie for ya!"

Marvy giggled. "Looks like you got them on the ropes. I think we should pile on the pressure!"

"Time for that, then?" the Great Ninja asked, earning a nod from her partner.

Marvy then placed a scroll on her mouth and began to make hand gestures. "Ninja Art! **BLOWING WINDS**!"

Suddenly, a strong wind began to blow in the arena!

"Woah!" Goofy shouted. "The weather forecast didn't say anything about this!"

"Stay strong, guys!" Sora declared.

"That's not all~!"

Yuffie took the chance and chanted something. "Freeze 'em solid! **ICE NINJUSTSU**!"

The Great Ninja's incantation caused the windy storm to gain an icy chill, causing Nep Team Epic to shiver under the sudden change of weather.

"Brrrrrrr!" Neptune shivered. "Someone please turn down the A/C!"

"Do they even HAVE aircons in Ancient Greece?" Compa complained.

"We're not done yet!" Marvy then switched to a different scroll. "Ninja Art! **FLAMING INFERNO**!"

And now, a heat wave surged across the arena!

"And now it's getting hot in here!" Donald complained.

"I feel like melted pudding..." Neptune bemoaned.

"And now for another!" Yuffie tried to prepare another incantation... "**LIGHTNING NIN-**"

"No, ya don't!"

...only to be hit with a thrown shield to the face!

"Yuffie!"

"**ARC SLASH**!"

Marvy immediately hopped back, narrowly dodging an incoming slash projectile from Rena.

"Aw right! They're open!" Neptune bellowed as she charged forth. "Time for a counter-attack! **CRITICAL EDGE**!"

Sora followed suit as he attacked the Great Ninja with a 13-hit technique. "**ARS ARCANUM**!"

"Here's a **GRAVITY SHELL** for you!" the nurse then followed with a Gravity-infused shot, downing the two ninjas at once!

"Aw, geez!" Yuffie complained as she got up, rubbing the back of her head. "They're going to own us at this rate!"

"Think it's time for that last gambit?" Marvy asked.

"It's a little earlier than I'd like, but..."

The Great Ninja then got up in a hop. "We gotta do it! We go for gold or go home!"

Marvy nodded as she stood as she grabbed a smoke bomb. "Let's do it!"

IF took notice of this. "They're trying something! Someone, stop them!"

"I got it!"

Sora then charged straight at them, but the cheery ninja threw down her smoke bomb, causing a mist to form around the two ninjas!

"Gah!" Neptune panicked as she closed her eyes. "My eyes!"

"I can't see them!" Sora shouted.

IF clicked her tongue. "Everyone, keep your guard up! They're trying something!"

Rena then closed her eyes and concentrated on their presences "*My Eight Leaves training lets me peer into their presences, so they can't have left the arena yet. What are they tr-*"

She then gasped. "Is this-!?"

As the smoke began to clear, they see their opponents standing proudly...

"There they are!" Donald pointed out.

Compa nodded. "Let's finish this!"

Yuffie smirked. "Yeah. But the big question you should be asking is..."

The sight in front of them surprised Nep Team Epic.

"Which of us should you be finishing off?" Marvy declared as...

"Holy nepperoni!" Neptune shouted. "The ninjas multiplied!"

Sure enough, four Yuffies and four MarvelousAQLs all stood in their path.

IF furrowed her eyebrows. "Not quite. They're most likely clones. Who knows how tough they really are..."

"Ready or not..." the Yuffies braced their stances...

...as the Marvies did the same. "'Cause here we come!"

It was pandemonium. Between the clash of competitors, there was no clear winner...

"Have a taste of my **TRUE DEMON SLICE**!"

"This is easy! Feel the **ART OF WAR**!"

"No, you don't! **STRIKE RAID**!"

"I'll help! **GOOFY DISCUS** AWAY!"

"**BATTOU-RENBU** GO!"

"I'll **DELTA SLASH** you down!"

"Chill out with my **BLIZZAGA**!"

It was too much for the resident nurse, who couldn't keep track. "Which one is the real one?"

She then sensed two Marvies about to attack her...

"AH!"

...causing her to raise her syringe in defense!

"We're going to be slapped down at this rate! What do we do!?"

Suddenly, she felt a presence behind her...

A Yuffie was moving in for the ki-er, knock-out!

"Gotcha now!"

The nurse closed her eyes!

And then she heard slashes, and in a few seconds, the pressure she felt against her lessened.

Compa opened her eyes slowly as the clones around her vanished in puffs of smoke.

"Huh?"

The nurse could then see the back of a proud adventurer-to-be, her head turned back to see her companion doing well.

"Stay put. I got this"

Rena stepped forward and with a deep breath, readied her attack once more...

"Second Form..."

From her peripheral, she could sense her prey perfectly, her years of training coming in when it comes to sensing presences, especially fakes from the real thing.

With her targets honed in, the adventurer-to-be made her move.

"**GALE**!"

In a swift motion, she slashed down each of the clones and even halted the attacks of the real ninjas with one more slash from her re-sheathed blade!

"Woah!" Marvy shouted.

"That gal's tough...!" Yuffie said.

IF then saw a window of opportunity and gave her order. "They're wide open! Take them down, guys!"

"Okay!" Donald then charged his staff with Thunder magic. "**THUNDAGA**!"

The lightning magic bolted the ninjas down!

"They're stunned!" IF shouted as she charged forth. "Sora, with me!"

"Got it!"

The two then performed their Combination Skill!

"**DOUBLE RAVE**!"

The skill sent the two ninjas flying up in the air with a powerful gust of wind!

"C'mon, Goofster!" Neptune beckoned. "Let's finish 'em good!"

"Okay!"

Goofy followed as he and the female Keyblade Wielder performed their Combination Skill!

"**GOOFY-NEP BUSTER**!"

The two ninjas were brought down by their combined assault, knocking them down onto the ground...

Yuffie groaned. "Why me…?"

"I'm sorry..." Marvy managed to say. "We tried our best..."

"And that's game!" Phil declared, raising his hand. "The winner of this round goes to NEP TEAM EPIC!"

"Aw, darn it!" Yuffie groaned. "How could we lose!?"

"I guess..." Marvy said, catching her breath. "We need more training, huh?"

"You..." IF struggled to breathe. "...tell us..."

"We're well on our way to becoming real heroes!" Neptune cheered. "Right, guys?"

Sora and Donald cheered. "Yeah!"

"Hero, huh?"

Yuffie got up upon hearing their declaration.

"So, lemme ask you guys real quick. What do you think makes a hero?"

"Uh, courage?" Sora answered.

"Cuteness?" Neptune responded.

"Fame?" Donald wondered.

Yuffie sighed. "If that's your answers, I doubt you guys are gonna make it big time on the Hero business"

"Hey!" the royal wizard complained.

"Then do you know what makes a hero!?" Neptune asked.

The Great Ninja shrugged. "Heck if I know. Far as I remember, people who became heroes never sought out to become one. They just sorta...became one"

"They just..." Sora wondered. "Become one?"

"Well, there's no need to rush the answers" Marvy said. "I'm sure you'll find it along the way."

She then approached the party and handed them a boxed lunch.

"What's in this?" Goofy asked.

"Some of my favorite food, futomaki" Marvy said with a cheer. "It was supposed to be a thank-you gift for before, but I couldn't find the time. Though, you can also consider it a prize for beating us!"

"Oooooohhh!" Neptune cooed. "Some nice lunch!"

"Thank you so much, Marvy!" Compa thanked.

"A quick-pick-me-up may be just what the doctor ordered" IF said.

"I bet it'll taste good!" Rena anticipated with wonder.

Marvy laughed. "I'm glad you all thought so!"

"Guess we'll be heading to the stands" Yuffie noted. "Good luck, guys!"

The ninja duo left as the party waved them goodbye.

Goofy hummed. "I wonder who our next opponent's gonna be?"

"Knowing our luck so far..." Donald hazarded a guess. "Our next opponent's gonna be tough."

"Yeah..." Sora wondered. "...and considering who we kept bumping into, I have a good feeling who our next opponent's gonna be"

"Oh?" Neptune overheard. "Care to share with the class, buck-o?"

Sora hummed. "I think it's gonna be..."

The final round of the tournament is about to begin! The winner of from the left bracket, Nep Team Epic, will now go up against the winner of the right bracket Team Not Interested. Go Talk To A Wall! (We're not making up the last one, folks!)

Sora sighed. "I knew it..."

"These two!?" Neptune gasped.

"Oh!" Rena, on the other hand, felt pumped. "Now THIS will be a great match!"

In front of the team entered two familiar men...

"So, you're our opponents this time..."

"Hmph. They're a nice break from all those other guys, that's for sure..."

It was Leon and Cloud! Truly, an amazing team-up for the ages!

"You two signed up too!?" IF panicked.

"W-We're in trouble, aren't we?" Compa whimpered.

"Aw, phooey!" Donald, however, did not balk. "We didn't come this far to back out now!"

"He's right, you know?" Goofy said. "Didn't we all come here to become heroes?"

Sora nodded. "Yeah! They're tough, but we can get through this! We have to!"

"An adventure wouldn't be complete without tough obstacles to overcome" Rena declared as she raised her blade. "Now, come! Give us everything you got!"

"Wow, look at you guys, getting all fired up!"

Neptune slapped her own face. "Okay, time to tough it out, Neptune. We gotta win this!"

IF sighed. "Look at us, panicking at the sight of these titans...

She then sported a toothy grin, "But what kind of guild agent am I if I can't find a way around this?"

She unsheathed her qatars. "Time for us to go the distance, and reach for hero-dom!"

Compa could only laugh. "Everyone's getting fired up from this! Okay, time to clock in overtime, Compa! Everyone's gotta need treatment after this!"

Leon could only chuckle at the sight. "Looks like we didn't have to worry about them"

"What's there to worry about?"

Cloud brought out his Buster Sword, ready for a tough fight. "We all got something at stake here. We go all in or leave it all out."

Leon smirked, readying his Gunblade. "She's right. You definitely have a way with words"

Cloud groaned. "*What has she been telling them about me?*"

"Time for the third battle to begin!" Phil announced. "Don't be afraid and force your way through!"

"FIGHT!"

"Okay!" Neptune readied her technique. "This time, there won't be any interruptions! **CROSS COMBINATION**!"

She then aimed straight for Leon, who met her blow for blow.

"I already felt your attack once..." the Drifter declared as he blocked up to the fifth slash. "I know when to strike"

He then charged up magic in his free hand... "Taste this!"

...and blasted a chunk of ice (his **Blizzard Barret**, if you will) at the girl with the key, forcing her back!

"Hey!" she complained. "No fair!"

Not wasting a chance, Cloud moved in and pressed the attack with a **Braver**!

"Dodge this!"

Seeing the attack, Neptune hopped away, leaving the soldier open for attack.

"He's open!" IF declared as she charged. "Rena, with me!"

"Roger!"

The aspiring adventurer followed suit, nearing upon the soldier.

"No, you don't!"

Leon attempted to intercept them, but was stopped by a thrown shield that he narrowly dodged.

"Don't forget about us!"

The Drifter's eyes widened as he noticed a beam of magic heading his way!

He was about to be hit by a **Treatment Blaster**!

"We got you now!" the guild agent declared as she readied her attack. "**FLAME SOUL SLICE**!"

"Third Form!"

As soon as Rena closed in, she raised her sword, causing it to be imbued with flame!

"**FLAME IMPACT**!"

Sensing an incoming attack, Cloud immediately raised his Buster Sword and barely parried the incoming attacks, pushing him back.

"Grk!" He groaned. "Barely felt that!"

"Did we get him?" Compa wondered as her and Donald's attack ended.

"Not quite!"

The two looked up and noticed Leon diving in with his Gunblade!

"Oh no!"

"Get back!"

However, Sora immediately moved in and blocked the incoming attack, causing the two to clash.

"I'm impressed" Leon praised the boy. "You've gotten stronger since we last fought"

"And I see you're not holding back as much, aren't you!?" Sora replied, pushing his opponent back.

"That's right" the Drifter declared as his Gunblade was charged with energy. "We haven't been slacking off while you guys were travelling around the worlds. We've gotten stronger too!"

He then dodged to the side, avoiding Goofy's sliding attack!

"But why?" the royal captain asked. "Aren't y'all busy with keepin' everyone safe in Traverse Town?"

"We are" Leon reassured. "But more than anything, we want to get our home world back. We can't just let you all carry that burden when that matter concerns us as well."

He then leapt up and readied to unleash the energy in his weapon.

"That's why we're not holding back even against you! **FATED CIRCLE**!"

The Drifter spun around, releasing the energy in his Gunblade in a large circle, forcing the party to defend themselves.

"Gah!" IF shouted. "Wasn't it smaller before!? Didn't know it could be that strong!"

"He's been improving himself for a long while, huh?" Rena guessed.

"He's not the only one"

The two ladies looked to see Cloud, his Buster Sword charged up with energy.

"How's this!? **BLADE BURST**!"

The soldier then slammed his blade down, unleashing beams of energy against his two opponents, pushing them back!

"I'm not done either!" Leon shouted as his free hand charged with electricity. "How about this!?"

He then sent a small lightning storm against Compa and Donald, forcing the two to shield themselves from the incoming attack!

"Now, feel this!"

Seizing the chance, Leon leapt up and charged up his Gunblade again, diving straight against the wizard and the nurse!

"**ROUGH DIVIDE**!"

Just as he was about to hit them, Goofy came in between Leon and his targets and shielded his friends, blunting the blow that would have knocked them all out!

"Guys!" Sora growled as his friends were KO'ed! "Okay! That's it!"

He then braced his stance and charged against the Drifter.

"HOH!" A **Sliding Dash** to start off!

"HYAH!" Followed by a **Slapshot**!

"**RIPPLE DRIVE**!" A blast of magic that pushed Leon back!

Cloud grunted, noticing his partner in danger...

"Watch where you're looking~!"

...only to find Neptune closing in on him with a Thunder-charged Keyblade!

"Blast!"

"**DELTA SLASH**, GO!"

The soldier could barely block the incoming slashes, joining his teammate near the edge of the arena.

"Looks like they're stepping up their game..." the soldier mused between gasps.

"Yeah..." Leon agreed as he tried to stand, energy filling his Gunblade as it began to emit a blue hue. "I guess it's time to wrap this up, don't you think?"

Cloud nodded as he stood, red electricity filling his being.

"Time to kick things up a notch!"

Rena grunted. "Looks like they're kicking things up into high gear! Watch out, guys!"

In a swift motion, Cloud flew around and started attacking the remaining members of the party, forcing them to block or parry the soldier's incoming attacks!

"Hey, is it me..." Neptune started as she parried one of Cloud's strikes. "...or has this guy gotten faster than last time!?"

"His strength's no joke..." Rena answered as she barely blocked an incoming attack. "Don't let that sword's size fool you! He can swing it as easily as a stick!"

Sora growled, dodging one of Cloud's attacks. "And that's not getting to what Leon's doing..."

IF glanced at the Drifter, who is still charging up his Gunblade. In fact, his blue-glowing blade seems to be getting longer by the minute!

"*This is bad! At this rate, he'll...*" She then turned to the only male left standing among their party. "Sora! Hit me with an Aero, now!"

"What about the rest of us?" Sora asked.

"Save your energy! Just do it!"

With a hesitant nod, he immediately placed an **Aerora** shield on the guild agent. "WINDS!"

"Farewell..."

Cloud leapt up in the air, vanishing from immediate sight.

"Now, where did he go!?" Neptune complained.

"He's too far away" Rena answered. "At this rate, he's gonna hit us hard before I can sense him!"

"He's not the only one you need to worry about!"

Upon hearing his declaration, the remaining party members looked to Leon, who raised his Gunblade filled with energy.

"This is nuts!" Sora shouted. "We're already beat and they're about to hit us! Even if we could use an item, they'll just beat us the moment we're healed up!"

"*I can't think of any other options now nor can I waste time to explain! No choice but to risk this!*"

IF then took a deep breath...

"We gotta-"

"RAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

...and charged against the lion-hearted man!

"Iffy!?" Neptune gasped.

"IF!" Sora shouted.

"What are you doing!?" Rena demanded.

But the guild agent wasn't paying attention to them and continued her charge, preparing an incantation as she did.

"A reckless last charge, huh?" Leon wondered, not losing focus. "I thought you were supposed to be the smart one, IF"

He then readied to heave his blade down. "But if this is your resignation notice, then I've taken notice. Time to finish this! **BLASTING**..."

IF growled, stretching her hand out as she neared her opponent. "**GUSTY**..."

But as she neared, she was suddenly pushed to the side by the force of a landed Buster Sword!

"No!" the remaining party members gasped...

...But IF smirked, which caused Leon to panic.

"**ZONE**!"

"...**WINDS**!"

Leon heaved his blade down, forcing the remaining three combatants to hop away to the sides. Cloud was thankfully away from the blast radius.

"Is..." Sora started as he stood up. "...everyone okay?"

"If anyone's dead..." Neptune shouted as she stood. "...raise your hand!"

"I'm..." Rena barely said as she stood up. "Alright. How's IF?"

The three remaining party members looked to see IF down on the floor ahead of them...

"Oh no..."

...and Cloud looming over her...

"That..." Leon managed to say as he tried to get up. "...was a close one. Didn't think she could sneak a glyph right behind me..."

"That explains why I nearly felt the blast earlier" the soldier said, rubbing the back of his head. "She was messing with your aim with that stunt"

"I don't know..." Leon wondered. "If that was her only aim, then why did she charge at me like that?"

The two then heard a loud roar coming closer to them!

"RAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

As soon as he saw Sora coming in at him, everything clicked into place in Leon's mind.

"*I see now...*" the Drifter smirked. "*So, that was your aim all along, IF...*"

"**SONIC**..."

Cloud gritted his teeth as he, exhausted from all the attacks he's been using, braced for the worst. "Blast!"

"...**BLADE**!"

The boy with the key furiously assaulted his foes with seven dashes!

"Sora..." Neptune bemoaned. She then slapped her own cheeks. "C'mon, Falcom Jr! Let's avenge our friends together!"

"Yeah!" Rena nodded fiercely. "But they're not dead, though"

The two girls then charged, determined to end this fight once and for all.

"How's this for a lion, Leon!?"

As soon as Neptune neared the man, she stopped and stepped back, readying her attack.

"**CRITICAL EDGE**!"

She then struck down the lion-hearted man, knocking him out for good.

"I've lost to you once, Cloud" Rena declared as she filled her blade with blue fire. "Now, I'm here to repay the favor!"

She then struck against the soldier with her flame-imbued sword.

"Azure flames, gather on my blade!"

The adventurer-to-be raised her sword...

"**AZURE FLAME...SLASH**!"

...and sliced through the caped man, sending him down to the floor along with his partner.

"Guess you guys..." Leon managed to say before he fell to the ground. "...really have what it takes after all..."

After a deafening seven-second silence, Phil declared the match over.

"WITH A DOUBLE KNOCK-OUT, THE WINNER OF THIS MATCH IS NEP! TEAM! EPIC! GIVE A ROUND OF APPLAUSE FOR OUR TOP TEAM, EVERYONE!"

Sora gasped as the cheers grew louder. "We...we won?"

"I'd dance and cheer, but..." Neptune managed to say between breaths. "...I'm...running on empty here..."

Rena nodded, stabbing her sword onto the ground as she used it as an improvised stand. "You...tell me..."

"SORA!"

"NEP-NEP! RENA!"

"IFFY!"

The three then saw the rest of the party rushing to them, though Compa rushed past them to get to IF.

"Hey..." Sora greeted them. "Sorry...we went and won the match ahead of you guys..."

Donald groaned. "Why must you guys be so reckless!? We're supposed to be a team, remember!?"

Goofy nodded. "Donald's right. You guys can only do so much by yourselves..."

Neptune chuckled weakly. "Well...you got us there..."

"Iffy!" Compa shouted as she administered treatment to the guild agent. "Why do you have to rush out there like that!? Now you've got a lot of boo-boos on you!"

"But...I'm still alive, right?" the guild agent weakly replied.

The nurse huffed. "Only because you held onto your last Hi-Potion. Any closer and you might be out in a coma!"

"Yeah!" Neptune followed. "Aren't you the gal with the plan? Why'd you go and rush out like that?"

"That was pretty reckless of you" Rena noted. "That doesn't seem like your usual MO..."

IF chuckled weakly. "Sorry. I guess time was against me here. I could have told you guys the plan, but then they would've taken us out by the time I was done hashing it out..."

"I see..." Sora understood. "That's why you said not to shield the rest of us. So, I'll still have enough energy to keep fighting."

The guild agent smiled. "That's the plan. Nice to you to figure that out, Sora."

"It wasn't just that"

The party then saw Cloud approaching them with Leon slinging onto his shoulder.

"She was messing with this guy's aim here." the soldier continued. "Had she not casted that wind glyph behind him, his attack would have hit you three dead-on, even if you gained some distance."

"Then my partner would have easy pickings on you guys..." Leon admitted. "IF saw through it and reacted as best she could..."

"You fought real hard, y'know?" Cloud told the guild agent. "Even when you're out, your pals kept going thanks to the chance you gave them. Guess you don't need to bark out orders to tell them what to do"

"Iffy..." Goofy said.

"To go this far..." Sora followed. "Just for us..."

IF chuckled again. "C'mon. Like Donald said, we're a team. Sure, I'm not all hyped up to be a hero like most of you here, but that doesn't mean I can't do my part and help you get there."

"Awwww..." Neptune cooed. "Iffy..."

"Just don't be reckless again, got it!?" Compa said aloud, nearing the verge of tears. "I don't know what I'd do if anything bad happened to you..."

The guild agent chuckled once more. "*And I to you too*...I'll try my best on that."

This did not reassure the nurse at all. "Iffy!"

"I'm being realistic here" IF shrugged. "We're gonna face tougher challenges past this tournament, and anything could happen to us out there. That's why we gotta keep our guards up out there. You know that, right?"

Compa sighed. "I know. Just...be careful. Like, really careful, okay?"

IF giggled. "Yes, ma'am"

"I think you guys can handle it" Cloud butted in. "S'long as you got the heart for it, I'm sure you'll make your way through."

"Heart, huh..." Rena pondered on that.

"Okay, listen up, rookies!" Phil called out. "We're gonna go clean up the place. A special match just came up for the winners at the last minute, so if you all can move your butts out, that would be great!"

"A special match?" Goofy wondered.

"What's up with that?" Donald asked.

"Who knows?" Neptune hopped back up. "Welp, you heard the goatman. Let's go rest up a spell!"

"We could even try out Marvy's futomaki while we're there" IF suggested. "Good thing we saved it up before this, huh?"

"Oh yeah!" Sora perked up. "She gave us a boxed lunch as thanks, right?"

"Sounds tasty!" the aspiring adventurer hummed. "Let's eat!"

"Good idea!" Compa agreed. "Besides, we all need the rest we can get before the next round, anyway."

She then turned to her patient. "Especially you, Miss Guild Agent"

IF sighed. "I know. I know."

We apologize for the delay, but the special match is about to begin! Nep Team Epic, please step into the arena!

The party returned to the arena, however...

"Is it me..." Yuffie said, hugging herself as she shivered. "...or is it getting a bit chilly in here?"

"You got a point..." Marvy agreed, holding on to the dogoo that howled from the chilly air.

"Sense anything strange?" Artisan asked her fellow staff user.

Aerith nodded. "It's like...bad. Really bad"

"Wonder what they'll be facing this time?" Leon wondered.

Cloud, however, remained silent. "*This presence...It feels familiar...*"

"AL-RIGHT!" Neptune shouted. "Who's next!?"

"Someone's excited..." IF complained.

"Well, we rested up and refreshed up thanks to that quick meal..." Goofy pointed out.

"I feel like we can take on anyone right now!" Donald said excitedly.

"Calm down there, ducky..." the guild agent scolded. "Most of us are still a bit beat. We gotta conserve our energy as much as possible."

The royal wizard moaned. "I know..."

"Still..." Compa looked around, noticing the strange fog around the arena. "Why does it feel like something's gonna jump on us here?"

"It can't be that bad" Sora said, slinging his Keyblade above his shoulder. "We dealt with monsters like that Cerberus before, right?"

"Only because Herc and the others helped out!" the nurse pointed out.

"But we have become stronger since then" Rena countered. "I say, whether the opponent is man, monster or even a god, bring them on!"

"See?" Neptune chirped. "Falcom Jr.'s all fired up now!"

"He-Hey, did someone call for a god?"

The party tensed up, recognizing the voice.

"That's...!" Compa shivered.

IF growled. "That snake...!"

"Hey-hey-hey" the voice complained. "Don't you know? I got WAY more class than every snake in the universe! Guaranteed!"

Sora shouted out. "Why don't you show yourself already!?"

"Geez, and after all I did for you, kiddo..."

A puff of smoke appeared in front of the party, revealing a familiar black-robed figure.

"You!" IF growled again.

"That snaky-oil salesgod from before!" Neptune pointed to said salesgod in question.

"Whoa there, tigress!" the fast-talking god said. "I have a name, y'know? Hades, Lord of the Dead, God of the Underworld. Nasty place. Wouldn't recommend for a vacation..."

"What are YOU doing here!?" Donald demanded.

"What do you think, birdbrain?" Hades shot back. "I'm here to participate in the tournament too!"

"That's a lie!" Compa shouted.

"Yeah!" Yuffie shouted from the seats. "We didn't even see your name in the registry!"

"Ah, better check that again" Hades said nonchalantly. "I'm pretty sure I placed that special match request. Mind checking it, goatsy?"

Phil scoffed at him, but checked the list regardless. "Huh. So, he did. All signed up and everything."

"Oh, come the nep on!" Neptune complained.

"He's gotta be cheating!" Aerith shouted.

"Can't you take it to the Gods, Mr. Phil?" Marvy asked the goatman.

"I would, but..." Phil explained. "It will take several hoops to get something like this checked over right now, and we're still in the middle of the tournament."

"And..." Hades took over. "You wouldn't want folks rioting all over the countryside, now would you? Wouldn't want Zeus-y and his 'family' to feel weaker from the loss of faith, am I right?"

Hearing that caused Neptune to feel apprehensive, for some reason...

Artisan clicked her tongue. "That's a low move..."

"Hit the enemy where it hurts..." Leon said with a disapproving tone. "This guy clearly sunk too low to consider those viable options..."

Yuffie huffed. "What a fast-talking cheapskate. You really fell for this snake, Cloud?"

Cloud sighed as he hung his head in shame. "Don't remind me..."

"So, what brings you to this place?" IF interrogated. "It can't be just a simple vacation tour, knowing you"

"And you would be right!" Hades shouted. "See, this tournament has a little particular clause that all participants are aware of. Care to repeat it for the class?"

Sora scoffed, glancing at the local hero, who was also glaring at the Lord of the Dead. "A chance to fight against Herc over there! What of it?"

"Well, I figured since SOME people couldn't do the ONE thing I oh-so-nicely asked them to do" Hades complained, his eyes glancing at Cloud from the stands before turning his hateful gaze at the legendary hero watching from the stands. "I figured that I'd take a more personal approach against Irkules. You feel me?"

"Cloud..." Aerith growled, feeling angry. "Requesting permission to kill"

"Denied" the soldier replied. "Besides, we're out."

Donald huffed. "Well, that's a relief."

"At least no one else will fall for your tricks again!" Compa shouted, readying her syringe.

"How about you go back to the Underworld like the good lowlife of a god that you are?" IF taunted.

"You won't get to Herc!" Sora declared.

"You'll have to get through us first!" Rena shouted.

"Heh, you know, I just had a wonderful idea" Hades started, the arena feeling a bit hotter.

"What?" Neptune asked, not dropping her guard.

"How about I get a place for you DOWN UNDER!?"

In a flash, Hades' fire ignited, turning his ashen body to a red hue, his blue flame turning blazing red as his anger boiled.

"Come on, guys!" Herc cheered the party from the stands. "You can take him down!"

"Let's do this!"

Neptune leads the charge, approaching the god with all her might!

"**CRITICAL EDGE**!"

"You think that'll be enough!?"

With the god sent reeling back, IF and Compa followed up with their attacks.

"Then how about this? **BLISTERING COLD**!"

"**FROZEN TREATS**!"

The combined Blizzard attacks managed to send the god further back.

"Gah! The chilly touch is NOT good for my skin!" Hades complained as he summoned up a fireball. "But in COMES THE HEAT!"

"DODGE!"

Everyone dodged out of the maddened god's assault of large fireballs!

"BADA-BOOM!"

"He's relentless!" Donald complained as he dodged another fireball.

"We gotta find an openin'!" Goofy shouted.

"Oh, what's that?" Hades mocked. "You want some more? THEN FEEL THE HEAT!"

He summoned fire onto his hands and unleashed them in lines and started circling around the arena.

"Keep dodging the flames and watch for an opening!"

The spinning assault went on for a good five seconds. Once Hades stopped...

"Hey, having fun yet?"

"I will be!"

The God of the Underworld looked to see Rena, her blade primed, and her soul empowered by her Burning Heart.

"And you are?"

"Rena Bright! And I'm here to deliver divine ultra-violence!"

She then slammed her blade down, causing the god to be flung up in the air from the aftershock.

"**QUICK BREAK**!"

Not letting another second slip, Rena unleashed a flurry of spinning attacks at the Lord of the Dead!

"We're not through here!"

Sora then proceeded to unleash his Strike Raid, throwing his Keyblade at Hades while he was still reeling from Rena's attack.

"Goof, back me up!"

"Gotcha!"

Dashing to the royal captain, IF hopped on top of his shield...

"UP YA GO!"

Goofy then launched the guild agent up into the air...

"Better hope you still have a prayer left, Hades!"

"Ah, smokes..."

...upon which she then unleashed a flurry of slashes straight at the God of the Underworld.

"Go down!"

Grabbing Hades, IF slams him down, unleashing a mighty blow against the Lord of the Dead!

This is their Combination Skill, **Ascending Demon**!

"That's it!" Hades then started charging flames into his hands again! "Time for a fried feast!"

He then floated across the arena, his flames attempting to burn whoever was unlucky enough to stand in front of him.

"Take cover!"

As everyone scrambled for cover, Neptune and Donald happened to stand right behind him.

"Hey, ducky" the girl in the parka called out to the royal wizard. "Fancy a combo of our own?"

The duck nodded. "I think I have just the one for us!"

Channeling all his magic into Neptune's Keyblade...

"Here's a little gift!"

"Oooohhh~! Thanks, ducky!"

...up until the blade has reached to FIVE times it's usual length, even!

"Isn't that?" Artisan's eyes widened in surprise.

"Similar to Mr. Leon's technique?" Marvy noticed, to which the Lionheart hmph'ed.

"Time for a big finish!"

"Don't screw this up!"

"Huh?" Hades noticed a shadow growing behind him. "Who put the lights out?"

"**SUPER NEP BLADE!**"

He was too late! The blade, enlarged by Donald's magic, bore down against the God of the Underworld in a mighty slash!

"I...can't believe this..."

With his fury cooled down, Sora took the chance and punted him straight out of the arena, leaving the Lord of the Dead to his fate.

"Ack! AGH! Wait! Come on, guys! COME ON!"

The title match of the tournament is about to begin! All members of Nep Team Epic, please step into the Arena for the Title Match!

"This is it..." Sora said, barely able to contain his excitement. "The final round. You two ready?"

"Heck yeah!" Neptune cheered. "Hero-dom, here we come!"

"This is the last stretch!" Rena said. "No matter what happens, let's give this all we got, guys!"

"Yeah!"

"So" Yuffie started, turning to the new entrants in the audience. "Tell me again why only those three are fighting Herc?"

IF sighed. "Apparently, they wanted to have their match like this."

Compa nodded. "Something about hero's pride and whatnot"

Donald sighed in frustration. "Those guys just wanted to show-off!"

"But didn't you want to be a hero just as much as they do?" Marvy asked innocently.

"C-C'mon!" Donald tried to defend himself. "There's more than just becoming a hero! I mean..."

Aerith giggled. "I think our little ducky's feeling a little embarrassed~!"

"Still, they made the right decision for this one" Artisan remarked.

"How so?" Yuffie asked.

"You four are already reaching your limits, right?"

The remaining members of Nep Team Epic gasped in surprise.

"Sadly, yeah" IF said, looking away nervously. "Guess the futomaki and potions weren't enough"

"Sorry about that" Marvy apologized. "I would've made more, but the ingredients were so expensive!"

"That's not what I'm saying..." the guild agent reassured.

"I thought I was seein' stars for a while there..." Goofy admitted.

"Wow" Aerith gasped in amazement. "I guess you two were giving no quarter there, huh?"

Leon hmph'ed.

"Hades jumping in there certainly didn't help" Cloud replied. "Our fights were just friendly matches. That wasn't"

"At least this is a friendlier bout this time..." Artisan commented.

Donald scoffed. "I could've kept going..."

"Now, now, everyone" Compa settled everyone down. "We may not be able to fight right now. But we can still cheer them on."

Marvy nodded. "We can, at least, give them our energy!"

"Well, that's one thing I'm good at!" Yuffie chirped.

"It's about the only thing you're good at" Cloud snarked.

"Oh?" the Great Ninja teased. "Then why don't you try being a cheerleader, spiky?"

"Not interested"

Meanwhile, back in the arena proper, Hercules is preparing for the match, doing some stretches for a warm-up.

"You ready, champ?" Phil asked.

Herc gave a smile. "Ready as I'll ever be."

As he approached his opponents, he couldn't help but ask.

"Still, are you guys sure you wanna do this? I can understand if you're exhausted from fighting Hades. Beating down a god is no easy feat."

"P-shaw!" Neptune replied with gusto. "We wanted to test our might against you ever since we heard about you from the goatman!"

"Besides, we want to prove something to you" Sora followed up. "And to everyone else here. Where our strength comes from. What being a hero really means."

Rena nodded. "I'm with them. Plus, with this match, I'll be able to see how far I have come as a person, to see if I'm ready to become a great adventurer like Falcom is"

Herc sighed. "Guess I can't dissuade any of you now, huh?"

Sora chuckled. "You can try. But we've already decided on this"

Herc nodded. "I see."

"Alright, everyone!" Phil announced. "The title match of the Pantheon Foundation Tournament is about to begin! In this corner are the three participants from Nep Team Epic!"

The three waved their hands across the arena, earning cheers from their growing audience.

"You can do it, Sora!"

"Go for gold, Nep-Nep!"

"Take him down, Rena!"

"We're rooting for you guys!"

"Do-goo!"

"And on this corner" Phil continued. "Is our reigning champion, the son of Zeus himself! HER-CU-LES!"

Herc waved his hand to the audience, earning him cheers as well!

"It's Hercules!"

"You can do it, Hercules!"

"Three cheers for the son of Zeus!"

"He's our hero!"

"Go Herc Go!"

"Now, the title match will begin in a moment. Weapons at the ready!"

The contestants wasted no time, drawing their weapons. In Herc's case, he simply readied himself. Despite having a sword, he preferred using his raw muscular strength to get the job done.

And this tournament is no different...

"Alright! Ready to go the distance?"

"Already am!"

"Let's get this started!"

"Whenever you are!"

"Then, let the final match..."

"BEGIN!"

"I'll start us off!"

Rena channeled energy unto both Sora and Neptune, granting them unbridled strength.

"Is this..." Sora wondered.

"Your **Burning Heart**?" Neptune continued.

Rena nodded. "Herc's coming. Get ready!"

Sure enough, he was coming at them with a bull rush attack.

"He's using his head!" Neptune shouted.

"Move!"

The trio immediately moved out of the way. However, Herc changed his course and started charging at Neptune!

"Why me!?"

"He's exposed!" Rena noticed. "Let's go, Sora!"

"Right behind you!"

Sora then channeled **Aero** magic onto his Keyblade...

"DEFENSE!"

...giving Rena a windy shield to work with.

"Time to show you the fruits of my training..."

"That's nice!" Neptune shouted. "But can you please be quick about it!?"

Sheathing her blade, Rena took a deep breath, and with the winds guiding her...

"Fourth Form..."

...she unsheathed her sword and proceeded to meet Herc's bull rush head-on!

"**AUTUMN LEAF CUTTER**!"

...By performing a cutting slash through him, breaking his focus!

"Gotcha now, hero!"

Neptune, seeing the opening, proceeded to attack him with three lightning-infused slashes!

"**DELTA SLASH**!"

"Grk!"

"Not done yet! **SONIC BLADE**!"

Not letting up, Sora follows up with his seven-hit dash attack, leaving the demigod kneeling on the floor.

"Now, he's using YOUR technique, Cloud!" Yuffie exclaimed, pointing at the boy.

Cloud simply huffed in response. "At least he's doing well with it."

"Hah. Not bad"

But then he got up, his divine aura flaring up!

"But I'm just getting started!"

He went for Sora and engaged him in melee combat. For every slash Sora does, Herc blocks them. For every punch Herc does, Sora dodges them.

"C'mon, Sora!" Goofy cheered.

"Punch his teeth in before yours do!" Yuffie shouted.

As the two men were engaged in combat, Neptune is preparing her next attack.

"I'll help out." Rena released another wave of energy, blue this time, to Neptune. "**ZODIAC**!"

The aura empowered Neptune's magical affinity.

"Sweet!"

Gathering fire energy onto her Keyblade, Neptune moves in and unleashes her attack.

"**BLAZE BREAK**!"

However, the flames just...bounced off the demigod, and he didn't even notice it!

"What the nep!?" Neptune complained.

"That aura must be protecting him!" Rena noticed. "At this rate, Sora will lose the fight!"

"What do we do!?" the girl in the parka panicked.

"Calm down" the aspiring adventurer said. "Let's try wearing him down. Maybe he can't keep that aura up forever"

"Good idea! In that case...Sora!"

Neptune ran over to the two, causing Herc to raise an arm to block Neptune's attack.

"Switch with me!"

"Got it!"

Once Sora tagged out, Neptune goes on the offensive against the demigod!

"Show me what you got!"

"I'll give you that and more! **VARIABLE EDGE**!"

While Neptune engaged with Hercules, Sora regrouped with Rena.

"You doing okay?" Rena asked the boy.

Sora nodded. "Yeah. Just a bit exhausted."

The two looked onto the duel in progress. Neptune is making about as much progress as Sora did in his clash. In other words, not so much.

"But how are we gonna take that aura down?" Sora wondered.

Rena hummed. "I have an idea..."

"What is it?"

Before his question was answered, he felt his magical affinity being empowered.

"Let's try attacking at the same time."

"Think he'll react?"

"If he reacts as I hope he would."

Sora nodded. "Then let's go for it!"

Neptune is already feeling a bit out of breath from the ongoing clash.

"Can't we...settle down...for a round of...pudding?"

"Sorry! Still in a fight."

Just as Herc is going in for a massive punch to Neptune's gut, Sora and Rena came in from behind...

"Haaaaahhh!"

"Hiyaaaaahhhh!"

Hearing their battle cries, Herc immediately jumped up!

"You guys!" Neptune cheered.

"Don't relax yet!" Rena warned her. "Get ready to move!"

Sensing that Herc's coming back, the trio tried to hop away.

"How's this for ya!?"

But they felt the brunt of Herc's **Divine Slam** attack, knocking them back.

"Gah!"

"Owie!"

"Hrg!"

The three slowly got up, and that's when Rena noticed something.

"I knew it!"

Herc's aura is gone! The last attack removed it from him!

"Heal up, you two! I'm going in!"

Wasting no time, Rena moved in...

"Face me, Hercules!"

"Bring it!"

...and engaged the demigod in single combat!

"Time for a big one!"

As Herc is readying his divine-infused punch...

"Not this time!"

...he suddenly felt his arm being stuck.

"What the...Strings!?"

Sure enough, his arm is being restrained by some of Rena's **Shadow Strings**.

"A little something to help me catch stray prey when I was little" Rena explained. "Never thought I could use this to restrain a hero, though!"

Wasting no time again, Rena immediately moved in!

"**AXLE RUSH**!"

Due to the fierce assault from Rena's blade, Herc was being pushed back.

"You're getting better by the day, Rena! Color me impressed!"

Rena smiled. "Thanks! But I'm not the only one who's improved..."

Herc's eyes widened as he felt two presences jumping at him from behind!

"Gotcha! **ARS ARCANUM**!" A direct thirteen hits!

"**CROSS COMBINATION**!" And seven more for good measure!

Herc could do little but brace himself against the assault from the two Keyblade wielders!

"Wow, that was rough!" Herc complimented the two. "You two certainly packed a punch there!"

"Aw, shucks!" Neptune cooed. "The hero's complimenting us!"

"We're here to win this!" Sora declared. "That's why we're giving this no less than our best!"

Herc nodded. "And that's how it should be. But the question now is..."

The demigod then flared up, charging himself with divine energy as he drew his sword.

"...how far are you willing to go?"

Rena gasped as she felt the hero's aura flaring up. "Here he comes!"

"Hiyah!"

Herc then began to spin around the arena, moving around like a spinning top threatening to slice anything in the way.

"He's...fast!" Sora managed to say as he maintained his defense!

"When will...he stop?" Neptune complained.

"Any moment now..." Rena calculated.

After two more seconds of spinning, Herc stopped in the middle, withdrawing his sword as he reorients himself, his divine aura dissipating.

"There! Strike now!"

Seeing a chance, the trio moved in to strike!

"**CRITICAL EDGE**!" A four-hit attack!

"Two hits...**GRAVITY BREAK**!" Gravity finisher delivered!

"**CRIMSON GALE**!" Flaming attack unleashed!

Herc again withstood their attacks with gusto, but he is starting to lost breath from the heated match!

"Heh..." the hero smirked. "I actually broke a sweat there..."

"How..." Neptune gasped. "How is he so tough!?"

"Must be his godly prowess showing..." Sora guessed.

"Nah" Herc shook his head. "I may have been born by Zeus, but I lost my divinity when I was a baby. When I was a teenager, my father told me to find someone who can train me to become a hero. That's when I met Phil and after a while, he agreed to train me."

He then put his hands on his hips. "And look where that led me. Hard work and the will to go for the distance has led me to become a hero. That's my source of strength. So, what's yours?"

"Our source of strength..." Sora mumbled.

"That's..." Neptune whispered to herself.

"You can do it, guys!"

The two looked to the stands. More precisely, where their friends are.

"Get up, Sora!"

"Fight on, Nep-Nep!"

"Don't lose, Rena!"

"Goofy...Donald.."

"Compa...Iffy..."

"And not just them"

Rena pointed to their other friends who were cheering for them.

"C'mon! The match is not over yet!"

From Aerith...

"You can do it!"

...to Artisan...

"Get up, guys!"

...to Yuffie...

"We're rooting for you!"

...to Marvy...

"Do-goo!"

"Stand up!"

...even Cloud...

"You can't give up now!"

...and Leon, too...

"Everyone..." Sora gasped.

"They're cheering for us..." Neptune said.

"To have this much support..." Rena stated as she smiled. "It feels nice."

Suddenly, the three of them had a shared epiphany.

"I get it now!"

They now know the answer to Herc's question.

The source of their strength.

"Found your answer?"

The trio looked at each other; the same look of realization plastered on their faces.

"Yeah" Sora answered first, his eyes resolute.

"There's no doubt about it!" Neptune answered next, her face filled with resolve.

"There can be no other answer than this!" Rena answered last, placing her hand on her heart.

Herc smiled. "I see. Then...!"

The reigning champion began to charge up divine energy, which started to encapsulate the entire arena!

"This power...!" Sora gasped.

"We gotta finish this up quick!" Neptune shouted.

"Then let's go for the gold, guys!" Rena rallied as she began to charge her sword with energy.

"Right! Sora?"

The boy nodded. "Time for that, then!"

The two Keyblade wielders charged right at the hero.

"Bring it on, you two! Let's finish this match!" Herc declared.

Sora grinned. "Took the words out of our mouths!"

"Then have a taste of our teamwork!" Neptune declared.

The two Keyblade wielders proceeded to assault the hero with coordinated Keyblade strikes.

Once they reached their sixth strikes, however...

"His aura's almost charged up!" the boy with the key shouted.

But the girl with the key grinned. "Then we leave this to her."

"What!?"

The two hopped to the side as Rena swooped in and charged right at Herc with all her might.

"Feel my **SOUL BREAKER**!"

Starting with three slashes, Rena then took a deep breath and proceeded to barrage the hero with several spinning strikes!

"Not yet!"

She then leapt up and charged the tip of her sword with more energy.

"She's going for a big one!" Herc noticed. "I'll have to expend the energy now!"

The hero proceeded to shrink the divine aura, now only affected a certain area around Herc.

"He's retracted the aura!" Sora yelled.

"Now it's up to us!" Neptune chirped. "Get ready, buck-o!"

"This is..."

"Try this on for size!"

"...the end!"

Rena sent herself down, clashing her blade with the champion's **Divine Sphere** shielding him from her attack.

"Hrrrrrrrrgggg!"

"Hooooooooohhh!"

"They're not letting up!" Sora noticed.

"C'mon, Falcom Jr.!" Neptune cheered.

"This sphere's incredible. All the energy it uses truly surpasses that of us humans...However..."

Rena began to exert more effort into her attack as the sphere slowly started to crack!

"Wha...!?" And Herc definitely took notice!

"I won't give in! I will give my all...TO GET OVER THIS BARRIER!"

The cracks started to form across the sphere as it loses the fight against Rena's assault, until eventually...

"HAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

...the barrier broke, and Rena landed her attack against the ground, unleashing a powerful wave of energy against the downed hero...

"She...broke through..." Herc couldn't believe his eyes. No one has ever broken through his shield before. Not even Hades' strongest creatures could do it!

But before the hero could formulate another plan of attack, two figures closed in on him.

"Now taste..."

"Our **TWIN ARCANA**!"

Sora and Neptune closed the distance, and with Rena's last slash wave, they delivered the final blow against the world's reigning hero...

"Not...bad...you guys..."

...and as he fell down in a loud thud, silence reigned over the arena, the audience gazing upon the end results of the match.

One second became three...

Three seconds became seven...

Seven seconds became thirteen...

And by then, Phil announced the results!

"And there you have it, folks! The winner of the Pantheon Celebration Tournament is NEP! TEAM! EPIC!"

"We...We're the CHAMPS!"

"SHALALALALA-LALALA!"

"We...We really did it!"

The rest of their friends rushed down to join them in celebration.

"We did it!" Goofy cheered as he rushed to hug Sora.

"We're real heroes now!" Donald shouted as he followed Goofy's lead.

"Three cheers for Nep Team Epic!" Compa exclaimed as she hugged Neptune.

"Guess we made a big milestone now, huh?" IF stated with a contented sigh.

Far from the team, the remaining Drifters looked upon them.

"Whaddaya know?" Yuffie started.

"Guess they're ready for hero-dom now, huh?" Aerith said.

Artisan chuckled. "So, they are."

Marvy giggled. "They all did great!"

"Do-goo!"

Leon smiled. "Sora, Neptune. Well done"

Cloud, meanwhile, helped Herc up to his feet. "Those kids...They're really something, huh?"

Herc couldn't help but give a proud smile. "Yeah. That they are..."

Olympus Coliseum – Vestibule

"Congrats again, you guys!" Herc congratulated the team. "You were amazing! I-I didn't even hold back!"

"So" Leon started. "What is the source of your strength?"

Placing a hand onto his heart, Sora declared his answer. "My strength...they come from the friends I made...From Riku and Kairi, Donald and Goofy..."

Neptune followed. "To Compa and Iffy...to Arty, Leon, Yuffie, Aerith, Marvy, Falcom Jr., even Cloud over there..."

"And not just them..." Sora continued. "Herc and the other friends we made along the way, they're part of our strength, too!"

"Really?" Herc asked to be sure.

"I agree with that" Rena nodded. "Hearing this made me recall something a wise man told me. 'No man is an island'. It is through meeting others and bonding with them that helps us grow as people. That is what defines our strength."

"Wait, you can't be seri-"

"That's right!" Herc said, lifting the confused Phil up. "You guys have found what gives you strength. And I'm sure with your friends by your side, you can get through anything!"

Sora nodded. "Yeah!"

"Well now, since we're all here" Neptune suggested. "Why don't we finish up our last deal of business here?"

"Last deal?" Artisan asked.

The female Keyblade wielder then turned to the pedestal on the side of the room. The one pedestal they couldn't move yet.

"Oh yeah!" Donald remembered.

"Heh. Almost forgot about that" Phil said, turning to the hero. "Herc, would you..."

But said hero shook his head as he put his trainer down. "Why don't we let do them do this one?"

The party, including Rena, got into position near the pedestal. Last time, they each tried to push it individually. Now, though...

"You guys ready?" Sora asked.

Donald and Goofy nodded, the two positioned behind the boy.

"How about you gals?" Neptune asked.

"You bet!" IF nodded.

"We're not gonna let one measly pedestal get the best of us!" Compa boasted.

Rena laughed at that remark.

...this time, they will push it together, as one.

"One..." IF started.

"Two..." Donald counted...

"Three!"

The party all began their push...

"C'mon guys!" Aerith exclaimed.

"You can do it!" Marvy shouted.

"Show that thing who's boss!" Yuffie cheered.

"Do-goo!"

...and after a few seconds, they started to make progress!

"Well..." Artisan noted.

"Look at that" Leon said.

"That's the stuff!" Herc cheered.

After a few more pushes, they were able to push the pedestal out of the way!

"Aw-right!" the Great Ninja shouted.

"They did it!" the flower girl cheered.

"You were all great!" the other ninja complimented.

"Yeah..." Neptune managed to say. "How's...that?"

"Never thought..." Rena said, catching her breath. "Pushing a pedestal...could be so tough..."

Sora tried to say something, but then noticed something peculiar on the ground. "Oh"

"Well, what do we have here?" Leon said, noticing the thing on the ground too.

"Who would've thought that could be so close here?" Artisan commented.

"What's up?" Cloud asked, feeling out of the loop.

"Look there"

Everyone looked at the object on the ground, or rather...

"It's the Keyhole!" Compa exclaimed.

"Wow" IF gasped. "How is it something so important be placed somewhere unsuspecting?"

"Whimsy of the gods, I imagine" Yuffie muttered.

"I don't get it" Herc said, confused. "What's so special about that keyhole?"

"Basically, it leads to the heart of this world" the guild agent explained. "If left be, the Heartless will enter into the core and consume this world, drowning it to the darkness."

"Some of the worlds have already been consumed due to this" Artisan took over. "Ours was close into becoming the next victim too"

"So, how do you deal with it?" Cloud asked.

"With this"

Sora and Neptune approached the Keyholes with Keyblades in hand.

"What are you two runts doing?" Phil asked this time.

"Keeping your world safe, that's what they're doing" Yuffie answered for them.

Together, their Keyblades shone and shot beams to light at the small Keyhole on the ground, locking it for good.

"There!" Sora said.

"All done!" Neptune followed.

"That should keep this world Heartless-free for a while!" Aerith cheered.

"Guess that means things will be quieter around here, huh?" Cloud surmised to which the flower girl nodded with a hum.

Suddenly, a ringing noise is heard close to IF.

"That must be Cid" Artisan guessed.

"Mind answering it, IF?" Leon requested.

"Got it" IF answered the call from her phone. "Hello? Yeah. Yeah, we're here. Everyone's here, too. Oh. Okay, see you!"

Putting her phone down, she relayed the party Cid's message.

The Gummi Ships are now ready to make the needed trek...

Olympus Coliseum – Entrance

"So, you guys are really going?" Rena asked the party.

"Yuppers!" Neptune nodded fiercely. "Time and pudding wait for no one, after all!"

"Besides" IF said. "Cid finished up the modifications to the warp gummis. We should be good to go to our next destination once he finished patching our ship up with them."

"Hollow Bastion, right?" Sora asked.

Goofy nodded.

"So, this is it" Donald said. "We're moving in on the enemy's stronghold!"

"It will be tough!" Compa stated. "Maleficent and Ms. Evil Witch will be there with tons of tough Heartless! Not to mention, Riku too..."

Sora nodded grimly.

Neptune hummed. "I wonder if that lovely Newtype's gonna show up there..."

Goofy turned to the other party. "So, what about you guys?"

"Well" Artisan rubbed the back of her head. "We'll be heading back to Traverse Town first"

"Why's that?" the nurse asked.

"We have to make sure the town stays safe, first and foremost" Leon answered. "Second, we have to make sure all the preparations we made are set and ready to go"

"Once all that is done, we'll rush in and join you guys there" Artisan followed.

"I'll help you all out too!" Marvy exclaimed. "A ninja must always repay their debts!"

"Wow!" Neptune's eyes sparkled. "Talk about bringing in the cavalry! You guys really want in on the action, huh?"

"Well, duh!" Aerith replied. "That world is OUR home! We'll do most things to get it back!"

Yuffie snickered. "This will be the grand return of Yuffie Kisaragi as she takes her home world back from the Heartless with her comrades by her side! Wouldn't that be awesome, right Clou-"

But the spiky-haired soldier is nowhere to be seen!

"Where'd he go!?"

"Oh, about him" Rena butted in. "He said he had some 'unfinished business' here and told me to tell you guys to go on ahead without him"

The Great Ninja groaned. "Just as when we finally found him, he goes off and walks away! What's his deal, anyway!?"

Marvy tried to calm her fellow shinobi down. "Now, now, Yuffie. We should at least respect his boundaries and give him space..."

Aerith sighed. "I hope you know what you're doing, Cloud..."

"Huh. Weird" Neptune suddenly said. "Why do I hear Latin chanting in the background all of a sudden?"

"So, does this mean we're going in first?" Sora wondered.

Leon nodded. "Try to cover as much ground as you can. If you can make it past Maleficent and her goons, all the better. But more importantly..."

"More importantly?" Compa parroted.

"Don't lose heart" Leon finished. "There's no shame in losing, as long as you can keep going afterwards"

The party nodded. "Right!"

IF then felt her phone vibrate from her pocket.

"Did someone text me?"

The guild agent opened her phone to see...

"I got messages!"

The party gathered around IF as she opened her inbox.

"Who are they from?" Compa asked.

"Let's see..."

IF opened one of the texts. It reads...

"Gud luk out ther, nyu! Make sur Alice coms hom safe..."

"Hey! Isn't that Puchiko?" Neptune recoginzed.

"I'd recognize that verbal tic anywhere" IF sighed.

"You have more messages here, Iffy" Compa noticed.

Shooting a quick reply to the previous message, IF proceeded to open the next one.

"Hey, u guys doin ok? Al and I got woried for bit."

"That one's from CC2, right?" Goofy guessed.

IF nodded. "Guess I'll reply to her too. Were fine. Wil brin Jasmine bak. Promis"

"You still have more left, Iffy"

Hearing the nurse loud and clear, IF opened up another message.

"U all better not los! Peter and the boys want to hear ur storis afterwards!"

"That one's from Sting, I believe" Donald said. "Only she could be so demanding..."

"But it's nice to hear she's rooting for us, too!" Sora said.

"There's still one more message. Sender unknown"

IF opened the message and it reads...

"I sense a great trial ahead of you. The residents of Halloween Town and I wish you well on the journey ahead."

Donald groaned. "I think I know who sent that one..."

"It's Magey!" Compa exclaimed.

"Man, she sent a text message without a phone" Neptune said. "How does she do it?"

"Magic?" Goofy guessed with a shrug.

Rena chuckled. "Everyone out there is wishing you luck, huh?"

"This is proof of how much their help means to us" Marvy said.

"That's right!" Herc cheered. "So, with that said..."

"You guys can do it!" the three of them said. "We know you can!"

"Herc..." Sora said.

"Awww, Falcom Jr..." Neptune cooed.

"Marvy..." IF gasped.

The boy chuckled. "Thanks, guys. Hearing all that's gotten me fired up!

Goofy nodded. "Everyone's countin' on us!"

"We can't let them down!" Compa exclaimed.

"We've come this far, so let's go all the way through!" Donald shouted.

"Once we make it through this, we'll be one step closer to saving the worlds!" IF declared.

"So, let's hustle and bustle, ladies and gentlemen!" Neptune chirped. "Let's go save our friends AND the worlds like the heroes we are!"

"YEAH!"

"Hey!" Cid called out to the party. "You're ships all prepped up! You're good to go!"

With that confirmation, the party rushed back to their Gummi Ship, their destination set...

"Good luck, guys..." Herc said as he waved them goodbye.

"May your journey be a prosperous one..." Rena prayed to the party, wishing them luck...

"Those rookies are certainly going a great distance..." Phil said, looking to the ship that departed their world. "That's for sure"

NEPSTATION

Neptune: This is Nepstation, coming to you with a special bulletin! Normally, we'd give you the latest buzz around, but today is something special, for we have the latest intel on our enemies!

IF: Nep, quit with the suspense and just tell everyone already.

Neptune: C'mon, Iffy. We gotta set the stage and everything! It's Showbiz 101!

IF: Stall too long and people will lose interest. *sighs* Anyway, we have the latest intel on the enemy's stronghold, the haunting castle of Hollow Bastion.

---

an image of the enemy's castle is shown onscreen

Neptune: And how haunting it is! Look at how menacing it is! The smoking pipelines. The huge Heartless Emblem in front of it. The many waterfalls dotting the front yard of this place. *shivers* This is top-notch dungeon design, I tell ya!

IF: It's not just that. The castle rooms are split across the place too. Upon entering it, you'll be in the Main Hall, which consists of an old Library, and past that hall, you'll have to take special elevators to climb further up the castle, which consists of an old chapel and a Grand Hall that houses a great secret.

Neptune: A chapel within the top of the castle? Okay, I know final dungeon design is supposed to be elaborate, but who in their right minds would put their place of worship further INSIDE a building. Those should be placed near the entrance or something.

IF: *sighs* Makes you wonder what kind of lunatic would design this place.

Neptune: I bet they even have an amusement park inside the place!

IF: Nep, you're watching too much anime. Simmer down, please. *clears throat*

---

silhouettes of more dangerous Heartless appear onscreen

IF: This is all we can uncover about the castle at present. It will be a long climb up, filled with more dangerous Heartless and a long path to the top, but rest assured. Once we get up there, we'll have those witches down in no time!

Neptune: Uh-huh! This was once the proud homeworld of tons of people, some of which we got the pleasure to be friends with! We gotta get them their home back!

IF: You're right! I'm sure they'll be able to make their world hospitable again after all this. If they can manage a Refuge World, they can certainly rebuild their world again.

Neptune: Now that's looking forward! Welp, it was short, but this is all we got for you today!

IF: Not yet. You still got more stuff to do before you end this broadcast, remember?

Neptune: Ehehe, you're right! Hey, Sora! Topic time!

Sora: Right! We got the fitting topic for this one!

---

the word Villains appear onscreen

Neptune: That's right! This time, let's talk about the bad guys we've been fighting throughout this story!

Sora: They made quite the impression, huh? All the bad guys we fought were...unique in their own way.

Neptune: Hm-hm! They are different, but they gathered together to realize their ambitions of conquest and vile villainy! Let's go through each one of them!

---

an image of Jafar appears onscreen

Sora: First up is Jafar, the vile vizier of Agrabah. His evil deeds include overthrowing the Sultan of his world, siccing the Heartless on the populace and kidnapped the princess there to establish his reign. You know, I was kinda expecting more out of him during our fight...

Neptune: What makes you say that?

Sora: I mean, his magic is no joke, really. But he was really just keeping his distance, his ice storm only affects the middle and Genie was less than helpful to him.

Neptune: I heard from the grapevine that this guy can turn into a snake. Didn't he do that?

Sora: Nope. Just blasted spells at us until he's beaten and used up his last wish. Honestly, he's as...stereotypical(?) as he gets.

Neptune: So, he makes all the classic villain mistakes? I get ya. I saw it coming the moment he spent more time gloating when CC2 was wrecking his stuff.

Sora: Anyway. Let's move on to the next villain.

---

an image of Ursula appears onscreen

Neptune: Next up is the evil witch of the seas! Ursula is a devious sort, making good deals that seems to benefit you a lot, but thanks to her...'poopsies', she rigs the deals completely in her favor. Her envy of Mr. Sea King's power knows no bounds! She could even trick his beloved daughter to cause his downfall!

Sora: Good thing that didn't come to pass, huh?

Neptune: No doubt. Still, that sea witch is pretty sturdy. No wonder you guys needed to blast her cauldron to take her out of the game.

Sora: Not to mention her giant form when she used the trident...

Neptune: Yeah...underwater combat sucks...

Sora: Let's...move on to the next bad guy...

---

an image of Oogie Boogie appears onscreen

Neptune: Now, take a look at this bag of bugs! A voracious gambler by nature, Oogie here tried to upstage Jack in order to impose his idea of Halloween, which, based from what we heard from the townsfolk, are deemed too dangerous and life-threatening to implement.

Sora: You tell me. His traps are sharp with a capital 'S'! Compa told me that she felt her life flashing before her eyes when she was running from those saw blades.

Neptune: Still, who'da thunk his biggest trick in himself is fusion dancing with his own freakin' manor!? He's so big he may as well call himself the Seven Holidays King if he could!

Sora: Yeesh! If he really is that, then I'd rather not celebrate any holidays! Noooooooooo thank you~!

Neptune: Now that we got that bag out of the...ehe, bag, let's go to our next villain.

---

an image of Captain Hook appears onscreen

Neptune: Ah, the good ol'codfish. Fun fact, he's pretty much the only normal guy among the bad guys. No magic. No higher plane of existence. Just a plain ol' sea captain with a grudge against a forever-young pre-teen.

Sora: That still doesn't make him easy to face. He's quite tough to fight outright. I think we all would've had a harder time if we couldn't fly around him like that.

Neptune: Yup! What he makes for in lack of mystic power, he makes up for in guile and sheer stubbornness! He even wraps his bombs in gifts for his...guests to have.

Sora: I heard that he tried to leave it behind in Peter Pan's hideout at one point. It blew up, but the kids there were moved to somewhere else safe.

Neptune: Hm-hm! He's devious and dirty! Captain Codfish's not one to underestimate...well, at least until he becomes crocodile chow.

Sora: *chuckles* Well, let's move on to our recent enemy...

---

an image of Hades appears onscreen

Neptune: Ah, yes! The snakey-oil salesgod himself! He may be a fast-talking con-artist trying to sell you his goods, but don't let that fool you! He's one of the many gods of Mount Olympus and as this episode showed, he means it!

Sora: He's got quite the temper for a god. Shouldn't they be, I don't know, more imposing and all that?

Neptune: Hmmmm, good question. Anywho...this guy's scheming to take over the Realm of the Gods because apparently, watching over the dead 24/7 stinks!

Sora: Not to mention, he's so focused on taking down Herc for being his dad's son, and said dad was the one who placed him in charge of the Underworld in the first place...Doesn't that seem more like Hades was the offended party here?

Neptune: Without context, yeah. But giving how an-gery he was about all that, and siccing monsters on the dad's kid instead of taking it to the god himself, I don't think he has any room to defend himself.

Sora: Agreed. Why don't we move on to the last ones?

---

an image of Maleficent appears onscreen

Neptune: First off is the evil mastermind herself! From what little we heard from her, she's not only gathered a council of villains to gain control of numerous worlds, but also has the

Heartless at her beck and call! However, it is said that she originated from a different world before claiming Hollow Bastion as her own.

Sora: So, she went out of her own world to go conquer other worlds? Sounds diabolical.

Neptune: Considering how she gathered all those villains together, she's got to be the cream of this vile crop! Taking her down won't be easy!

Sora: I'm aware! Maybe she'd have something cool, like turning into a dragon when she's cornered.

Neptune: He-he! A hero's gotta fight a dragon at least one point in their journey, huh?

Sora: You know it! Now, let's move on to the other one...

---

an image of Arfoire appears onscreen

Neptune: There's not a whole lot we really know about this old lady. Although, she seems to have something against me for some reason, considering she keeps attacking me.

Sora: Do you think you did something to her before? Like she's keeping a grudge against you or something?

Neptune: Now, why would I do that!? Okay, sure, I keep botching her name or whatever, but I'm pretty sure I've never met her in my entire life!

Sora: You sure? You know what they say about life-long grudges, right?

Neptune: *sighs* I'm aware. Still, what does the old lady have against cute, adorable me anyway? I mean, her name's based of pirating software, but...

Sora: Speaking of, how does she fight? I mean, I knew she could use a spear when we fought her last, but IF and Compa said she used something different in the middle of your next fight...

Neptune: Oh yeah. She's got the weapon swaps. Turned her spear into a large battle axe-like thing-y and started speaking out German against us.

Sora: So, she has different fighting styles based on what weapon she uses? That's troubling...

Neptune: Call me crazier, but I get the feeling the power's she using is...I dunno, not exactly her own, you know?

Sora: Like she took those powers from someone else?

Neptune: Yup. Dunno who though...

Sora: That would be nice to know...

---

an alarm bell rang

Neptune: There's the bell. I mean, we've been here for a pretty long time, huh?

Sora: Gotta make up for the short ones we've been having the past few weeks, right?

Neptune: Sure! Anywho, that's all from us here today!

Sora: Be sure to stay tuned, everyone! The next chapter's gonna be the fight for our lives!

Neptune: That's right! Next time for the climax of the story! The epic confrontation between old friends and diabolical enemies! There will be tears, betrayals, revelations, all the things that make a story compelling! Next time on Heartdimension Neptunia, Chapter 13, Forces of Evil! Our hearts...will lead us to victory!

Sora: Now, we ended up doing a proper preview...

Neptune: Hey, it's the big climax. Gotta drum up excitement and all that, you know?

Sora: *chuckles* Sure! Anyway….*a plane letter flies in* Huh? What's this? *opens letter*

Neptune: Is it from Mr. Author? What news does he have for us this time?

Sora: It says "Since the next two chapters will be split into parts again, once the upload starts next week, I will upload the parts within three days each. My plan is to have the rest of this fic be completed by the end of April, so please look forward to what's coming next. Not just the climax of the story, but what comes afterwards. That's all!" Huh, guess our schedule's taking a bit of a shake-up, huh?

Neptune: Well, at least people won't have to impatiently wait for several years before they get their next nugget of news.

Sora: Are you…referring to something with that?

Neptune: No! It's not like certain companies are being radio-silent about their content or anything because they are still putting out fires within them or coming up with another get-rich-quick scheme or something! *chuckles nervously* Why would I think about that? Don't be ridiculous!

Sora: *sweats nervously* Errrr, right…Anyway, from all of us here at Nepstation...

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Chapter 15: Chapter 13.0: Hollow Bastion (Desires)

Chapter Summary

> Our party has finally arrived at the vile Hollow Bastion, where they are greeted with stunning revelations...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hollow Bastion – Rising Falls

"This is it..."

"Yup"

The party landed into a ruined area, filled mostly with water, bubbles, and displaced patches of land. In front of them is an enormous, menacing castle.

"That castle definitely screams 'evil fortress', alright!" Neptune stated.

"I wonder where Kairi is..." Sora wondered.

"Same with Alice and Jasmine..." Compa mumbled.

"Well, we're not gonna find our answers standing around here" IF figured.

"Yeah! Let's get-"

A loud roar interrupted Donald's declaration.

"What the nep was that!?" Neptune shouted.

Goofy looked around, and then spotted a large figure ahead. "Over there!"

"Looks like someone's in trouble!" Sora noticed.

"Let's go!" Compa cried. "That person needs treatment, stat!"

"You heard the nurse, let's go go go!"

With no time to waste, the party rushed to the scene of the crime!

Meanwhile, at the scene of the crime...

"You're not supposed to be here...How did you get to this world?"

Riku is starting down at a hulking Beast, exhausted and out of breath, yet still carried a sense of determination in his being.

"I don't know" the Beast answered. "All I know is that Belle is taken here, and I will do anything to get her back"

"You came all the way here just for that?" Riku scoffed. "Even crossing the Dark Corridors that eats away at your being?"

The Beast growled.

"Hmph. Fine then" Riku taunted the intruder, daring him to attack.

And attack he did! The Beast headed in for a mighty lunge, but Riku deftly dogded the attack and slashed him from behind!

"Graaaaahhh!"

"Riku!"

The boy in question turned to see six familiar faces enter the scene.

"Is that a monster!?" Neptune panicked at the sight of the Beast.

"Well, it's no Heartless, that's for sure" IF said, turning to the nurse. "Compa, get him treated."

Compa nodded and dashed to the injured Beast. "Hang in there!"

"Hmph" Riku said. "So glad you came, Sora"

"What's with you!?" Sora scolded his best friend, drawing his Keyblade. "Sure, you can get a little rough back then, but you wouldn't go out of your way to hurt others!"

"Then clearly you don't know a lot about me" Riku fought back. "Besides, why are you still so concerned about me?"

"Wha-Because we're friends, Riku!" Sora said, flabbergasted that his best friend ever asked such a question. "There's never a moment where I didn't think about you and Kairi! I thought you knew that!"

Riku scoffed again. "More lies...Whatever, I'm coming to take back what's mine"

"Yours?" IF questioned.

"What could you have lost that we have?" Neptune asked.

"Why don't I show you?" the boy with silver hair declared. "The Keyblade's true Wielder!"

Riku extended his hand, which caused Sora's Keyblade to begin moving towards him. The boy tried to fight back, but in a few seconds, the Keyblade vanished from his hands...

"Wha-!?"

...and went into Riku's in a flash of light.

"Right where it belongs..." Riku said.

"But...how?" Sora managed to say.

"The Keyblade goes to those whose heart is stronger" Riku boasted. "There can't be two who can wield the same Keyblade. Only those with the strength to wield it can change the world. You were just the delivery boy."

"But..." Sora bemoaned, still in disbelief over what just happened. "I was the one who fought my way here with that!"

"You really want to play hero that badly?"

Riku then procured a wooden sword. "Here. Go play with this"

Tossing it to the despondent Sora, Riku then turned around and left without a word.

"Hold it!"

Riku turned around and blocked an attack from the furious Neptune.

"Give Sora back his Keyblade..." the girl growled. "Right now!"

"Hmph. Almost forgot about you"

Riku deflected the girl's assault, pushing her back.

"I'm never one to rely on others for favors, but..."

He then brought out a dark-red crystal from his pocket.

"What is that?" Donald wondered.

"That doesn't look good" Goofy said, feeling sick.

The crystal then began to glow, and soon...

"Ghhhhhh!"

...Neptune began to clutch her own chest as a dark aura permeates her being!

"NEP!"

"Oh no, Nep-Nep!"

IF and Compa immediately rushed to their friend, struggling to stand or even breathe!

"Are you okay?" IF asked, worried.

"Please hang in there!" Compa cried.

"Hrrrgggg..." Neptune struggled to say. "Can't...breathe..."

"Ahhhhhhh!"

But it wasn't just Neptune who was struggling...

"Sora!"

"You too!?"

Goofy and Donald immediately rushed to the boy, who was also clutching his chest.

"What...is this?" Sora managed to say. "Why does my...chest feel so...tight?"

"RIKU!"

Everyone turned to their left to see a familiar, albeit bruised girl wearing blue standing on the nearby platform.

"Is that...?" Donald couldn't believe his eyes.

"N...Noire?" Neptune managed to say.

"Neptune!"

The twin-tailed girl leapt down and rushed to the struggling girl's side.

"Are you okay?" Noire said, clearly worried. "Please say something!"

"Noire..." Neptune called out, still clutching to her chest. "You're...hurt..."

Noire shook her head. "Not as badly as you are! What's wrong!?"

"I'm sorry...it's just...my chest feels...really...hot...!"

"What's going on!?" IF demanded from Riku. "What is that crystal!? Where did you even get it?"

Riku scoffed again. "How would I know? That witch just gave it to me just in case that purple nuisance comes around."

"A witch...?" Goofy said.

"That means Arfoire!" Compa figured out.

IF clicked her tongue. "Figures that hag would pull something like this! But, why is it affecting Sora?"

Noire got up and faced Riku, glaring at the silver-haired boy. "Drop that crystal right now, Riku! Both of them are getting hurt!"

Once more, Riku scoffed. "Like I care. But isn't this what you wanted? Depending on how she reacts, you may finally get your answer"

IF looked at Noire, who is still furious. "Answer?"

"Shut up!"

Noire attempted to strike at Riku, who easily blocked it with the Keyblade. However...

"What!?" Noire gasped. "Isn't that Keyblade...?"

"What in the!?" Donald said, beak agape.

"Is that...?" Goofy gasped, looking at Noire's weapon.

"I knew it..." IF whispered.

"Why...?" Compa cried. "Why does Noire have a Keyblade?"

"Huh?"

Noire looked at her own weapon. She expected her rapier, but she unconsciously drew her Keyblade out instead.

"Looks like your cover's blown" Riku snarked.

Despite her accidental exposure, Noire continued to glared at the boy. "You will drop that crystal if you know what's good for you."

"Still trying to play that card, are you?" Riku glared back. "I told you before. You are NOT my goddess!"

He then pushed Noire back, knocking her Keyblade away and sending her down to the ground.

"Noire!" Neptune managed to cry out.

"Why you...!"

Noire, however, is met with the edge of the Keyblade as he glared at her.

"You annoy me too much with your coddling" Riku said coldly. "You won't bother me anymore..."

"Riku..." Sora attempted to plead. "Please...stop!"

"Noire..."

Neptune looked to Riku, who is about to cut Noire down!

"NOIRE!"

A bright flash of light illuminated the area, blinding all who are unlucky to be in it's wake.

"Ahhh!" Goofy yelled.

"It's too bright!' Donald exclaimed.

"My eyes!" Compa shieded her eyes.

"What is...?" IF managed to say.

A loud clang could be heard...

"What the..." Riku said, his eyes widening.

Noire gasped. "No way..."

In front of her stood a tall and beautiful woman, wearing a black battle suit and had long purple hair. On her right hand is a black katana that had shattered the dark crystal Riku once held.

"Who are you?" Riku asked the woman in front of him.

"Me? Don't tell you wiped your memory of my name already?" the woman mocked with a deep and serious voice.

She then pointed her katana right at Riku. "I am Neptune. I am a Keyblade wielder, here to protect my friends and get my fellow wielder his weapon back."

"That...can't be..." Noire managed to say, having been rendered speechless by the turn of events in front of her.

Donald and Goofy are too star-struck at the sight of the seemingly mature Neptune in front of them.

"H-Huh?" Sora managed to look up, seeing the tall woman in front of him. "Nep...tune?"

"Sora!"

The woman immediately rushed to Sora, who is still kneeling over, but not in pain.

"Are you hurt? Can you stand?"

Sora, however, looked stupefied at the presence of the woman in front of him.

"Uh...Huuuhhhh..."

Donald and Goofy's staring didn't really help either...

"Reel it in, boys..." IF sighed.

"I-I'm fine, really" Sora tried to stand up, still being supported by Donald and Goofy. "But, are you...really Neptune?"

"Yes" the woman nodded. "Who else would I be, buck-o?"

"Hearing her say something like that with that voice..." Donald commented. "Feels kinda weird..."

"Yeah..." Goofy started. "She looks a lot different from the usual Nep-Nep..."

"I do?"

Neptune(?) looked at herself, noticing the suit she is wearing and the weapon on her hand. "Wait, where's my Keyblade?"

As she looked at her weapon, she noticed a small pool of water and gazed upon her reflection. Sure enough, her face is different, looking more mature than usual, with her eyes sporting a darker blue with her irises shaped like the symbol found on her Keychain (a power symbol, right?).

Not to mention, her chest...

"H-How?" Neptune(?) said, clearly surprised. "When did I get so tall? Why is my voice so deep? Since when did I speedrun through puberty AND adolescence in a matter of seconds!? Is this...really me!?"

She looked around for answers, but no one can really respond to it...

"I think I have an idea..."

Neptune(?) turned to her salvation.

"What is it, Iffy?"

"Iffy, huh?" IF smiled. "The fact that you still call me that means you really are still Nep, deep down"

"Hm?" Neptune(?) titled her head in confusion.

"It's nothing" The guild agent reassured as she cleared her throat. "Nep, do you recall the time when we fought the old hag together?"

The taller Neptune nodded. "You said I passed out after the fight, that I used a technique I didn't know to finish her off."

"That's right" IF nodded. "Back then, you suddenly began to glow, seemingly teleported to defend me and drew Arfoire back. From what I managed to overhear from her, you were using some sort of power unconsciously to defend me."

"Really?" Neptune asked, to which IF nodded. "Did this power have a name?"

"I think she called it...Hard Drive Divinity?"

"HDD, huh? That's actually pretty cool, not gonna lie..."

"So that's how she drew it out..." Noire mumbled.

"The real question now is" Neptune said. "How did I get this power? Why do I even have it? This...HDD form?"

IF shook her head. "I don't know. I do have some theories, but..."

"Why don't I give you an idea?"

Everyone turned to Riku, the Kingdom Key back on his hand.

"I think that Neptune over there is just like Noire. A forgotten goddess of a fallen world."

"A...goddess?" Donald said slowly.

"No way..." Sora breathed out.

"Me, a goddess?" Neptune asked. "Wait, Noire too?"

"..." Noire looked down in shame.

"A goddess of what, though!?" Compa shouted as her eyes widened into comical white circles. "Food? Greek? Space? Anime? Babylonian!?"

"She's one too, huh?" IF said. "That's what I figured..."

"Whaddaya mean?" Goofy asked.

"Going back to what I said about Nep tapping onto that power" IF explained, turning her gaze to one person in particular. "The only other person I saw who can move that fast was the Newtype we kept encountering...or rather Noire in her transformed state."

"How did you figure that out?" Donald asked.

Noire kept looking down in shame...

"I noticed her mannerisms are a bit similar to each other" IF started. "Not only that, the way they fought is almost similar too, despite the difference in their weapons. Even shared similar techniques like Poison Fencer. Then there's also the fact that Noire knew more than what she let on."

"How?" Sora asked.

"Remember when she was ranting when we first met her normal form?" the guild agent asked. "She was saying terms like Keyhole, Drifter, Refuge World and the like long before we got to explain things to her. Not to mention, when she asked for them again, she pretended to be confused by it."

Donald hummed. "Did she say anything about those? I only heard her talking to herself..."

Goofy thought aloud. "I think she did..."

"Then, why did she keep getting in our way as the Newtype?" Compa tried to figure out.

"I think I know"

Everyone turned to the transformed Neptune.

"You do?" IF asked, surprised that Neptune of all people figured something out.

She nodded. "I believe that our encounters with her have all been attempts to get me to transform, to confirm that I was a fellow CPU just like her."

"You even knew about CPU's!?" Noire gasped.

"You mentioned that term a while back, right?" IF recalled, to which Neptune nodded.

"Yes. Histy told me that Noire and I are fellow CPU's. Though the reason hasn't truly dawned unto me until now. Not like she could, given the short amount of time we had to be able to talk..."

"Could that relate to that 'spark' Noire kept talking about?" Sora wondered.

"I believe so" Neptune replied. "This 'spark' might be a type of energy that is native to us CPU's."

"Do you know what that energy is?" Compa asked.

Neptune shook her head. "No, I don't know. Histy might have an idea though"

"Then let's go and find her!" Sora exclaimed, only for him to clutch his chest. "Grk!"

"Are you okay!?" Donald asked with worry.

"That crystal must've damaged you far worse than you thought..." IF figured.

Riku scoffed at that. "As I thought. You really are too weak, Sora"

"Hey!" Goofy shouted.

"That's your best friend you're talking to!" Compa scolded him.

"Not anymore" Riku replied coldly. "Kairi's all I have left now. Only I can save her, Sora!"

"We're not done here, Riku!" Neptune called out.

But then, they heard laughter...no, giggling in the area.

"Hahaha...hahahahahahaha! I couldn't believe it. All this time, you had that power..."

It was Noire, who is currently in the middle of a breakdown...

"Noire?" Neptune called out to her, but she wasn't listening.

"All that time, you knew about CPU's...about the goddesses, yet you didn't show a flint of that power during all our encounters." the injured girl ranted as she clutched her face, leaving only her left eye uncovered. "Only that witch managed to get a glimpse. How cruel of you..."

"Why is Noire...acting so scary?" Compa whimpered.

"All this time, I've been trying to find someone like me. All this time, I remained and suffered through this pain and torment just to find a single clue about others like me. And yet, here you are..."

"This doesn't look good..." Donald said with worry.

"So, what?" Noire began to walk slowly and shakily. "Are you laughing at me? Mocking me for my lone endeavors? Ignoring all the pain I had to go through to defend the worlds by myself!?"

She then grabbed the transformed Neptune by her shoulders.

"Tell me, Neptune!"

Neptune was at a loss for words. Throughout their encounters, even if she was annoying them as the Newtype, Neptune never carried an ounce of hatred for Noire. Sure, she felt hurt from her rejection back at Halloween Town, but she never hated Noire for it.

"I would never think ill of you, Noire" Neptune answered. "Rather, I hoped we'd at least get another chance to talk things out. We did leave things on a sour note last time..."

"...ar..."

"Huh?" Neptune didn't hear what she said. "What did you just say?"

"LIAR!"

In a flash, light surrounded Noire's being, and in the next second, the transformed Neptune was flung back to the watery ground below.

"Nep!/Nep-Nep!/Neptune!"

The transformed girl looked up as she recovered, gazing upon the familiar white-haired figure she now knew the identity of.

"Noire, please!" Neptune pleaded. "You have to listen!"

"NOT ANOTHER WORD!"

The transformed Noire charged right at her with a fierce dive!

"Noire...!"

Due to not putting her heart into the fight, Neptune was pushed back! As if by instinct, she flew up to dodge Noire's incoming attack.

"Get back here, Neptune...!" Noire growled. "I'm not through with you!"

"Sorry about this, Sora" Neptune whispered. "You want me? Fine! Come get me, Noire!"

She then flew away to the castle, with the maddened Noire giving chase.

"Don't you dare fly away from me!"

"Wait!" IF yelled.

"Nep-Nep, come back!" Compa shouted.

"Neptune...Urk!"

Sora tried to give chase, only to stumble back down.

"Sora!" Donald cried out.

"Don't try to move!" Goofy said.

"But...!"

Riku, however, said nothing and left the area.

"Where are you going?" IF demanded from the silver-haired boy.

"Off to do what I have to" Riku said offhandly. "Noire is already doing the same"

"What do you mean?" Donald demanded.

"She wanted this to happen" Riku answered. "She wanted Neptune to be the one she was looking for, and she got it. Now, I'm off to get Kairi..."

"Riku..." Sora tried to call out, but stumbled again.

And thus, his best friend left without even sparing a glance back.

"What's his deal?" Compa groaned.

Goofy nodded furiously. "That was very rude of him, that's for sure!"

"We can't worry about that now" IF briefed. "Right now, we need to go after Nep and Sora's Keyblade."

Donald and Goofy nodded.

"Compa, could ya look after Sora?" Goofy requested.

Compa nodded fiercely. "I would, even if you didn't tell me!"

"W-Wait" Sora pleaded. "I can keep going...Agh!"

"You have to stay put!" IF demanded. "You're in no condition to even move right now!"

"But...!"

"Sora..." Donald called out in a stern tone. "You can't help us right now"

Hearing this disheartened the young boy, probably a lot more than anyone in the area realized.

"You could've worded that better..." IF sighed. "Compa, make sure he stays put here, got it?"

Compa saluted. "Got it. He won't even move a muscle!"

Goofy patted Sora on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Sora. We'll get yer Keyblade back. Once we do, we'll catch up to Nep-Nep and we can save Kairi and Histy together! So, stay put and rest for now, okay?"

Sora didn't answer. It's as if his whole world had long crashed down...

IF sighed. "Come on, you two. Let's go"

As Sora was being escorted by Compa to be treated, he could hear someone tell him something.

"Sora...I'm sorry..."

But he didn't say anything...What could he do, not when he didn't have the Keyblade?

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

"This area should be big enough..."

Neptune, having flown away from the maddened Noire, landed in a wide, circular area. The ruins across the area should be a tell-tale of how long the place hasn't been maintained...

"Still..." the transformed girl mused. "To think Noire was that Newtype the whole time...I wonder how much this could have been avoided if I just told her I knew about CP-"

"NEPTUNE!"

...and now Noire has flown through the open hole leading into the ruins, her tunnel vision laser-focused on one woman...

"Persistent, aren't you?"

"RAAAAAAAHHHH!"

The two began to clash once more, but unlike the last times, Neptune's heart just wasn't into it.

Especially now that she knows who the Newtype really is.

"What's the matter, Neptune?" Noire taunted. "Not fighting back? Am I not worth the effort, is that it?"

"That's not it, Noire" Neptune refuted. "I just don't see the point in our feuds at all! Can't we just talk this out like adults?"

"Just shut up and fight me!" Noire charged at Neptune with all her fury. "**LACY DANCE!**"

"Shoot!"

Neptune could barely block the incoming kicks and slashes coming from Noire, but she wasn't done yet!

"Now, **DROP CRUSH**!"

She immediately followed up her attack, pushing the purple swordswoman back.

"Noire, please!" Neptune continued to beg. "This conflict is pointless! At this rate, that purple hag will...!"

"Then forget her!" Noire fought back. "This is between you and me, Neptune! You will pay for deceiving me!"

Neptune groaned. "I don't understand you! All I wanted is to find Histy and travel with my friends! Is that a problem!?"

"So" Noire said. "You're saying you don't care about yourself...about our kind...about me!?"

"I never said that!"

Despite Neptune's pleas, the other CPU tightened her grip on her weapon. "Then I'll go at it alone! JUST AS I ALWAYS HAVE!"

In her anger, Noire unleashed more of her power, and blitzed through the arena with super sonic speed!

"**INFINTY SLASH**!"

Neptune braced herself for Noire's ultimate attack.

She blocked the first hit.

She dodged the second hit.

She couldn't evade the third hit.

Then the fourth hit lands on her!

But she dodged the fifth hit on time!

Sadly, the same can't be said for the sixth hit.

"I'm not done!"

Flying up, she threw her sword down against the transformed Neptune, which resulted in the woman being hit by several sudden sword slashes!

"GAAAHHH!"

The overall force of the attack caused Neptune to kneel down in pain.

"You're strong..." Neptune said. "I suppose...this is the natural result of having used that power longer than I have..."

Noire scoffed. "Now you understand. Compared to an ordinary bumpkin like you, there's no way you can fully use that power. It is wasted on someone like you..."

Neptune is feeling a bit too tired to get up, not even bothering to refute Noire's claims. Yet her thoughts right now, reach to one person in particular.

"I hope you're still safe down there, Sora..."

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"I can't believe this!" Compa complained as she and her companion walked down the darkened hallway. "First, you followed Mr. Beast's lead and charged forward against the Heartless anyway! Then, you still have the gall to apologize to me after defying the nurse's orders to stay put!"

Sora sighed. "I know. This is reckless of me. But I can't just give up yet! Like I said before, there's still someone left for me to fight for. As long as she's not safe, I can't just mope around and wait while everyone else is out there! I gotta do something!"

Compa huffed. "And thanks to that, we are now separated from him! I can only do so much by myself, you know?"

The boy nodded. "I know. That's why I hope we can find Donald and the others ahead. Once we get back together, we'll find a way to get to Neptune and then Kairi."

The nurse sighed. "Okay, fine. Just don't get too injured, alright. We're not throwing our lives away after we've come so far together!"

He nodded with a smile. "I won't. Thanks, Compa"

As the duo entered the hall, they came across a horrifying sight!

"Donald! Goofy!"

"Iffy!"

Compa immediately rushed over to the guild agent's side.

"Still not giving up, are you?" a familiar voice taunted them.

The duo looked up the nearby fountain to see Riku, now dressed in a blue bodysuit with a modified Heartless symbol on it and a white skirt (I'm not joking), sitting there while the rest of the party was knocked out all over the hall.

"No!" Sora declared. "Not without Kairi!"

"The darkness will destroy you!"

He jumped down the fountain to approach them.

"The darkness may destroy my body, but it can't touch my heart!" Sora dared. "The light in my heart is strong. It will never die!"

"Is that so?" Riku then launched a fireball made of darkness against his best friend! "We'll just see about that!"

Sora braced himself for the worst as the Dark Firaga closes in on him...

"Sora, no!"

Compa immediately moved in to shield the boy from harm, but then...

"Hm?"

...the fireball was blocked by a valiant shield!

"Sora's not going anywhere!"

"Goofy?"

"How's this for a **Fire**!?"

Riku then noticed a **Firaga** aimed at his way, and swatted it off him.

But that was just a distraction as a thunder glyph appeared under him, causing him to hop out of the way.

"We're not...done yet...!"

"Donald...Goofy...IF..."

Sora smiled at the sight of his three friends, now up and in front, ready to defend him.

"What are you even doing here, Sora!?" Donald scolded the boy.

"I thought we told you to stay back!" IF joined in on the scolding.

"You could've gotten really hurt, y'know?" Goofy said with more worry in his tone.

"That's what I keep telling him..." Compa complained as she returned to the group.

Sora chuckled, despite it all. "Yeah. I know, but..."

"You're hurt!" Sora shouted as the Beast tried to stand.

"You shouldn't be moving around too much!" Compa yelled.

"I...appreciate the aid." the Beast said. "But someone important to me is still held in there."

Said Beast then stood up and continued to limp forward despite his injuries.

"So long as I can move, I will keep going. So long as I can breathe, I will fight!"

"So long as you can move, huh?" Sora thought aloud as he remembered what Neptune said back when they first met.

"Ooooghhhhh, what do I do?" the nurse bemoaned, turning to her friend for aid... "Sora, please tell him to stop!"

"I'm going too"

But he stood up and joined the Beast instead, Wooden Sword in hand!

"Whaaaaaaaaat!?" Compa yelled, completely flabbergasted at the turn of events in front of her!

"Hm?" the Beast hummed, turning his head to his new companion

"There's someone important to me that I can't lose too, and I don't want us to stay separated!" Sora declared with gusto. "Not for one more second!"

The Beast nodded, taking note of his resolve. "I see. Then let's go"

"Right!"

"Ooooghhhhh, now Sora's going too!" Compa complained as she packed up her stuff. "Fine, I'm coming with you! But you better not complain to me if your injuries act up!"

"I couldn't just sit still, not while Neptune's out there fighting and Kairi's still there, waiting for us." Sora started, looking down in shame. "I know I'll get in your way, but I just couldn't sit around twiddling my thumbs while you're all out there, getting hurt without me or Compa to help out..."

Goofy felt touched by Sora's statement. "Sora..."

IF sighed. "There's only so much reckless acts you can do before we all get hurt..."

The boy sighed. "I know..."

"But..." Donald continued. "We're glad you're here with us, Sora. Thank you."

"Donald..."

Sora couldn't help but chuckle. "I should be the one saying thanks to you guys, for sticking with me all the way."

"Of course we would!" Compa declared proudly. "We're a party now, and a party sticks together forever!"

"All for one and one for all, right?" IF recalled.

Hearing this, Sora, Donald and Goofy nodded with gusto.

Seeing this disgusted Riku, who growled at the sight...

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

Neptune slowly got up, using her sword as to support her stand.

"So, you still stand?" Noire huffed. "What can you do by yourself? Between you and me, I have more experience fighting in this form, and without your friends, you can barely stay standing! What makes you think you can keep fighting?"

The transformed woman chuckled. "True, I can't hold a candle to you in our HDD forms. If we were to keep fighting, I would most certainly lose. But there's one thing you got wrong about me, Noire."

Noire raised an eyebrow at her opponent, who simply placed her free hand onto her heart.

"Even if I am by myself, I am never alone, for they are here with me, in my heart"

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"How will you fight without a weapon?" the silver-haired boy demanded.

"You know, I realized something." Sora started. "I don't need the Keyblade! I got a better weapon, my heart!"

Riku laughed. "Your heart? What good will that weak little thing do for you?"

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

"What does your heart have to do with your confidence?" Noire demanded.

"More than you would now understand" Neptune answered back.

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"Although my heart is weak, it's not alone. It's grown with each new experience. And it's found a home with all the friends I made. Not just here, but in every world we've been to..."

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

"Meeting new people, going on adventures with them, fighting with them shoulder to shoulder. The experiences we share with them help us grow and shape the people we are today..."

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins/Entrance Hall

"I've become a part of their hearts, just as they have become a part of mine..."

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"And if they think of me every now and then, as long as we remember each other, then our hearts will be one!"

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

"...So long as we keep them in our thoughts and us in theirs, our hearts will remain connected, as if we are one."

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall/Chapel Ruins

Sora brings out the Wooden Sword, even in the face of his best friend who still has the Keyblade.

"I don't need a weapon..."

"Nor do I need the power of a CPU or any Goddess..."

Sora/Neptune's face is filled with determination, even against the odds.

"MY FRIENDS ARE MY POWER!"

After their declarations, something amazing happened.

"Huh? Wha?"

"Huh!?"

The Keyblade, once held in Riku's hand, vanished and reemerged onto Sora's!

"Sora!" Goofy cheered.

"That's more like it!" Donald said with gusto.

"The Keyblade chooses its wielder" Compa recalled. "And it chose Sora again!"

IF smirked. "Right where it belongs..."

As Sora felt the weapon in his grip, he felt something warm coming his way. "You seeing this, Neptune?"

Meanwhile, Neptune began to glow brighter.

"Wha-What's happening!?" Noire demanded.

"This power..." Neptune said, trying to feel more of it. "I feel it. The feelings and thoughts of my closest friends. They are giving me strength!"

"I-Impossible!" Noire shouted, her eyes as wide as saucers.

Neptune smiled as she felt something warm in her. "I feel you too, Sora..."

The other CPU growled. "Goddesses like us shouldn't consort with those beneath us! To do so is a sign of weakness! I won't accept this!"

The transformed heroine sighed. "So that's how you feel. Fine then..."

As the glowing aura around her faded, Neptune readies her battle stance once more, her vigor and determination restored.

"Come, Noire! I'll come at you with everything we've got!"

Riku/Noire growled in anger...

"You're saying...it rejected me..." Riku started. "...that the Keyblade chose a weak heart like his!?"

"Such a power doesn't exist..." Noire shouted, refusing to believe at what's in front of her. "That goes against everything a CPU stands for!"

"Fine!" Riku/Noire declared, readying his/her battle stance. "I'll show you my full power!"

Sora/Neptune braced for the worst, but with their friends at their side, they cannot afford to lose!

Chapter End Notes

Hoo-ey! Here we are, at the climax of this story, and Purple Heart (who, to remind you, will not be called as such in-story...for now) has finally made her appearance! One thing I can talk about this chapter is the power scaling between Neptune and Noire here. In the Neptunia games, Neptune/Purple Heart is constantly known to be a really powerful CPU (even if her nation is CONSTANTLY on the lowest in the Share scale), so much so that whenever the other CPU's are fighting each other, their preferred strategy is to try to take out Purple Heart first. But in this story, Noire has been battling Arfoire's enhanced Heartless about everyday in her HDD form, while Neptune has been relying on her teamwork to help her win her battles and never even KNEW she had an HDD form until recently. However, since KH is known to have power boosts from the Power of Friendship (Aqua is prime example of this), Neptune is able to gain a similar power boost here. The reason why she and Sora are able to get this power boost will be explained later in the story, but if you were paying attention, you'd have a good idea for the reason why.

Anyway, since this chapter and the next are split into parts again, there won't be a Nepstation broadcast until the last part of the chapter. So, I'll see you all then!

Chapter 16: Chapter 13.3: Scherzo (Chaos) at Night

Chapter Summary

> The fight is on! As rivals and goddesses waged battle, the truth begins to dawn ever closer to all those involved...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

"Ready?" Neptune dashed forward. "Then here I come! **VARIABLE EDGE**!"

"**TRI-COLOR ORDER!**"

The two clashed, and this time, Neptune is faring a lot better now.

"She's pushing me back!?" Noire said in disbelief. "Curse her and her newfound power!"

The clash ended in Neptune's favor as she pushed the white-haired CPU back.

"Now, taste this!" Neptune's blade then filled with wind magic. "**WIND SLICER**!"

The attack hit, sending the transformed Noire further back. "Blast! How is she this strong!?"

"I'm not done yet!"

Neptune took a step back and primed her blade...

"That stance...Is she going for a Cross Combination? Or a Critical Edge?"

"Here goes...**SONIC BLADE**!"

Noire's eyes widened at that! "What!?"

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

Sora executed his Sonic Blade move against Riku, leaving him defenseless as he attempted to recover from Sora's dash attacks.

"He didn't pull that move when we were on the islands..." Riku mumbled to himself.

"COMIN' THROUGH!"

Riku looked to his side to see Goofy charging right at him with his shield.

"This again!?"

Instead of dodging to the side, he met the charge head on!

"Will you ever learn your lesson!?"

Riku charged a **Dark Firaga** on his hand, which he unleashed upon the royal captain, pushing him back against his charge!

"He's not the only one you're fighting!"

Upon hearing that nasally declaration, thunder bolts started raining down the halls due to Donald's **Thundaga** magic.

"You're a nuisance!"

Riku sprinted past the lightning bolts and scored a hit against the duck, knocking him down.

"Right where I want you..."

An Aero glyph appeared beneath Riku...

"Shoot!"

"**GUSTY WINDS**!"

...which sent Riku up flying in the air!

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

As Noire recovered from that last attack, she is left to her thoughts.

"How can this be!?" Noire thought aloud. "How can Neptune have access to Sora's skills? Could that new power have something to do with it?"

"How's this? **THUNDARA**!"

Neptune then channeled magic into her sword, sending thunder bolts across the arena.

"She's even using her magic like he does! Is this also her new power!?"

Noire gritted her teeth, coming out of hiding and dashing straight for her opponent!

"You won't get past me! **TORNERAID CHAIN**!"

"**DEFENSE**!"

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"So, what will you do now, Sora?"

As Sora pulled back, he looked around to see Donald, Goofy and IF knocked out from the fight. Thankfully, Sora managed to keep himself and Compa safe with timely Aerora shields, but they won't last.

"Your friends are out cold now. Now, you're defenseless!"

"Not yet!"

Riku looked to his side in a panic as he felt a **Paralysis Shot** to his face, sending him back paralyzed.

"Sora!"

He nodded, wreathing his Keyblade with Fire magic!

"**BLAZE BREAK**!"

"What!?" A direct hit! Riku was now pushed back. "GAH!"

Compa took the chance and rushed to the boy's side.

"Shall we?"

"Yes!"

Channeling magic into his Keyblade, Sora prepares a special spell...

"May our strength..."

"May our feelings..."

Compa follows his lead by channeling healing magic into her hands, extending them out to empower Sora's spell.

"Reach out to them!"

A bright light enveloped the room, casting a mighty healing magic that restores the life and even some magic power for Sora and all his friends.

"Oh yeah!" Donald cheered.

"We're back!" Goofy declared.

"Time for round two!" IF exclaimed.

Including the ones that were knocked out earlier! This is Sora and Compa's Combination Skill, **Light's Miracle**!

"You're kidding!" Riku complained. "And after all that effort, too!"

"It'll take more than what you have to defeat us!" Donald boasted.

"We'll keep gettin' up as many times as we have to!" Goofy declared.

"So, face the facts here, Riku" IF called out.

"You have already lost!" Compa finished.

"No..." Riku answered with a clenched fist. "Not yet. I haven't lost yet! I won't lose to the likes of you!"

"Then..."

Sora took a step back and primed his stance.

"What move will you make this time?"

"Just this! **CROSS COMBINATION**!"

Riku's eyes widened at that! "What!?"

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

Neptune executed her ten-hit combo, each hit being met with sword clashes.

"You're keeping up!" Neptune complimented her opponent.

"I won't give in!" Noire declared. "I won't lose to a bumbling moron like you!"

"Is that how you think of me?" Neptune sighed. "Really now, Noire, I thought you were more mature than that."

"Shut up and focus on the fight! **TORNERAID SWORD**!"

Noire broke through the combo with her own technique. This did not deter Neptune, however.

"I'm not done! **STRIKE RAID**!"

Neptune threw her sword right at Noire, forcing her to block it!

"I've already dealt with this move, Neptune!" Noire boasted.

But instead of throwing the sword again, Neptune suddenly teleported to where the sword was...

"Wha-"

...which was right in front of Noire!

"She teleported!? How did she do that!?"

"Gotcha! **CRITICAL EDGE**!"

Neptune took the chance and hit the exposed Noire with her technique, knocking her back down with heavy force!

"Drat!" Noire shouted. "Am I going to lose? Me, who has done so much by herself!?"

"Noire..."

"Stop looking at me with that face!" Noire shouted louder. "That face full of pity and shame!"

She then took a step back and readied her final attack once more.

Neptune sighed at the sight. "Will this truly be the only way to get to you, Noire? Fine..."

She then did the same and readied her next attack.

"Ready to die, Neptune!?"

"Not yet! I still have much to do and friends to come back to! I won't die here! *If she's going for that technique again, I may have to pull out the big guns. Time to see if I can remember how to do this...*"

"**INFINITE SLASH**!"

"Here goes...!"

As Noire rushed in with her ultimate technique, Neptune, still aglow with energy, met each blow with dashes of her own!

"What!? She's meeting all my blows!?"

"HAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

The clashes continued, however by the end of the sixth clash...

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"How!?" Riku yelled. "Those techniques earlier were hers, weren't they!? How are you using them!?"

"I don't know" Sora admitted, putting a hand to his heart. "But I can feel her. Neptune's out there fighting, too. Just as she's fighting here with us, we are there fighting with her! That's what makes us strong!"

He then charged forth, ice magic imbued onto his weapon. "**FROST CRUSHER**!"

"You're joking..." Riku denied as he was pushed back. "How could you beat me!? You've never even won against our matches back on the island!"

"True. I couldn't" Sora said. "But WE can!"

"Goofy!"

Riku looked at the two walking animals as Donald imbued Goofy's shield with Thunder magic!

"HERE GOES!"

The royal captain wasted no time and led another charge against the dark-wielding Riku with their Goofy Elements.

"Why you!?"

Riku met the dog's attack head-on, leading to a clash of wills!

"I can take...on the both of you!"

"Both of us?"

Goofy's confused statement caused Riku to notice something strange.

Where's the duck!?

"We got you now!"

At the corner of his eye, he can see Donald and Compa preparing their Combination Skill against him!

"**TREATMENT BLASTER**!"

"Shoot!"

With Goofy holding him up, Riku couldn't move to dodge the incoming attack, causing him a great deal of pain.

"AAAAAGGGGHHHHH!"

Goofy moved back as soon as the blast hit their opponent, keeping an eye on his damaged, kneeling form.

"...!"

But underneath him is a a glyph of light that suddenly formed!

"O angel of light...grant this weary soul the rest he deserves!"

It was IF, preparing her latest technique!

"**LA DELPHINUS**!"

A pillar of light shone from the glyph, sending the dark-wielder flying up in the air in pain!

"I can't lose...I won't lose!"

And as he slowly descended, he could see his best friend primed for one last strike, spinning his Keyblade back all the while...

"Here goes...My one-hit finisher..."

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

Noire positioned herself up in the air while Neptune opted to return to the ground.

"How!?" Noire ranted. "How are you able to meet my attacks head-on!? What is that technique!?"

"Honestly, I do not know" Neptune replied. "From what Iffy told me, I used this move subconsciously. But now that I am fully aware of it, I think I'll call this move...**Neptune Break**!"

Silence filled the room for a good while...

"Okay, not the best name I've got, but I'd rather not keep it too long or my tongue will twist too much that I won't be able to eat pudding ever again..." Neptune sighed.

Noire groaned. "No, that's not...ugh, enough! I will end this!"

She then threw her sword against Neptune. Anticipating that Noire would finish her Infinite Slash, the transformed Neptune threw up her sword, caught it and deflected the incoming blade...

"Impossible!"

"Time to finish this!"

...and then flew right past Noire, slashing her!

"AGH!"

"This is..."

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall/Chapel Ruins

"...THE END!"

From his/her position, Sora/Neptune proceeded to slash through Riku/Noire with their techniques, **Zantetsuken** for Sora and finishing her **Neptune Break** for Neptune, ending the fight once and for all!

"No...This can't be...I'm not...done yet..." were the last thoughts Riku/Noire had before he/she fell to the ground.

Sora/Neptune sighed in relief. "It's over...Riku/Noire"

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

Sora approached the fallen Riku, his friends right behind him.

"C'mon, Riku" Sora extended his hand to his best friend, whose outfit reverted back to his old one. "Let's go find Kairi...together"

Riku looked up to see his best friends, and with his own hand...

Sora smiled for a moment...

...swatted the hand away and ran off without a word, anger and frustration painted all over his features.

"Riku..."

"Aw, phoeey! He's been spurning you ever since we met back at the whale..." Donald complained. "Why do you keep going out of your way for him? He doesn't think you're his friend anymore."

"Well..." Sora looked to the hand that was swatted away. "I...just couldn't abandon him like that...Even after everything we've been through lately, I still consider him my friend"

"Sora..." Compa cried.

"Well, judging by his words..." IF inferred. "He must've been lied to regarding you, probably by Maleficent or Arfoire or even both."

"My munny's more likely on Maleficent!" the royal wizard guessed. "Arfoire seems dead set on dealing with Neptune, judging by how she kept isolating her."

"Yeah!" Goofy agreed. "We should get Maleficent to fess up about what she told Riku. Then we can tell him the truth!"

The nurse nodded. "It's just like my grandpa said. 'Never give no manipulative witch the benefit of doubt'. Let's capture her and make her confess!"

Donald sweatdropped. "Your grandfather's...kind of a wild guy, huh?"

The boy nodded. "Still, that sounds like a good plan to me! But first, let's meet up with Neptune."

"I hope she's okay..." Goofy said with worry.

"I'm worried about Nep-Nep too..." Compa followed with her own face of worry.

"I don't think we have much to worry about" IF said confidently.

"Even though she just turned into a different lady?" Donald asked.

"I'm a bit iffy on that." IF said, silently chuckling to herself. "But Nep's a quick learner. I'm sure she'll do fine."

Sora nodded again. "If I know her, she'd probably be working her way down to meet with us, even if her transformation ran out on her for some reason."

IF laughed. "That girl hates staying still when it's not nap-time, after all"

Suddenly the door behind them slammed open, revealing the Beast, who is uninjured.

"Mr. Beast!" Compa waved to the hulking man. "Up here!"

He looked up to see the young boy, rejoined with his companions and his lost weapon.

"So" the Beast started. "Your heart won this battle"

Sora nodded. While the current battle has ended. their trek into the large, lumbering castle has only just begun...

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

"So...I lost..."

Noire stared up at the sight of her opponent, that of the transformed Neptune. Her hands still gripped on her sword that was planted right next to Noire's head.

"..." Neptune didn't say anything, instead just continued to stare at Noire.

"It's not fair..." Noire complained as tears leaked out of her teal eyes. "I didn't ask for this power or have people like that hag as company!"

"Noire..."

The white-haired woman laughed bitterly. "It was tough, you know? When I first came to, I didn't have any idea where I was. All I knew was that my name is Noire and that I held this weird black key with me. As I walked around this castle, I ended up fighting some of the Heartless, and then a woman came and helped me out."

Neptune nodded, releasing her hands from her blade and sat down right beside her fellow CPU.

"She told me that I seemed familiar to her, that she may know who and what I am, so she offered me a deal. I help her with what she seeks, and she will tell me what she knows about me, or rather, my kind."

"What did she ask from you?"

Noire sighed. "Not much. She sent me out to some worlds to gather materials, though she wouldn't tell me what she plans to do with them. Other times, she asked me to deal with some errant Heartless around the castle, including some with stronger auras."

"Arfoire's doing, no doubt..." Neptune guessed.

"I didn't figure that out at first." the other CPU admitted. "Though at one point, while I was scouting, I noticed her doing something strange to one of the Heartless around here. And sure enough, a while later, I was asked by her to deal with it. That's when I realized I couldn't trust her. That's what established the ideal to me that CPU's must face their problems alone, that no one beneath her can be truly trusted."

"Hence, the words you said back in Wonderland"

"Thinking back on that, I may have said some bad stuff to Compa and the others, didn't I? I'll apologize to them for that later..." Noire said, placing an arm on her eyes. "Anyway, later on, I happen to meet up with a young boy named Riku. He seemed aloof, closed-off, saying only one person cares for him now. That's when I figured that either the hag or Maleficent must've lied to him about something, but I didn't know what his problem was."

"He seems convinced that Sora has betrayed him..." Neptune nodded. "But Sora would never betray his friends!"

"So, I figured..." Noire replied. "That's why I try to be around him as much as possible. You noticed that when we were in the whale. But then, Arfoire continued to send me after more Heartless while Maleficent kept Riku close to her along with Kairi."

"Why did you go along with it?" Neptune wondered. "You don't have to do what she says"

"If I don't, then she'll have Maleficent banish me and I wouldn't be able to monitor Riku then." Noire answered. "Besides, some of those Heartless she enhanced were sent to other worlds. If I wasn't there, then more worlds would've been in danger and you guys might've had a harder time getting here."

Neptune nodded, accepting the answer for now. "I see..."

"Eventually, it became too much...I became desperate..." Noire cried. "So desperate that I began to believe in what that hag said about you...about you being a CPU like me. I went to confirm that when I heard you were in Halloween Town, but then..."

"I didn't transform when we dueled..." Neptune recalled bitterly. "And then you rejected me..."

Noire sighed. "Thinking back, I must've jumped to conclusions too soon, but then, it never crossed my mind to focus on your defensive impulses..."

"Defensive impulses?"

"The drive to defend what's dear to you" the white-haired woman clarified. "The hag pressed on that during her fight with you before, and then Riku did the same just a moment ago. That's what caused you to transform, to tap into your HDD form."

"The drive to defend what's dear to me..." the purple-haired woman parroted as she placed a hand onto her heart. "...So that's what this was, huh?"

Noire laughed bitterly. "All this time, you've been a CPU like me, but you couldn't know about it. How would you, after all when even I didn't know until that hag told me. And for all I didn't believe you to be one, all it took was for you to defend me to prove me wrong."

She continued to laugh as more tears leaked from her eyes.

"Noire..."

"I suppose...this is what I get for being such a loner...for trying to do everything on my own...So pathetic..."

Neptune approached the white-haired woman more closely, propped her up and proceeded to hug her.

"Wha-" Noire said, caught by surprise as her heartbeat began to increase. "What are you?"

"You've been suffering all this time, haven't you?"

Nore kept silent...

"All this time, all you needed was someone to be with you. Someone you can relate to. Someone you can speak to, share laughs and tears with, all those things."

Noire sniffed. "Is that so?"

Neptune nodded. "You sought me for that. You sought Riku because you see yourself in him. All this time, all you wanted was a friend."

"A...friend..."

Neptune chuckled, looking to her fellow CPU. "But aren't we friends already? Though it was brief, I enjoyed our little time together back in Traverse Town. We don't need fancy things like Goddess powers or Keyblades to be friends."

"R-Really?" Noire stuttered.

The transformed woman nodded, putting one of her hands onto her heart. "Even if I had known about these powers before, I would still be happy travelling with Sora, Compa, Iffy, Donald and Goofy together. I would never trade the times we had together for anything."

Noire looked at Neptune in awe. All this time, she aspired to be the best CPU she thought possible. For Noire, it meant taking in all the burdens by herself, so others wouldn't have to suffer and be able to enjoy life. However, for Neptune, she enjoyed her life being in the company of others, laughing with them, crying with them, and just enjoying the time they spent together. In a way, Neptune was different from the ideal image of a great CPU, a great goddess, to her.

Perhaps that's why part of her never accepted how carefree Neptune is. Not only is her attitude unbecoming of that of a dignified being like a Console Patron Unit (as far as Noire knew, anyway), her ability to make friends and enjoy life with them made it seem like she's sharing her burdens with them and they to her as well, and as someone who should be the only one bearing those burdens, that ideal was unacceptable.

But...

"So, what say you, Noire?" Neptune asked. "Can we still be friends?"

Ah.

There's her heart, beating again. Even now that she knows that Neptune's a CPU like her, she never felt that heartbeat until just a while ago. Is it really not because she's a CPU, but rather because she's...just plain Neptune, even in this form?

"Or is it...you can only accept me while I'm in this form? Is my plain, cute and tiny self not enough for you?"

Noire shook her head fiercely. "N-No, that's not it! I'd never sa-Oh..."

She looked down in shame, recalling the time she rejected her back in Halloween Town.

"Neptune..." Noire called out. "Listen, I..."

Only for her to gasp in horror as a looming figure approaches her fellow CPU from behind!

"NEPTUNE! BEHIND YOU!"

The moment Neptune had her back turned, she was suddenly pulled away, and the next she knew, she was down on the ground while Noire was held up by the neck by a familiar face!

"Haa-hahahahaha! I swear, you dumb goddesses make this so easy for me!"

Neptune growled "Arsnore!"

'Arsnore' growled back. "FOR THE LAST TIME NEPTUNE, IT'S AR-FOIRE! WILL YOU EVER GET MY NAME RIGHT!?"

Neptune got up and readied her sword. "Let Noire go!"

"I'm afraid not" Arfoire replied snidely. "Now that the both of you are worn down, I'll come in and claim my prize!"

"Why you-" Noire growled. "This was your aim all along, wasn't it?"

"Oh?"

"Wearing me down and dropping my guard through those menial tasks" Noire continued. "You were hoping to strike at me when I'm at my most vulnerable, aren't you?"

Arfoire snickered. "True, up to a certain point"

"What do you mean?"

"It's true that there's something I desire from you" Arfoire admitted. "But then, I discovered Neptune's existence, and then thought to myself a brilliant idea to knock two birds with one stone. So, I told you about her and the possibility that she's a CPU to get you two to fight against each other."

She then laughed. "And it worked perfectly!"

"You figured I was a CPU?" Neptune wondered as she glared at the witch. "Then the crystal that Riku was using..."

"Yes! I made that to draw out your HDD form, Neptune!" Arfoire shouted. "I figured out how you were able to draw that power, so I made that Anti-Crystal from the materials Noire here oh-so-helpfully provided for me in order to attack you by targeting the energy stored inside your being. The confirmation was just icing on the cake. But rest assure, I can only make one of those, not that I need more."

"Then what about Noire?" Neptune demanded. "You welcomed her into this castle. You provided her with what you know. Why would you put her through so much suffering!? Why do you keep sending her against those Heartless you messed with? What does she have that you would want!?"

Noire continued to glare at the witch.

"Ah, that" Arfoire recalled. "As I told you, I needed her to acquire her power, but she was too weak when we first met, so I needed to make her strong. Any weaker and her power is useless to me"

"Hence all the Heartless sent her way..." Neptune then realized something. "Then why not do the same to me?"

"I don't have to" Arfoire answered confidently. "With all the Heartless and villains in your way, you'll be able to get stronger without my prodding. Though obviously, I need to check in every now and then to make sure you are progressing smoothly."

"Is that..." Noire managed to say. "Another reason why you sent me against her? Just to see...how strong we've become!?"

The witch snickered. "That wasn't the only reason, Noire..."

Noire's eyes widened in realization. "You don't mean..."

"Haa-hahahahaha! That's right!" Arfoire laughed. "I not only set things up to ensure that you would seek her out and fight her, but by wearing you down, you began to feel desperate. You desire for company like hers that she would seek you out even without my prompting. People naturally desire companionship, especially in hours of strife. The people in Gamindustri have demonstrated as such."

"Gamindustri..." Neptune murmured. "You know of that world?"

"Naturally" Arfoire declared. "I was one such resident in that world."

"You...remembered?" Neptune said slowly. "How is that possible?"

Arfoire chuckled. "All in due time, dear. Going back to Noire here..."

The witch tightened her hold on the weakened CPU. "I wore down Noire here with the intent of taking her powers for my own. Once she became strong enough, I had to wear her down since she kept her guard up at all times, but between seeking you out and being beaten over and over by you and the Heartless, her defenses eventually wore down..."

She then brought Noire closer to her face. "What was that you kept saying to yourself? 'A CPU must be alone' 'They must act dignified and bear the burden on their own'. And yet, you desire Neptune's companionship and stewardship over Maleficent's toy. What a model CPU you are. Haa-hahahahahaha!"

If not for Arfoire's hold over her, Noire could just run off to a corner and cry over her own weakness. Her own self-made doctrine that she made to defend herself from the unknown and her own growing desire for friends has now weakened her to the point that this...witch will now steal the very essence that defines her being!

"Now that I have let this all out, any last words, Goddess Noire?"

Instead, all she could do is glare at the witch in defiance and even spat on her foot for good measure!

"Go slink back into the darkness, witch!"

Arfoire glared back at her in turn. "Then you have sealed your fate..."

She then began to exert energy as Noire screamed.

"No! Noire!"

Neptune attempted to rush over to her, but the overwhelming amount of energy exerted was too much for the transformed Keyblade wielder, and she was forced to brace herself on the spot, all the while her fellow CPU's screams haunted her ears and mind.

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

"HAA-HAHAHAHAHAHA!" Arfoire laughed mightily. "Now your power is mine!"

A good thirteen seconds have passed, and the energy dissipated. Noire, with her power drained, reverted out of her Hard Drive Divinity and back to her bruised, human form and her Keyblade dissipated into her rapier, it's wielder sapped of her strength.

"YES!" Arfoire shouted as she summoned her lance and morphed it into a large sword. "This makes three! Only one to go and my goal is nearly complete!"

She then gazed upon the nearly-unconscious Noire.

"I no longer have need of you now"

The witch then threw the drained CPU to the side, causing her to fall into a thud.

"NOIRE! Please, speak to me!"

Neptune immediately dashed to Noire, cradling her weakened form filled with bruises and heavy finger marks on her neck.

"Nep...tune..."

The weakened girl could barely open her eyes, gazing upon the majestic yet worried CPU in front of her.

"Noire!" Neptune pleaded. "Please, save your strength! I'll get us to Compa! She'll treat you, I know it!"

Her sight is fading, yet Noire managed to give out a smile...

"I'm...sor...ry...I...hurt...you...Please...for...give...me..."

As soon as she spoke, she passed out like a light...

"Noire...Noire!" Neptune shook her fellow CPU to wake her, but there was no response...

"NOIRE!"

Arfoire chuckled at the sight. "How sad. The foolish CPU, brought down by her own hubris..."

Admist her tears, Neptune turned to the witch, her face and heart filled with rage.

"...And now, you're next, Neptune!"

Neptune growled louder and louder, until...

"Shut up..."

"Huh?"

...the CPU was glowing bright again!

"I SAID SHUT UP!"

Suddenly, the evil witch was surrounded by several spectral swords. She was trapped!

"Impossible!" Arfoire gasped. "You still have this much strength!? You should be worn down just like that fool Noire!"

"You dare to hurt her..." Neptune spoke, her bangs covering her eyes. "You dare to steal her power and ruin her pride..."

As the CPU stood, gently laying Noire down, more and more spectral blades surrounded Arfoire, leaving her with no room to run!

"...You will pay..."

She then raised her sword...

"...WITH YOUR LIFE!"

...and upon lowering it, the spectral blades converged upon the evil witch, piercing through her like a piñata!

"GAAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

The damage done to her was so severe that most of her dress is ruined, her hat punctured and the buckle holding the giant tome she's been carrying has been broken, leaving it lying on the floor...

"Curse you..." Arfoire growled at the approaching Neptune, trying to get up. "...Curse you!"

Once she made it near her, Neptune glared at her for a good three seconds before raising her sword against her.

"...Fall..."

"*Neptune, stop!*"

The sword landed right next to Arfoire's head, inches away from killing her!

"Histy?" Neptune whispered.

"*There's no time, Neptune!*" Histoire warned. "*You must flee from here immediately! The Heartless are coming!"*

Neptune gritted her teeth. "But what about Noire?"

"*She's alive, Neptune*"

Hearing this caused a gasp to leave the transformed woman's lips.

"She's still alive?"

"*Yes! Now hurry!*" Histoire urged. "*Grab that tome right next to Arfoire, and fly away with Noire immediately!*"

Neptune had half a mind to ask where Histy is, but right now, she's not at the best of states and the Heartless could be here any moment!

"Got it!"

Grabbing both her sword and the tome, Neptune made a break for Noire.

"You won't escape!"

But one glare from the CPU's glowing eyes caused more spectral swords to appear around the evil witch, halting her advance!

"Why you...!"

"Come on, Noire"

Neptune carried the unconscious CPU's form like a princess and placed the tome on said CPU's arm, allowing Neptune to carry Noire on her left arm while keeping her sword on the right.

"I know I'm asking much, but please hold on that tome tight" Neptune whispered to Noire. "A friend of mine asked for it after all."

"Fr...iend..."

Upon saying that, Noire started tugging the tome tightly.

Neptune smiled at the sight, glad that at least Noire's still alive. "You really are alive, aren't you? Thank you, Noire"

Eyeing the open hole she just entered from, Neptune flew off from the premises and back out into the open.

Despite the predicament she is in, Arfoire could only laugh. "Fly while you can, Neptune. So long as you have unfinished business here, you'll be back. And then, I'll finally have what's rightfully mine...Haa-hahahahahaha!"

Hollow Bastion – Great Crest

"How long is this ride gonna take?" Sora asked impatiently as he and the party, accompanied by the Beast, are taking an elevator heading eastward into the castle.

"Try asking the ones who made this castle that" IF answered, feeling a bit annoyed at the boy's impatience.

"I can understand why he's so anxious, though" Compa said. "I'm worried about Nep-Nep too"

"Are you sure you're okay, Sora?" Donald asked. "You've been clutching your chest for a good while back there..."

Sora nodded. "Yeah. I felt my heart aching all of a sudden, like...it was hit with a thunderstorm, but then it calmed down..."

IF hummed. "That was pretty odd. *Not to mention the fact that you were glowing and had Nep's eyes for a moment there, but that can wait.* Could something have happened to Nep and Noire?"

"Doesn't she wield the same weapon as yours?" the Beast asked. "That Neptune you kept talking about?"

"Yup!" Goofy answered. "She's a Keyblade wielder like Sora here!"

"Those two are basically inseparable since we all met. I can see why he'd worry about her so much" Donald remarked as he looked out the elevator for any suspicious signs. "Hey, I see something"

"What is it?" the boy with the key asked.

"Over there!"

IF pointed towards the top of the broken Heartless emblem decorating the castle, spotting a figure flying out of the hole.

"Someone's flying out!" the nurse described. "And they're carrying someone with them!"

"It's a woman" the Beast noticed.

"A woman?"

Sora gasped, looking closer at the figure.

"It's Neptune!"

"Now then, where can we land...?"

Flying out, Neptune scanned around the area to see a possible place to land and rest.

"...!"

However, several Heartless, which took the shape of red winged beasts, called Wyverns, and giant floating heads of darkness, called Darkballs, block her way out.

"Looks like they're here already!" Neptune growled. "I don't have time for this!"

In her anger, she summoned several spectral swords from the sky and with a wave of her sword, rained down upon the flock of flying Heartless, disintegrating them.

However, Neptune's breathing became heavier and her sight is getting worse...

"Not good..."

"*You mustn't be so reckless with your energy usage!*" Histoire scolded. "*At this rate, you might end up running out to maintain this form and fall down!*"

Neptune shuddered from the thought. No one has to remind her how deadly fall damage is. "You're right. But where can we lay low?"

She looked around, left and right, in search of such a place. Luckily, her salvation came from her right.

A large, circular area with a small passageway that leads further into the castle!

"There!"

Wasting no time, Neptune begins flying to her new destination with due haste, making sure to keep Noire tightly held...

"*Neptune, dodge!*"

Instinctively taking Histoire's advice, Neptune rolled to the left, seeing a blizzard spell that just flew past her!

"What!?"

She looked behind, and saw flying beings with pointy hats and small wands and even soldiers equipped with mini-copters and small gliders, closing in on her! The **Wizard** and **Air Soldier** Heartless have come!

"More of them!?"

"*There's so many of them!*" Histy cried. "*At this rate, they'll chase us to your destination!*"

Neptune clicked her tongue. This isn't good at all!

Unless...

"I have an idea, Histy!"

"*Is it a good idea?*"

"Not sure. But as long as it works...!"

"*Are you sure about this!?*"

"Who knows? But, Histy, can you at least tell me how close they are to me?"

"*Not physically, but I can still read their signatures. I'll tell you once they get close!*"

"Good. Now, let's fly!"

Picking up the pace, she flew faster to the open area. Meanwhile, the squadron of Air Soldiers and Wizards began to give chase to the errant Goddess, determined to bring her down!

"Just a little closer...!" Neptune hoped as she dodged the incoming attacks from the Air Soldiers.

"*I hope your plan works!*"

She then swerved to dodge incoming lightning bolts. "Me too...!"

The area is looking closer and closer by the second, and by the second, her sight's getting blurrier and blurrier.

"Please...Just a little more...At least until Noire and Histy are safe...!"

The pack of flying Heartless is drawing closer and closer as Neptune drew nearer to the open area!

"*Neptune, they're getting closer now!*"

The CPU smirked. "Good"

As the Heartless drew closer, some of them suddenly stopped as they gazed above the run-away Goddess, noticing something forming above her.

A giant spectral sword aimed squarely at them!

"NOW!"

The spectral sword dropped down on the Heartless at Neptune's declaration, wiping out the whole squadron in a large blast!

"*Incredible...*" Histoire gasped. "*You waited until you reached near the open area and lined up a blast to wipe them all out in one blow! Truly amazing, Neptune!*"

Neptune huffed for breath as she landed. "It was rough. Still, that large attack deserves it's own name. How about...**32-Bit Mega Blade**?"

"*That will do!*" the heavenly voice said with haste. "*Now please set Noire down so you can rest!*"

"Will do!"

Limping to the nearby wall, she slowly set Noire down, still unconscious and gripping the large tome tightly. Thankfully, she's still breathing, albeit slowly.

"At least...you're safe...Noire..."

Suddenly, Neptune began to feel dizzy. Her vision's fading and her movement's getting wobbly.

"This is...not good..."

"*Neptune! Behind you!*"

A strange sound was heard behind her. As the transformed CPU turned, she could barely make out...something from her fading vision.

"It's blue...and large...with a shield...? Not good..."

She tried to raise her blade to fight off the incoming threat, but one lunge from said threat pushed her back.

"No...I...can't..."

As her vision faded, her eyes turned to the unconscious Noire, who is about to be attacked by the something that attacked her.

"No...Noire..."

And then her eyes went shut and her world went silent...

Chapter End Notes

And Cliffhanger!

I'm normally not one to do this, but the entire nature of this climatic chapter demanded I'd do this at least once!

Anyway, one detail a lot of you readers may have noticed was the motivation behind why Donald and Goofy still left Sora behind. In the original game, the two left him behind since the King's letter told them to stick with the Keyblade wielder, which in that case, was Riku. They then followed him out of loyalty for their King, even though they went back to Sora moments later anyway. In this case, however, they went after him to get Sora's Keyblade back, regardless of the King's orders. Furthermore, since Neptune

still technically has her Keyblade, they have no reason to leave Sora's side (this, on top of their bonding moment back in Deep Jungle, which strengthened their bond as well). That, and seeing how much of a jerk Riku is (moreso than in canon, mind you) turned them off from siding with him anyway.

Welp, see you all again soon!

Chapter 17: Chapter 13.5: The Deep End (Darkness)

Chapter Summary

> With old scores now settled, the party reconvenes, all the while the Mistress of All Evil awaits the fools who dared to ruin her plans...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

???

"Neptune..."

"No...Please...don't go...Noire..."

"Neptune, please wake up!"

"NOIRE!"

Neptune woke up in a jolt, sweat dropping from her features as she looked around the pitch-black void.

"Thank goodness, you're awake!"

"Oh!" Neptune chirped at the sound of the voice. "Heya Histy! Long time, no speak! How've ya been?"

"*Very well, thanks to you!*" the heavenly voice thanked. "*Now I'm out of that dreadful witch's clutches!*"

"Really!?" the girl in the parka said, her eyes widening. "Did someone bust you out while we were out there, raising a ruckus?"

"*Um, yes*" Histy replied. "*You did*"

"Say wha?" Neptune managed to say, her face turned to one of confusion.

Histoire sighed. "*I suppose I haven't explained that part yet either, huh.*"

"My Nep Senses are telling me that this is rather important, huh?" Neptune said with closed eyes.

"*Yes. But I will make it brief for your benefit.*"

"Oh, cool-eo! So, what's the exposition?"

"*Basically, you freed me from Arfoire's clutches, and in doing so, you managed to keep your fellow CPU safe as well!*"

"Fellow CPU?" Neptune said slowly, but then gasped. "Noire! Is she okay!? Please, tell me she isn't dead!"

"*No need to worry about that*" Histy reassured. "*She is safe and sound, and so are you*"

"Really!? Phew..." Neptune sighed in relief. "Guess someone saved us in the nick of time, huh?"

"I*ndeed. Your companions are very kind and strong. Especially that beastly one who knocked that Heartless away...*" the heavenly voice said with pride. "*But back to me. You see, I am sealed away in the tome you've taken. Until the seal's broken, I cannot interact much with the outside world.*"

"Ooooooohhhh~" Neptune understood. "So, you were inside the tome, huh?"

"*In a manner of speaking, yes*" Histoire agreed.

"Great!" the girl with the key cheered. "Now all that's left is to free ya like I promised!"

"*That would be great...*" Histy started. "*But not right now*"

"Eh?" Neptune said, tilting her head. "Why not?"

"*Arfoire is close to her goal*" the heavenly voice explained. "*If my seal is broken, she will be able to freely abuse my power to her designs. So long as I am sealed, the amount of power she can use from me is limited!*"

"What IS her goal, exactly?" Neptune asked. "I know she's trying to take my and Noire's powers, but..."

"*That would take a lot of time to explain.*" Histoire warned. "*But know this. She will need both my power AND the power of four Console Patron Units in order to fulfill her goal. Right now, she already has three CPU powers absorbed.*"

"Three..." Neptune thought for a moment. "Does that mean...?"

"*I'm afraid so. It means that she will come for you next, Neptune*"

"Go figure..." Neptune complained. "So, what? Do I just bail with Noire or what?"

"*That would not be advisable*" Histy replied. "*She already knows who and where you are. At this stage, it will only be a matter of time until she chases you down*"

The girl clicked her tongue. "Good point. Arboire's persistent as a cockroach, after all."

"*The only chance for you to fight back against her is with all your friends*" the heavenly voice suggested. "*Only together can you overcome her great powers.*"

"My friends, huh..."

"*Nep-Nep!*"

"*Wakey-wakey!*"

Upon hearing those voices, Neptune's sight began to blur...

"Huh?"

Hollow Bastion – Great Crest

Neptune slowly opened her eyes to see some familiar figures in front of her.

"Oh!" a familiar doggy voice spoke. "Fellers, she's wakin' up!"

As she yawned and opened her eyes again, she saw six people crowding up on her.

"Oh, mornin' guys." Neptune greeted as she rubbed her eyes. "So, what's for breakfast?"

"Oh, Nep-Nep..." Compa cried as she hugged the small girl. "NEP-NEP!"

"Whoa!" Neptune giggled. "What's with ya?"

"Neptune!/Nep-Nep!"

And then Donald and Goofy joined in on the hugging!

"Wha-" Neptune choked. "Can't...breathe..."

Sora laughed as tears of joy leaked out of his eyes.

IF sighed. "C'mon, guys. Break it up. She needs her space"

Slowly, the three broke off the hug as IF knelt down near the girl.

"You doin' okay, Nep?" the guild agent asked nicely.

Neptune nodded as she streched. "Doin' good. Felt like I slept real good, y'know?"

"No kidding" Sora teased. "You were snoring loudly like you usually do."

Donald sighed. "Good to know some things never changed for her..."

"Hey, I rese-Whoa!"

Neptune was about to complain, but noticed that she's now back to normal.

"I'm tiny and adorable again!"

IF facepalmed. "You only noticed just now?"

"You were glowing and everything when we found you two" Compa reported. "And once it stopped, you were back to the cute Nep-Nep I know and love!"

"Huh" Neptune managed to say. "You know, I kinda missed being tall, sexy and powerful."

Donald and Goofy gulped uncontrollably.

"Don't tell me you know how to transform back into that?" IF grimaced.

"Yeaaaaaahhhhh..." Neptune dragged. "No. I...don't remember how to."

"You don't?" the boy asked.

The girl in the parka shook her head. "It came so suddenly, you know? I don't have a freakin' clue how to use that!"

Goofy gulped again. "C-Can you try?"

"HUMPH!"

Neptune raised her arms up for a good three seconds, but nothing happened...

"Aaaannnnd nothing!" the girl with the key said, putting her arms down. "See?"

IF thought for a moment. "Perhaps we ought to shelve that idea for now. We should-"

A yawn was heard from nearby.

"What's with all the noise...?" a voice spoke. "Can't a girl get some beauty sleep around here?"

"Noire!"

As the other CPU woke up, she saw that she was surrounded by several people.

"It's you guys..."

"Good morning!" Compa greeted.

"Good to see you doing alright" Sora said.

Noire stared at them for a good few seconds.

"What's with the stare?" IF asked.

"Getting tongue-tied?" Donald teased.

"I-It's just..." Noire said, looking down in shame. She glanced at Neptune for a moment, who only smiled at her. "I don't get it."

"Get what?" Goofy asked.

Noire groaned. "You know what am I now, right!? I was the 'Newtype' that kept attacking you! I hurt you! Even insulted you! And yet, here you all are, worrying about me and treating my wounds."

She then placed her hand on her arm. "How can you guys just...? I expected you to bear a grudge against me, but..."

The party looked to each other for answers...

"Well..." Goofy started.

"It's true that you kept attacking us time and time again..." Donald said. "And you were pretty tough to fight, to boot"

IF crossed her arms as she spoke. "By those alone, we wouldn't be giving you the time of day."

Noire sighed. "I guess that's fair..."

The guild agent sighed, lowering her arms. "But...you weren't that malicious to us. Sure, you were annoying, but nothing we can't handle nowadays"

The other CPU made an incredulous face. "Huh?"

Compa nodded. "I remembered you saying bad things before, but nowadays, I don't think you were a bad person..."

"Yeah!" Sora nodded. "Besides, you kept watch over Riku, even when no one asked you to. I think only good people could do that"

Noire looked at the party in surprise. As she did, a bubbly feeling surfaced deep within her heart.

"This...feeling..." Noire mumbled. "This warmth...What is that...?"

Compa gasped. "Noire, are you crying?"

"Huh?"

Noire wiped her cheek, and sure enough, she felt tears flowing down her face again.

Neptune chuckled. "You've been crying quite a lot today, haven't you?"

"S-Shut up!" the other CPU denied, wiping the tears from her eyes. "My powers were taken and my heart's a mess! I am not having a great day, thank you very much!"

"Here"

Noire looked to see Compa lending a handkerchief, one she took immediately to wipe the tears from her face.

"I-I just had something on my eye and it's hard to get it out, okay!?"

Neptune laughed. "C'mon, Noire. Just admit it!"

"Admit what!?"

She stood up, taking the tome with her as she spread her arms to the party around her.

"That it's fun to have friends to hang out with!"

Noire looked at the party, who only offered smiles to her.

"Friends..." Noire cried. "I...admit...I have been thinking about that for a while now..."

"Noire..." Goofy said.

"I've been alone for as far as I remember..." the other CPU admitted. "Even in this big castle, there was no one I could relate with or speak to casually. The only other person I could speak to is far off the deep end by now..."

"You mean Riku..." Sora guessed.

"But..." Noire continued. "When I was with you all back then, I admit now, part of me wished we could've stayed longer. It was fun, just being able to talk to others like that, so much so that I wished that I could've just gone back to you the first chance I got, but..."

"Your pride as a CPU wouldn't let you, huh?" Neptune continued as she cleared her throat and spoke in a deep voice. "'I'm a goddess! I can't be speaking to mortal weaklings! It is heresy!'"

The twin-tailed girl huffed. "I don't sound anything like that!"

"So" the nurse wondered. "The reason you didn't keep close to us is because you think you shouldn't? That sounds stupid"

"Yeah" Donald agreed. "Very stupid"

The twin-tailed girl groaned. "I know. No need to point out what's obvious already."

IF sighed. "Enough butting in, guys. Just let her finish"

"Thanks..." Noire thanked as she cleared her throat. "Anyway, I know we all got off the wrong foot, but I...I..."

Everyone looked closer to her as Noire's face flushed red.

"Yes?" Neptune interjected, stars glistening in her eyes.

Noire groaned. "Why is this so hard to say!? It's just one question!"

Hearing this caused Neptune to laugh.

"H-Hey!" Noire yelled at her fellow CPU. "This is a monumental moment for me! Don't laugh!"

Neptune stopped her laughter. "D'oh! It's okay. Just say it loud and clear to us! We won't judge!"

Noire looked to the party once more, fighting through her growing anxiety. Neptune, in particular, nodded to her.

She gulped. "C-Can I...Can we...be friends? For real this time?"

The party looked to each other once more, and nodded.

"Of course we can!" Sora agreed.

"Do you need to even ask?" Donald snarked.

"Let's be pals, Noire!" Goofy greeted.

"We'd love to have you with us!" Compa cheered.

"It feels nice to have another straight one in our wacky group." IF remarked.

Noire smiled so much that tears are leaking from her eyes again.

"Hey, c'mon" Neptune said, kneeling down in front of her. "Aren't you happy?"

Noire sniffed. "S-Shut up! Of course I'm happy! I'm just..."

She then looked up, her eyes still wet but her smile never left. "Thank you. All of you. I promise I won't let you all down!"

Hollow Bastion – Grand Hall

"Now, Princesses of Heart!" Maleficent declared. "Reveal unto me the Keyhole!"

Within the chamber lies asleep the Seven Princess of Hearts...

Aurora, Princess of the Enchanted Dominion, Maleficent's former homeworld.

Cinderella, Princess of the Castle of Dreams, the Fairy Godmother's former homeworld.

Snow White, Princess of the Dwarf Woodlands, home to an ancient being sealed in the Magic Mirror.

Belle, Princess of Beast's Castle, home to a wealthy prince who was transformed thanks to an enchantress' spell.

Jasmine and Alice, Princesses of Agrabah and a world near Wonderland that were abducted recently...

And lying near the dark passageway is Kairi, Princess of Hollow Bastion, a world once radiant, now turned foul after the Heartless' arrival.

Sealed in stasis chambers (all except for the latter), the princess' hearts were forced to respond to the evil fariy's call, shining a beam of light that guided her to a nearby dark passageway, its shape resembling the emblem found within most Heartless.

"Is it done?"

Maleficent turned her head to see her accomplice, Riku, approaching her. Judging by his appearance, he appears to be enjoying the use of the dark powers that she had awoken inside him.

"Almost" the fairy informed. "Just a few more touches and the heart of all worlds will be ours to obtain!"

Riku(?) hummed. **"Is that so?"**

He then extended his hand, summoning a Keyblade of his own! It has a red guard, black handle with a sharp edge, and mysteriously, no Keychain.

"Oh?" Maleficent said, not helping but marveling at the sight of such a blade.

But...something was wrong...

The fairy groaned. "Why isn't the Keyhole opening yet!? We have managed to acquire all seven, but..."

She then turned to the unconscious girl behind her, the one the boy was searching for.

"It must be her" the fairy concluded. "Without her heart, the Keyhole will not open yet. But where could it be...?"

Suddenly, they heard a loud roar from the outside.

"I thought you had the intruder handled..." Maleficent scolded the boy, who just shrugged.

"So did I" Riku(?) replied. **"Apparently, the creature had help"**

"He's right..."

The two turned their heads to see Arfoire, limping into the hall, bruises and cuts surrounding her old figure.

"You're hurt" Maleficent said bluntly.

"Did that goddess do this to you?" Riku(?) asked.

"Hm?" Arfoire hummed, noting something odd about the boy, but shrugged it off for now. "Yes. It appears I underestimated her."

Maleficent sighed. "This is what happens when you do not heed our advice. Now the children will be more powerful than ever."

The witch chuckled. "I wouldn't be so sure."

"Oh?"

"Just because Neptune has awoken to her power, it doesn't mean she knows how to use it" Arfoire said confidently. "Once I recovered here, her power will be mine for the taking!"

The evil fairy scoffed as she walked off. "I shall be the judge of that!"

"Off to face them?" Arfoire asked. "You, the mistress of this castle?"

"Indeed, I am. I have a history of dealing with nascent Keyblade wielders." Maleficent said confidently. "You two will remain here to guard the chamber. We must ensure the Keyhole opens successfully."

Arfoire bowed. "Of course. I am here to honor our agreement, after all"

Maleficent huffed. "Then I will ensure that the purple goddess is delivered to you. Though it may not be in one piece"

Arfoire huffed in turn. "So long as her power remains, what's left of her is none of my concern"

With that last affirmation, the evil fairy set off to deal with the intruders.

"And what of you, boy?" Arfoire asked the other person in the room. "What of your goals?"

"Hmph" Riku(?) shrugged. **"It's close. Thought I wonder whom among us will achieve theirs first"**

"Is that a challenge?" Arfoire chuckled. "Very well. Let us see where our paths end, 'Riku'"

She then headed off to recover, all the while Riku(?) sneered.

"Play your games for a while longer, fools. Soon, this world will suffer the same fates as yours...to be drowned in eternal darkness."

Hollow Bastion – Corridor (Near Chapel)

"Phew!" Sora sighed in relief. "That was quite the trip, huh?"

"You can say that again..." Compa said, breathing in heavily. "So much...jumping. So much...climbing..."

Noire chuckled. "I get the feeling."

"How can you say that?" Donald complained. "You were able to fly around a lot!"

"True" Noire admitted. "But I like to be as thorough as possible, so during my patrols, I tend to walk around to get a good look of the layout of the castle. It was quite the jog, you know?"

"But it's thanks to that" Goofy declared. "That we were able to get around as we did, huh?"

The Beast grunted. "Belle should be close ahead, right?"

Noire nodded. "There's one chamber I was not allowed to access. Thankfully, from what I was able to scout out, the way there is a straight shot, so no more turnarounds after this."

"Hmmm?"

"What's up, Histy?" Neptune asked the tome.

"Something wrong?" Sora followed.

"*I sense a great evil presence ahead*." Histoire informed.

"Which one are we talking?" the boy asked.

"Is it old or...not old?" the girl in the parka followed up.

"*It is a bit unfamiliar, so...*" Histy answered. "*Not old*"

"Meaning it's Maleficent" Noire said, clicking her tongue. "She'll be a tough one"

"Are they talking to that tome again?" The Beast asked, crossing his arms.

"Yessy..." Compa groaned. "It sucks that we can't speak with Histy like they can..."

"It can't be helped..." IF sighed. "Their 'CPU blood', as Nep puts it, lets them hear her out."

"At least she can hear us!" Goofy said, looking on the brighter side.

"Okay, but" Donald wanted to point out. "How is SORA able to hear her?"

"They said Histy knows the answer" Compa answered.

"But since we're kinda pressed for time, she'll just tell us later." IF continued. "I do have an idea though"

The Beast snorted. "You seem to know your way around all this magic talk..."

"You sound kinda bitter there..." IF noted.

"Bad experience?" Compa asked.

The large creature-like man hung his head in shame, scratching his head. "You could say that..."

"If it's bad to talk about it, then feel free not to" Compa advised.

"Just don't forget there's people you can rely on now" Noire said, butting in.

"Trying to do the same?" the Beast snarked.

Noire chuckled. "More or less"

"What's up?" IF asked the other CPU. "We moving in?"

Noire nodded, her face turning grim. "We better be careful. Maleficent's no Arfoire in terms of power, but we shouldn't drop our guard around her. From what I heard, she has experience dealing with Keyblade wielders"

"Meaning we have to be really careful..." IF noted. "Especially since we're relying on those two in the front"

Donald breathed in. "Okay! Let's get us an evil fairy!"

Compa nodded fiercely. "It's time we get their world back!"

Noire chuckled. "You all sound confident. Then again, considering how much you've all been doing this, I suppose it's natural"

"Gawrsh, we just like helpin' out folks, that's all!" Goofy noted.

"Helping out folks, huh?" Noire noted with a sigh. "If only I could be so altruistic..."

IF chuckled. "Okay, enough chit-chat. Let's get ourselves pumped! This will be the decisive battle, after all!"

"YEAH!"

In the distance, Neptune and Sora couldn't help but smile at the sight.

The girl, in particular, giggled. "Noire's getting along with everyone so well, huh?"

The boy nodded. "That she does"

Neptune turned to Sora with a wry smile. "Don't worry, buck-o. Your pals'll be alright."

Sora chuckled mirthly. "How'd you figure I was thinking about them?"

It was Neptune's turn to chuckle. "Like, practically all the time, kiddo. How long have we been travelling together, hm?"

"I guess you're right"

Sora slapped his own face, composing himself. "Okay, let's do this!"

With a fierce nod, Neptune and the party set forth to face their next foe...

Hollow Bastion – Chapel

"You have come, as expected!" Maleficent welcomed the party, who barged in with their weapons at the ready! "But you are too late! With the final Keyhole in my grasp, my plans for the worlds will be realized!"

"Oh yeah!?" Neptune fought back. "Well, we're still here!"

"And after coming this far!" Sora followed. "There's no way we're giving up now!"

"We're taking the princesses and this world back!" Noire declared. "Now give it up!"

Maleficent glared at them as she raised the platform she was standing on.

"You poor, simple fools! You think you can defeat me!?"

Her staff cackled with energy and four Darkball Heartless appeared to her side!

"ME, THE MISTRESS OF ALL EVIL!"

Noire clicked her tongue. "That flying platform's gonna be annoying..."

"Not to mention, the Heartless..." IF said, taking note of the Darkballs ready to chomp down their prey. "Okay. Compa, Donald, let's focus on disabling that platform! Sora, Nep, you're on support! Goof, Noire, Beast, we're on defense duty! Once it's down, we go all-out against that witch! Let's bring home the bacon, everyone!"

"RIGHT!"

"You fools think your plans will work!?"

The evil fairy began to cast magic with her staff. "Taste the melting fury of these unholy flames!"

She then casted unholy felfire in front of her as the platform slowly moved forward.

"Move to the other side NOW!"

At IF's order, the party ran over to the other side as the Darkballs gave pursuit.

"How's about a spin!?"

Goofy began to spin around furiously, hitting two of the Darkballs silly with his shield!

"Come here, you..."

Noire taunted one of the Darkballs in front of her, goading it to attack her.

"Wait for it..."

As it was ready to chomp her down, it was suddenly punted into the wall by another Darkball!

"Weak!"

One thrown by the Beast in his fury!

Noire flipped her hair in celebration. "Nice work!"

The Beast grunted as two more of the Darkballs bore down upon them.

"That platform's not going down!" Compa said, blasting it with numerous shots of differing elements.

"There has to be a specific trick to this..." Donald thought for a moment.

"Well, you better come up with one quick!" Sora warned as he cast another **Aerora** on them.

Seeing Maleficent raising her staff again, Neptune quickly yelled. "The evil lady's about to fire off another spell!"

Donald groaned. "When in doubt, try everything until something works! FORCE!"

In his frustration, he ended casting a **Graviga** spell at his target, which instantly forced the platform down!

"You fools!"

"It worked!" Neptune cheered. "Nice one, ducky!"

"Okay!" Noire said, joining the support team. "Let's get her!"

Sora nodded, and the three charged straight at the Mistress of All Evil.

"Stay away, you fools!"

"I don't think so! **LACY DANCE!**" Noire launched a kicking attack!

"**DELTA SLASH!**" Neptune follows up with a triple-electric slash!

"**ARS ARCANUM!**" And Sora finishes with a light-charged combo technique!

The three Keyblade wielders (though Noire is stuck with her rapier without most of her powers) unleashed their techniques at the witch, forcing her to flee into an untouchable orb!

"Hey!" Neptune complained. "Get back here!"

"Get down, you two!"

Hearing Noire's warning, the two jumped off the platform, which ended up moving back to the center of the chapel!

"She's going for another round!" IF shouted. "Everyone, pull back!"

As everyone retreated, the witch reappeared from the orb, cackling loudly for all to hear!

"Now you fools shall taste my wrath!"

Upon her declaration, four Wizards emerged near the evil fairy as electricity cackled from her staff.

"Come hither forth, o evil lightning!"

Summoning a swirl of energy above her, she sent a veritable lightning storm down the area! The Wizards around her then did the same, maintaining the thunderstorm sent their way.

"Lightning..." Compa complained. "Why does it always have to be lightning!?"

"This is bad!" Goofy bemoaned as he protected his head with his shield.

"And it's about to get worse for the lot of you!"

Not about done yet, Maleficent continued to cast magic, this time summoning a portal behind her.

"METEORS OF HEAVEN, UNLEASH THINE FURY!"

"EVERYONE, HUG THE WALLS!"

The party did as the guild agent instructed, hugging the nearby walls tightly as several meteors began to burst forth from the portal.

"A-HAHAHAHAHA!"

Sora clicked his tongue. "How do we get close to them like this!?"

Compa suddenly moved a bit to her side, dodging a sudden zapping "At this rate, we'll either get smushed or zapped or even both!"

"Simple!"

Everyone turned to IF, who was smirking in confidence.

"Hm?"

Maleficent noticed the group was talking to themselves. However, from the abundance of energy cackling around her, she couldn't overhear their plan.

"What are those fools planning? Hmph, no matter..."

She then summoned another portal behind her, ready to unleash more meteors against them.

"BEHOLD THE POWER OF THE MISTRESS OF ALL EVIL!"

"Here she comes..."

As the meteors rained forth, IF was busy counting in her head...

"Three...Two...One...GO!"

The party charged forth once the meteors had decreased in number, with the royal captain leading the guard with his shield.

"You will never touch me again! Come out!"

Tapping her staff, two Defenders suddenly appeared in front of the party...

"STEP ASIDE!"

But the Beast lunged forth, sending the two guardian Hearltess reeling back.

"Time for your treatment!"

Compa followed up the assault with two Poison Agents, reducing the Defenders to naught but shades...

"Now!" IF shouted. "Aim for the casters!"

Donald, hearing the order, cast another Graviga on the platform, sending it down!

"Not this again!"

With the platform downed, Goofy, IF, Neptune and Sora dealt with the Wizards in short order.

"Time to go flyin'!"

"**HEAVEN DEMON!**" A ten-hit combo!

"**CROSS COMBINATION!**" A seven-hit combo!

"**STRIKE RAID!**" A singular weapon-thrown attack!

Knocking the Wizards off the platform (and out of existence) the **Thunderstorm** cloud above dissolved into nothing, leaving the evil fairy open for attack.

"You fools!" Maleficent shouted in defiance. "Don't think you've won!"

Not hearing any of this, Noire launches her attack. "**FALL SLASH!**"

The attack sent Maleficent back, knocking her off the platform, and backed into a corner.

"I've underestimated you..."

She then conjured a dark portal, fleeing the scene to recuperate.

"Hey!" Neptune shouted at the disappearing fairy. "Get back here!"

"She ran off..." Sora complained, slinging his Keyblade on his shoulder. "Now what?"

"What else?" Noire said. "We go after her and finish this!"

"I wonder what other tricks that evil fairy has up her sleeve..." Compa wondered.

"Well, it can't be any worse than what she just unleashed upon us now, right?" Donald wondered.

IF sighed as she facepalmed. "Ducky, please don't jinx it..."

Hollow Bastion – Chapel Ruins

After a quick break to recover and reenergize, the party followed Maleficent into the portal, leading them into the same area where Neptune and Noire fought their fierce (and hopefully last) battle.

In front of them is an exhausted Maleficent and a freshly-recovered Riku, wearing his dark outfit.

"**Do you need some help?**" the boy(?) asked.

"Riku!" Sora called out to his best friend.

"Hold on..." Noire said, eyeing Riku(?) cautiously. "Something's wrong with him..."

"Tell me about it!" Neptune shouted. "That outfit's so old-fashioned! 2/10!"

"I don't think that's what she's talking about, Nep-Nep" Compa snarked, judging by the facepalming twin-tailed CPU.

The Beast grunted. "She's right. His stench has gotten worse since we last met"

"You mean he hasn't bathed in weeks! Blegh!" Neptune groaned, pinching her nose. "Don't tell he didn't wash off all the whale funk from last time!"

"I believe he's referring to the stench of darkness, not his body odor, Nep" IF replied.

"Oh" the girl in the parka simply said. "Still reeks though"

As the conversation died down, Noire noticed something on the silver-haired boy's hand.

"Wait. That weapon on your hand..."

"Is that...?" Donald continued.

"**Yes, a Keyblade**" Riku(?) confirmed. "**But unlike any of yours, this Keyblade unlocks the door in people's hearts.**"

He raised his arms...

"**Allow me to demonstrate...**"

...and then stabbed his accomplice with it!

"**BEHOLD!**"

Maleficent gasped as she felt the bladed pierce her chest, dark energies swirling within her like a vortex!

"**Now, open your heart! Surrender it to the darkness...**" Riku(?) declared. "**Let it become one...with darkness itself!**"

As soon as he finished his declaration, he pulled his weapon back, vanishing as he does so.

"Riku!" Noire called out in vain.

"This is bad..." IF clicked her tongue. "The dark energy within her is going stir crazy!"

"Could she be unleashing her final form!?" Neptune shouted.

Maleficent cackled as the dark energy overwhelms her. "This power...How long have I last felt this rush of energy! Darkness...THE TRUE DARKNESS!"

Once the energies around her dissipated, the evil fairy has transformed into...

"A MOTHER-NEPPING DRAGON!?"

...a large, menacing, black dragon to be precise!

"This would be so cool..." Sora commented. "If we weren't actually fighting this thing right now..."

The transformed fairy roared, summoning large wisps of unholy felfire around her in a circle!

"Take cover!" the guild agent shouted as the party scrambled to the nearby thorny areas.

"Okay, how do we deal with this?" Neptune asked around. "Any ideas?"

"I got nothing" Sora bemoaned, weathering another felfire attack with his **Aerora**. "You?"

Noire groaned, observing the dark dragon. "Let's try hitting her for now. Hopefully, we'll figure out a weakness as we go."

The two Keyblade wielders nodded.

"Still, we've got all this fire to deal with..." Sora noticed.

Neptune chuckled, bringing out a Summon Gem. "Good thing we got someone who can deal with castle fires!"

The boy smiled. "Good idea! I'll get some help too!"

"Well, make it quick!" Noire beckoned. "I don't think our friends will last long underneath all that felfire!"

"Summon..."

"Grant us courage!"

Meanwhile, IF and the rest of party are scrambling away from the emerging felfires.

"They're comin' right for us!" Goofy shouted, keeping his shield up.

The Beast roared as he swatted more of the felfire away, burning his claws in the process! "We need...ugh...a plan of attack!"

IF groaned, sweat building up from her head admist the heat and stress. "I'm working on it!"

Meanwhile, the dragon began to inhale heavily.

"It's going for a breath attack!" Donald shouted.

"Not on our watch!"

The party then saw Neptune coming at them, at the back of a...

"HOLY FLYING ELEPHANTS!"

Yes, Compa, a young elephant using it's large ears as improvised wings.

"Alright, **Dumbo**!" Neptune called to the young elephant. "Splash these fires good!"

Heeding the summoner's call, the flying elephant then unleashed a stream of water from their trunk, dousing away the fires around and shooing off the transformed Maleficent for good measure.

"The fires are going away!" Goofy cheered.

"That witch is getting splashed up too!" Compa followed.

"Well, if it works, it works" IF shrugged. "Now we gotta pile on the damage!"

"Wait, first we need a quick fix!" Donald then channeled healing magic onto his staff. "CU-"

Only to be sprinkled with a familiar set of dust.

"Huh?" The duck then noticed his burns fading away. "Oh..."

"Was that a pixie?" the Beast wondered as a small flying light danced around them.

The light then snapped to the Beast and bounced up and down in front of him.

"Not just any pixie!" Compa answered. "That's Tinker Bell!"

Sure enough, the newly-acquired pixie from Neverland has arrived to assist them with her healing dust!

"It's no flight" IF mused. "But I'm feeling a little better already thanks to this!"

"Guys!" Sora called to them as he and Noire approached them. "You all okay?"

"We are now, thanks to you and Tink" the guild agent thanked. "Now that we're safe and good to go, let's press the attack!"

"RIGHT!"

But the dragon roared as she started to snap her jaws in a frenzy, threatening to bite all who stood in her way!

"You won't stop us!" Donald boasted as he conjured magic from his staff. "**THUNDAGA**!"

"C'mon, Goofy!" Compa called out. "Let's teach this bad fairy a lesson!"

Goofy nodded as he grabbed a hold of the nurse's giant syringe!

"RAAAAAHHHHH!"

The Beast lunged forward and held Maleficent's down, the draconic witch trying in vain to break free!

"Keep her there, Beast!" IF ordered as she imbued her qatars in flames. "**FLAME SOUL SLICE!**"

"I'll help!" Sora declared as he threw his Keyblade against the witch's head. "**STRIKE RAID!**"

"I'll go too!" Noire shouted as she neared the dragon head. "**TRI-COLOR ORDER!**"

Maleficent roared in pain as she bore through the party's combined assault!

"All-righty!" Compa shouted as she and Goofy readied their Combination Skill! "Let's wax her, Goofy!"

Goofy nodded fiercely as the two bucked back. "CHARGE!"

The two charged, injecting the dragon head with 13 CC's of pain! (may not be the accurate amount but hey, damage!)

"TASTE OUR **GOOFY TREATMENT!**"

Feeling angry, Maleficent roared, knocking the Beast off her as she summoned several orbs of felfire across the arena, which then scattered around and lit the whole arena in felfire.

"Aw, come on!" Neptune complained, still flying atop Dumbo who is now dousing the new flames. "We just put those out!"

"This is bad!" the guild agent bemoaned. "Everyone, regroup!"

Not wasting this chance, the dragon then fired a breath of felfire against the party, which surrounded them in a fiery circle of doom!

"And things just got worse!" Sora complained. "Any way out?"

Goofy tried to pry the flames open with his shield, but nearly burned his hand in the process. "Not one here!"

The Beast tried swatting the flames, but had no such luck either. "Can't even claw through this!"

IF groaned as she felt sweat dropping around her fast. "Where's Nep!? Maybe she can douse the-"

"OOF!"

But her questions were answered when said girl dropped down to the ground near them, the flying elephant nowhere in sight.

"Let me guess" Donald snarked. "Your MP ran out?"

Neptune giggled nervously as she stood, answering that question.

IF facepalmed. "This is not good..."

Maleficent roared as more orbs of felfire emerged around the arena, all poised to strike at the defenseless party!

"I don't know about you" the Beast replied. "But I'm not seeing a way out of here..."

"We're dead!" Compa shouted. "So very, very dead!"

Noire groaned. "Don't give up! Didn't you all face worse than this!?"

"But what can we do!?" the royal captain wondered.

Sora tried to rack his brain for ideas, but with the stress of the situation, he's coming up empty.

Maleficent roared again as the orbs then dispersed against the party!

Neptune yelped, raising her Keyblade as she ducked for cover. "JUST **STOP**, PLEASE!"

As the **Stopra** magic erupted from the girl's Keyblade, the flames around them and even the dragon herself halted, their movements rendered completely inert!

"Whoa..." Sora gasped in amazement.

"She stopped?" Donald quacked. "Just like that!?"

"Huh?"

Neptune looked up to see the evil dragon rendered completely still. "Wow. Didn't know how OP this spell is! No wonder this stopped appearing in most games..."

"Enough side commentary!" Noire shouted. "That witch is wide open! Let's hit her now before she moves again!"

IF nodded. "Right! And if she moves again, we'll just cast another Stop on her!" She then raised her right hand as she pointed against the transformed fairy. "Everyone, throw everything you've got at her! Leave her with nothing!"

"I'll start us off!" Donald declared as his staff is lit with flames! "**FIRAGA**!"

The fireball landed a direct hit and the dragon didn't flinch! (more like it couldn't, since she's still under the effects of the Stop spell)

"Goofy, with me!" IF called the royal captain as she ran towards her target.

"Roger-dodger!"

"I'll go too!" The Beast shouted, joining the assault!

"**ASCENDING DEMON**!"

"FALL!"

The combined assault dealt devastating damage against the time-frozen Maleficent!

But it wasn't enough as the evil dragon roared, signifying the end of the Stop spell!

"She's moving again!" the Beast shouted.

"Not on my watch!" Compa declared as she aimed her syringe right at the dragon. "**STOP AID!**"

Once the launched projectile landed it's hit, the dragon's movements were halted again!

"Nice!" Sora cheered. "I'm moving in!"

The boy charged forth, closing the distance as he launched an aerial combo!

"HOH!" An **Aerial Sweep** from the ground.

"YAH!" Downward slash!

"**HURRICANE BLAST!**" A vertical spinning finisher to end it! "Neptune! Noire! She's all yours!"

"Right!" Noire called, her rapier filled with energy. "Ready, Neptune!?"

"At once, Noire!" Neptune answered, readying a large spectral sword behind her. "Time for our **Assault Combo**!"

"Right! **TORNERAID SWORD!**"

Noire unleashed her attack against the dragon...

"**32-BIT MEGA BLADE!**"

...and then Neptune drops her large spectral sword against the dragon in quick succession, adding to the damage!

"RAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

The dragon's pained roars echoed the area, but still it stands.

"Oh poo!" Compa moaned. "That wasn't enough!?"

"No..." the Beast started. "But it's swaying..."

"That means we dealt a lot of damage with those." IF noticed. "We just need a little more and she's fairy toast!"

"Then let's finish this!" Donald declared.

"Yeah!" Goofy agreed.

"Oh, hands of time" the guild agent chanted. "May your movements be halted and this witch along with it! **TIME STOP!**"

As a pillar to Stopra magic erupted around the dragon witch, her movements were then halted once more, leaving her open to attack!

"Compa!"

"Right here, Donald!"

The duck readied his magic, enhancing the nurse's syringe with magic power.

"EAT THIS! **TREATMENT BLASTER!**"

The ensuing beam attack hit the dragon square in the head!

"Time your attack with mine!" IF shouted to Noire as the two charged forth!

"Roger!" the twin-tailed girl answered as the two split up to the sides

"I'm tagging in, too!" Neptune chirped in as she moved in from the center.

All three then jumped right at the still dragon...

"**HEAVEN DEMON!**" A ten-hit attack!

"**FALL SLASH!**" A swing with numerous slashes!

"**CRITICAL EDGE!**" A heavy-hitting attack!

...and struck at her with a combined attack, leaving her reeling as she was freed from the **Stopra** spell!

"Sora!" Noire called. "She just needs one more!"

"She's all yours, buck-o!" Neptune cheered. "Land the last blow!

"Right!"

The dragon reared her head to face the boy chosen by the Keyblade, who is now floating in the air, channeling energy onto the tip of his Keyblade in a collection of raw energy.

"**Ragnarok**..."

The orb expanded and expanded, until...

"GO!"

...it exploded, unleashing several laser beams of raw energy against the transformed dragon!

"RAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

As the last of the beams hit her, the mighty dragon fell down to the ground as she and the thorns across the area began to disappear in a wave of felfire.

"Did..." Noire gasped for breath. "Did we do it?"

"I think so" IF said, observing the dragon fading away, leaving only the evil fairy's massive cloak behind.

"Well, that takes care of that!" Donald cheered.

"But that took everythin' we had..." Goofy bemoaned. "I'm feelin' pooped..."

Tinker Bell, who was still going around, started to dim.

"You've done enough, Tink" Sora told the pixie. "Thanks for keeping us safe"

The pixie smiled as she nodded and faded away, happy to help out in a big battle like this.

"Stay sharp!" the Beast warned everyone as he sniffed out something bad. "We're not done yet!"

And right on cue, Riku(?) appeared before them again.

"**So, you have dealt with the evil fairy**" Riku(?) said. "**I suppose congratulations are in order.**"

"Riku..." Sora called out again.

"**Still, to think that she would end up consumed by the darkness within her despite her own warnings**" Riku(?) remarked, stepping on the fairy's coat as it faded away "**How ironic**"

"Hey!" Noire called out. "She was your ally! How could you be so...disparaging!?"

"**She was nothing but a tool, fallen goddess**" Riku(?) replied. "**A pawn of a much larger scheme in the making. She has long served her purpose, and so will all who worked with her...starting with that wretched witch**"

He then vanished into the Dark Corridor once more, chuckling sinisterly all the while.

"Hey, uh" Neptune started as she chugged a Hi-Potion. "Is it me, or is he...?"

"Yeah" Noire answered, drinking a Potion. "Something's wrong with him."

"He was acting rude before" Donald noticed, using up an Ether. "Now he's just...downright villainous."

"Hmmmmm" Goofy hummed. "Do ya think he might'a been possessed by someone?"

"That's a possibility" the Beast guessed as he crossed his arms.

"Then if so..." IF thought aloud as she drank the last of her Potion. "Who could it be?"

"It can't be Arboire" Neptune guessed. "But...who else fits the profile?"

Compa then turned to the tome hanging on Neptune's pocket. "Do you know, Histy?"

"*I do not know either*" Histoire chimed in. "*However, I can tell that whatever being possesses that young man holds a very strong surge of darkness, far more than what Arfoire or Maleficent can muster*"

"So, the true villain makes their appearance or whatever, huh?" Neptune said as Noire relayed Histoire's guess.

Sora, however, wasn't paying attention to the conversation. His gaze remained still on the spot where his best friend(?) once stood.

"Riku..."

Chapter End Notes

Ding-dong, the witch is down! Now only two foes remain! Though, if I'm gonna be frank here, the Dragon Maleficent fight was gonna be a bit shorter, but I didn't really like how it turned out, so I lengthened it to what you saw here. As for Purple Heart, don't worry about her. I got plans for her in this series.

Up next is the big moment a lot of you have been waiting for (you sadists...), so prep some tissues in the coming days, because tears will be shed...

Chapter 18: Chapter 13.8: Forces (Intentions) of Evil

Chapter Summary

> With Maleficent defeated, the party makes their way forward to rescue the princesses. However, as they confront their last foes, sacrifices were made...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hollow Bastion – Corridor (Before Grand Hall)

After another moment to rest, the party proceeded forward to their last destination, the Grand Hall that lies beyond the Castle Chapel.

"So, you haven't been to this place before" Sora said. "Right, Noire?"

The twin-tailed CPU nodded. "It's the only place I couldn't find initially. Considering what I now know about the princesses they've been kidnapping; they definitely didn't want me to find out and halt their plans when I had the chance"

"Princesses, huh..." IF murmured. "You said that Maleficent's been kidnapping them for something, right? Any ideas?"

Noire hummed in thought.

"Didn't she say somethin' about needing seven princesses to unlock some sorta door?" Goofy guessed.

"Where did you hear that?" Noire asked.

"We heard that from one of the Drifters in another world!" Donald answered.

Compa nodded. "She overheard them talking about needing seven princesses!"

"Seven princesses are needed to open the final door..." IF recalled. "A door to what, exactly?"

"No idea..." Sora shook his head.

"Me neither..." Neptune shook her head as well.

"Kingdom Hearts..."

The party looked to Noire, who uttered the words.

"What's that?" Goofy asked.

"It's something Riku mentioned before" the twin-tailed girl answered. "From what he was told, it is the place where all lost hearts gather. He believed he could find Kairi's heart there..."

"Is that true?" Sora asked this time.

Noire shook her head. "I don't know. Given Maleficent's penchant to keep certain information away from others, I doubt that's true."

"Oh..." the boy said, hanging his head down.

"However, I believe that the door the princesses are needed for and this Kingdom Hearts may be related" Noire theorized. "It may even be possible that this is where that door is supposed to lead..."

Neptune hummed as she looked to the tome on her pocket. "Do you know, Histy?"

"I'm afraid not" Histoire bemoaned. "*But if that is true, then we cannot let Arfoire gain access to it! Holding dominion over all hearts essentially means she has become the ruler of the worlds!*"

Once Sora relayed the message, the Beast grunted. "Then let's not waste any more time. Belle and the others are up ahead!"

IF nodded. "Right. Let's mosey, people!"

Hollow Bastion – Grand Hall

Entering through the massive door, the party looks around the massive room, decorated with a large carpet depicting the Heartless emblem and a similar looking passageway located at the opposite side of the room.

Near them are six stasis chambers, housing key people of interest, including...

"BELLE!"

The Beast rushed over to the chamber on the middle right, housing a woman with brown hair wearing an elaborate yellow gown.

"Hey, I found Jasmine!" Donald shouted over on the top left chamber.

"Alice is right here, too!" IF exclaimed by the bottom right chamber.

"Then, these beautiful ladies are..." Compa wondered as she neared the bottom left chamber, housing a blonde woman wearing a white dress and a tiara.

"The kidnapped princesses!" Goofy shouted, standing near the middle-left chamber housing a black-haired woman wearing a blue and yellow dress.

"But what kind of dastardly plan could those witches want with these fine ladies?" Neptune wondered, inspecting the top right chamber housing a yellow-haired woman wearing a purple dress. "Are they really going to be opening this Kingdom Hearts thing?"

"I get the feeling we're going to find out ahead..." Noire answered.

Sora, meanwhile, is looking around the area. "Yeah, but where's...Kairi!"

"Huh? You found her!?"

Neptune said, rushing to her fellow Keyblade wielders.

"There!"

Sora pointed ahead, near the area where the dark passageway is. Sure enough, there is a red-haired girl lying unconscious on the floor over yonder.

"Why is she lying on the floor there?" IF wondered. "Why not put her in one of these chambers?"

"Maybe they didn't have enough time?" Compa guessed.

Sora shook his head. "That doesn't matter. Let's go! Kairi!"

"You heard the man, ladies and gents!" Neptune exclaimed. "We got an island princess to save!"

The rest of the party sallied forth after Sora, but...

"*Neptune, Noire, please wait!*"

"Huh?"

Just as the two stopped at Histoire's call, they heard a loud thud near the area.

"Owie!" Compa winced in pain.

"Another IMB (Inconvenient Magic Barrier)!?" IF complained.

The Beast attempted to break through, but couldn't make a dent on it.

"At least the others were able to get ahead..." Noire murmured, noticing Sora, Donald and Goofy still running on ahead.

"But if the barrier's here, then..."

Neptune groaned as the familiar sound of evil laughter rained in the area.

"Haa-hahahahahaha!"

"Arlord!"

'Arlord' growled. "Still, you insist upon getting my name wrong...! Gah, no matter!"

"She must've given up on correcting her at this point..." Compa said, sweat dropping her forehead.

"At least Nep's got that over her, that's for sure" IF commented, shaking her head in disbelief.

"You!" Noire growled. "Coming to finish the job, are you?"

Arfoire sneered. "Naturally. With everyone else from Maleficent's gathering defeated, I am the last one standing. It falls upon me to carry out our shared goal, after all."

The parka-wearing CPU furrowed her eyebrows. "That's a big, fat lie! You were only out here for yourself!"

"Oh? So, you were paying attention, Neptune" Arfoire chuckled. "That's right. I don't give a care about Maleficent's or even 'his' goals. I am only here for my own..."

"*His*?" the guild agent thought, taking notice.

The evil witch summoned her evil lance once more, ready to do battle. "You may have blindsided my blindsiding with your CPU powers, Neptune. But this time, you will not have it so easy! Your powers WILL be mine!"

"Oh yeah!?"

Neptune summoned her Keyblade, ready to do battle against her archnemesis (pending) for the (hopefully) last time.

"Well, I think we've had our feud for far too long!" Neptune declared boldly. "I will take you down so you will never appear in any more games ever again!"

"Yeesh, Nep" IF said, taken aback by her friend's choice of words. "Reel in it."

"Then again" Compa noted, bringing out her syringe. "If she appears in too many games, people will get really bored of her real quick if she doesn't bring in new material as a villain..."

"Hey!" Arfoire complained. "I can hear you, you know!?"

Noire smirked. "So, what? No one likes an old lady like you for a recurring villain!"

The Beast grunted. "To be frank, I don't think she'll last that long as a villain..."

"See!?" Neptune boasted. "Even Beasty here gets it! Now, exit the stage, Arwitchi!"

However, the insults hurled were one too many, and now Arfoire looks ready to blow thirteen fuses!

"You dare insult my greatness, are you? Very well, then..."

She snapped her fingers, causing three more of her to spawn right next to her, each of them wielding a different weapon, with one wielding the axe, another wielding the sword and the last clone also wielding a lance!

"Am I trippin' or am I seein' quadruple here?" Neptune remarked with widened eyes.

"Oh great..." IF complained. "Another hack ability she pulled out of her butt!"

"Haa-hahahahaha!" the four Arfoires laughed. "I am a villain, after all! Cheating is just part of our nature!"

"And now, she's speaking in stereo!" Compa exclaimed, covering her ears. "I don't think I'll ever recover from this..."

Noire clicked her tongue. "This is bad...I knew her magical powers are no joke, but I didn't think she'd have something like this up her sleeve!"

However, her fellow CPU only laughed. "What's so funny, Neptune?"

"He-heh!" Neptune snickered. "Don't you guys see? By splitting into four, her power's all divided up, too!"

"Huh" IF observed, then an idea hit her! "I see! If that's the case, then if we can coordinate our strikes, we should be able to defeat her!"

"Oh yeah!" Compa cheered. "Nice thinking, Nep-Nep, Iffy!"

The Beast smirked. "It seems you have a plan in mind, then!"

The guild agent nodded. "Let's get a feel for them, first. Once we exchanged enough blows, I'll have a plan all cooked up!"

Noire got into her battle stance. "Then I'll take point! Ready for this, Neptune?"

Neptune rubbed her nose. "Am I ever? Now, let's end this feud!"

Arfoire (the real one, like we couldn't tell anyway) smirked. "For once, we agree on something! It is time to end this, Neptune, once and for all!"

Just as the party started to move, the four Arfoires began to do the same.

"You've annoyed us for too long, witch!" Compa declared, opening fire with her syringe. "**BLAZING AMMO**!"

One of the lance-wielding Arfoires dodged the incoming fire.

"Playing with fire, are we?"

The axe-wielding Arfoire created a chunk of ice with her magic. She then dissolved it into ice chunks and threw them at the nurse with her axe like a person would with a baseball bat!

"**GEFAHRLICTERN**!"

"AH!" Compa cried. "I don't like getting hurt!"

"Compa!" IF shouted as she rushed back to defend her friend. "Hold on!"

"You won't be going anywhere!"

The guild agent turned, raising her qatars in defense, against another lance-wielding Arfoire, who has her and Compa right in her sights!

"**KINESTRA SLASH**!"

The attack struck before either the nurse or the guild agent could react, causing them to be sent flying!

"GAAAAAAAHHH!"

"Compa! Iffy!" Neptune shouted, locked in combat against the first lance-wielding Arfoire.

"What's wrong, Neptune?" Arfoire taunted. "Losing your grip already? You're making this too easy!"

She deflected the sword attack, and readies her next attack.

"Grrr! **DELTA SLASH**!"

"**PURPASCENS BURST**!"

Neptune attempted to hit her with her electric attack, but Arfoire rushed through it and struck Neptune dead and true.

"GAH! That's not fair!"

The Beast roared, furiously charging at the axe-wielding Arfoire, who only smirked and taunted the transformed man with a finger.

"STEP ASIDE!"

"**GETTER RAVINE**!"

The clash was fierce, but the winner was already determined...

"GUOH!"

Noire clicked her tongue, clashing with the sword-wielding Arfoire. "This is bad. I didn't think she'd be this tough."

"Of course I am" Arfoire boasted. "To strike effectively, one must learn to bare their fangs until the right moment. It's basic strategy"

Noire glared at her opponent. "Why you...! **LACY DANCE**!"

"**LACY DANCE**!"

Their attacks matched up, but Arfoire had more power in her strikes, so Noire was pushed back!

"I'm not done! **VOLCANO DIVE**!"

The small eruption stroke true, sending both Noire and Neptune packing.

"GAAAAAHHH!"

"Haa-hahahahahaha!" all four Arfoires laughed at the same time. "Come now! Where was the fire and the passion that you all had? Don't tell me your bodies couldn't keep up after dealing with Maleficent!?"

"How is this possible...?" Noire bemoaned, struggling to stand.

"Maybe...her power wasn't divided...after all..." IF guessed, even in her damaged state.

"Or...do you think..." Compa struggled to say. "...maybe...she's just...too strong...for us..."

The Beast growled, trying to stand, only to stumble back down. "Cursed...witch!"

Neptune tried to stand up, barely being able to do so.

"Oh?" One of the Arfoires said. "You still stand, Neptune?"

Despite her stand, Neptune remained silent.

"No words? Ah..." Arfoire realized. "It seems your fear has taken root in your mind before your body did, and only now it's catching up to you..."

"Neptune..." Noire called out weakly.

But Neptune smirked. "Don't count me out yet..."

The Arfoires furrowed their eyes on the purple menace, slowly raising her finger upward.

"Every protag always has an ace in the hole..."

The Arfoires then gasped, widening their eyes in surprise!

"Since when...?" IF gasped.

"Did Nep-Nep make that!?" Compa cried.

Behind them, a large spectral sword was summoned, poised to fire at whatever's in front of it.

"Checkmate..."

Extending her hand out, Neptune sent the spectral sword forth, causing a massive explosion against the four Arfoires!

"A direct hit!" IF reported.

"Did it work?" Compa hoped.

Noire furrowed her eyes to see through the chaos...

"No way..."

...only to see all four Arfoires with their left arms raised, erecting a magical barrier that shielded them from the attack!

"Is that all, Neptune?"

The girl couldn't give an answer as she fell onto her knees, her strength giving out.

"Her 32-Bit Mega Blade..." Noire bemoaned. "It didn't hit..."

"This blows..."

In a swift instant, the three Arfoire clones converged on the party!

The sword-wielding Arfoire placed her sword near Noire's neck, ready to slice it off.

The axe-wielding Arfoire lined up her axe near the heads of Compa and the Beast, as if she has become their executioner.

The lance-wielding Arfoire double readied her spear over IF's chest, ready to pierce her heart like a sheesh-kabob.

Meanwhile, the real Arfoire slowly walked over to the downed heroine.

"You see the difference in our strength now, Neptune? You and your friends were never a match for me. Not now, not ever!"

As she approached her, she used her spear to gently raise the girl's head, letting her see the girl's face.

"Now that you recognize that, I only ask for two things. Your power..."

She then glanced upon the tome, sticking out of the right side of Neptune's parka pocket.

"...and that tome..."

The witch then looked to the downed party, all at the mercy of her clones.

"...for your friends' lives!"

"Don't do it, Neptune!" Noire pleaded.

"If you do, that hag's gonna win!" IF exclaimed.

"Get up and run away, Nep-Nep!" Compa pleaded.

"Hurry!" the Beast shouted.

The witch glanced back to Neptune, her head still tilted up by her spear.

"Well, what's your choice, Neptune? We don't have all day, you know?"

"*Neptune*!" Histoire begged. "*Please do as they say. Get up and run as far away as you can! We can't let Arfoire win*!"

"But..."

"*There's a saying here. We must run in order to live for another day. We can't risk the worlds in jeopardy like this!*"

"But then, Noire and the others will..." Neptune wondered, nervously glancing at her downed friends

"*I know what you feel, but if Arfoire obtains all that power, then the worlds will fall just like Gamindustri!*"

"Well?" the witch impatiently demanded. "Your answer, Neptune?"

"Neptune!"

"Nep!"

"Nep-Nep!"

"..."

A good three seconds passed...

"Go ahead...You win..."

Everyone looked at the girl in shock. Did Neptune just...

"Wha..."

"Nep-Nep..."

"W-Why!?"

"This isn't worth it..." Neptune cried. "Giving up my friends for the sake of a world I don't know, even though I could've lived in it? I don't think I could ever make that choice..."

"But Nep!" IF pleaded. "That witch could destroy everything, INCLUDING US! Just forget about us and run away already!"

"No!" Neptune suddenly shouted as tears leaked out of her eyes. "I don't wanna leave you guys! I don't wanna leave Sora and the others behind too! I...I still have my promise to Noire!"

Noire gasped at the mention of her name.

"I still promised Histy I'd free her!"

"*Neptune...*"

"I wanna keep on going on adventures and stuff with you all. You...All of you...You all are my world!"

"Nep..."

"Nep-Nep..."

IF and Compa started to cry upon hearing her declaration.

"So, what if I lose my power as a CPU!? So, what if I lose my Keyblade like Sora did!?" Neptune declared, life returning to her eyes. "I still got my heart with me! And it's saying...no, it's screaming at me to keep my whole world safe! And if it means giving up this 'spark'...even if it means we have to part again...I'll do anything to protect it!"

"Neptune..." Noire called out, tears once again leaking from her eyes.

"So, go on, Arforichi!" Neptune declared, raising her arms. "Take my power! Take Histy from me! Just spare my friends and we're good, got it!?"

Arfoire chuckled. "Very well. A deal is a deal."

She snapped her fingers, causing the clones to disperse into balls of light that end up converging into the witch.

"Now then..."

She then grabbed Neptune by the neck...

"...Your power shall be mine at last, Neptune!"

...and after taking the tome from her, began to absorb Neptune's power in earnest...

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!"

"NEP-NEP!"

IF and Noire looked away in shame, tears still leaking from their eyes.

Eventually, the sound of flowing energy stopped as Arfoire began to glow with overwhelming energy.

"Hahahaha! HAA-HAHAHAHAHAHA!" Arfoire bellowed as her weapon now transformed into a black katana. "At long last! I finally have ALL four CPU powers! The right to reign over Gamindustri is mine and mine alone!"

She then glanced at the girl still in her grasp. "And it's all thanks to you, Neptune. My goal is now within reach!"

"Well...good for you..." Neptune snarked. "Now, let me and my pals walk away in peace...and we won't bug you again..."

Arfoire hummed. "About that..."

She then dropped Neptune to the ground.

"...How about I kill you all right here and now?"

Neptune's eyes widened in shock. "No fair, Arwitch! We had a deal!"

"And I'm a villainess, remember?" the witch declared offhandly. "Playing fair was NEVER in my creed."

IF and Noire glared at the witch with righteous fury.

"I knew it..." IF said, slamming her fist onto the pavement. "I knew she wouldn't go through with it...!"

"Are we...gonna die...?" Compa cried.

Noire gritted her teeth as she casted her mightiest glare at the evil witch.

"ARRRRRFOOOIRRREEEEE!"

As the other CPU screamed, Arfoire felt a looming presence over her...

"ROAAAAAARRR!"

...and swatted him away, right next to the middle right stasis chamber, pinned by dark spectral swords.

"You're quite a nuisance, you know that?" Arfoire said without glancing at her attacker. "Be thankful I gave you a place next to your beauty, filthy beast."

The Beast growled, but he could not break free from his binds!

She then raised the reacquired tome. "Now, Histoire! By my right as successor of Gamindustri, grant me the power I rightfully deserve!"

"*Arfoire...*"

Arfoire chuckled. "Before you all say anything, yes, I'm quite aware that with the seal, I can't access the whole tome. However..."

She then began to exert energy against the tome itself!

"AAAAAAAAHHHH!"

"Histoire!" Noire cried.

"You heard that, right Iffy?" Compa said in shock.

"Yeah..." IF nodded. "That must be Histoire!"

"Histy..." Neptune cried softly.

"I anticipated such an obstacle!" Arfoire boasted. "I studied across several tomes and scrolls in order to bypass your seal! Now, with the power of the four Console Patron Units, grant me power unimaginable! Grant me dominion over our world and all others as the ONE TRUE GODDESS!"

"AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

"What'll happen now, Iffy?" the nurse cried. "Are we really going to die?"

The guild agent slowly crawled to her friend, hugging her tightly. "It'll be okay, Compa. I'll work out a solution..."

Neptune could only gaze upon Arfoire, smug yet triumphant, as she forces Histy to do...whatever she wanted to do...

"...?"

Only to feel warmth surrounding her.

"Noire?"

She turned around to see the twin-tailed girl, who only gave her a wry smile as she hugged her from behind.

A sad smile...

Yet, Neptune could only give a smile back...

"Sorry, Noire" the girl who once held the key apologized. "Guess I screwed up, huh?"

Noire sighed, never losing her smile. "You really did. But...you didn't abandon us...I guess...I can be grateful for that, at least..."

Neptune sniffed as tears leaked out a bit more.

"Guess this is it, huh?"

"Yeah...For how short it was...it's been fun..."

Neptune chuckled. "Yeah...It really was..."

She then sighed. "I only wished...we could'a gone out there...like we promised..."

Noire scooted closer and gently laid her forehead against Neptune's, the latter surprised by her action...

"It's alright..." the twin-tailed CPU reassured, her tone and face seemingly at peace despite the situation. "You did all you could...That's all anyone could ask for..."

"Noire..."

Neptune reciprocated, laying her forehead against Noire's as they both closed their eyes and awaited the end...

"*Sorry Sora, Donald, Goofster...I guess I messed up to the end...I only hope...you'll forgive me once we see each other on the other side...*"

"I'm sorry, but you fail to meet the requirements for such a demand..."

...only for it to never come...

"What?" Arfoire nearly shouted. "What do you mean?"

"As I said, you fail to meet the aforementioned requirements."

"What in the actual heck, Histoire!" the witch yelled back. "Why haven't I been granted the power yet!?"

"Must I repeat myself? You failed to meet the requirements to be granted sovereignty over Gamindustri."

"Impossible!" Arfoire argued. "I already have the power of all four CPU's! I should be reigning all over the worlds by now! So WHY!?"

"I do not wish to repeat myself a fourth time. You heard the reasons, so figure the rest out yourself"

Arfoire growled in anger, throwing her weapon down. "WHY!? WHAT AM I STILL MISSING!? I WAS SO CLOSE!"

"Uh, anyone wanna fill me in here?" Neptune asked around as she and Noire looked at their fellow companions.

"I have no idea what's going on anymore..." Compa admitted, wiping her cheeks with a handkerchief.

"Me neither..." IF said as she stood and helped the nurse up. "But for now, let's take this chance and regroup"

"Regroup?" Noire wondered. "With Sora and the others?"

The guild agent nodded. "We won't be able to take that witch down by ourselves. Let's meet up with the others and form up a plan"

"Wait!" Compa urged, glancing to the trapped Beast. "But what about...?"

Said Beast shook his head, and motioned his head to the path ahead, silently urging them to go on ahead without him.

"That answers that" IF mused as she started moving. "Now, let's go! Hopefully, everything's going fine on their end..."

The other three nodded as they proceeded on ahead, leaving the ranting witch, the trapped Beast and the captured tome behind.

"*What is this?*" Neptune thought as she and her friends went past the disabled IMB. "*What's this...icky feeling in my chest? I don't like this...*"

A few minutes ago, near the dark passageway...

"Riku...!"

Sora tried in vain to reach out to his best friend, who has been possessed by a man called Ansem, the Seeker of Darkness. In a riveting duel, Sora, beckoned by Kairi's voice, was able to triumph, but his best friend vanished before he could reach out to him.

"Sora!" Donald called out near the dark passageway.

"The Keyhole!" Goofy cried in a panic as they saw darkness spilling from the dark passageway.

Sora raised his Keyblade in an attempt to seal it, but nothing happened...

"What's wrong?" Donald wondered.

"The Keyhole's not finished yet!" Goofy guessed.

"Then what do we do?" Sora bemoaned as he withdrew his Keyblade. "Should we go get Neptune?"

The royal captain turned to the unconscious body in the area.

"Maybe we oughta wake Kairi up!" he suggested.

"But how do we do that?" the court wizard asked.

"Go wake Kairi up..." Sora thought aloud. "But how...?"

His eyes then turned to the fake Keyblade Riku once possessed, lying on the ground bereft of its wielder.

"A Keyblade that opens people's hearts, I wonder..."

He then walked down to grab the Keyblade...

"Sora...?"

Donald gasped at the sight, realizing what he's going to do.

"Sora! Wait!"

The boy turned to his friends with a goofy smile.

"SORA!"

The three turned to see the girls running in, exhausted and out of breath.

"Hey, Neptune..." Sora said sadly. "It's been fun..."

He then aimed the Keyblade at his own heart...

IF gasped. "No! Is he going to...!?"

"Take care of her, okay?"

...and STABBED himself with it!

As he let the Keyblade go, he could feel his consciousness, his entire being getting lighter and lighter, his eyes getting heavier as his vision blurred...

The false Keyblade crashed into the ground, dissolving into darkness as six hearts emerged and flew over to the princess locked in their stasis chambers, reentering into their original owners.

Meanwhile, one more heart emerged from Sora and flew into the unconscious Kairi, waking her up at last, bringing a smile to the boy's face.

And for the coup de grace, a dark orb, shielded by bright purple energy, flew out of him as the boy who held the key dissolved into light. This sight did not the guild agent's notice.

"SORA!" Donald screamed as he tried to reach him. "SORA!"

"DON'T GO!" Neptune pleaded as she ran up to him. "PLEASE! SORA!"

Kairi immediately got up upon hearing Sora's name...

"Sora!"

...and tried to reach him, only to dissolve into the light as sparks faded...

"SORA!" Donald cried out into the distance. "COME BACK, SORA!"

"YOU STUPID, IDIOT JERKFACE!" Neptune yelled at the top of her lungs. "WHY'D YOU GO AND DO THAT!? WHY!?"

...But it was no use...

"*I'm...falling...*"

Sora, the Keyblade's Chosen One...

"*Falling...and falling...into darkness...*"

...is gone...

"Sora..." Kairi cried out "Did you really...?"

Noire approached the crying Neptune and patted her on the shoulder.

Sensing this, the girl with the key immediately leapt on her fellow CPU's arms and buried her weeping face onto her friend's chest.

"He's gone, Noire..." Neptune cried. "He's gone...Why did he have to go like that…?"

"I'm sorry..." Noire said to the young girl as she patted her head. "He was a good friend…"

"Is he..." Compa cried as IF comforted her. "Is he really gone? Our Sora, gone?"

The guild agent, however, growled in frustration as the tears flowed from her eyes. "Why couldn't he just wait!? If we had more time, we'd come up with a plan together! But then, he…he…that moron!"

Donald moaned in defeat while Goofy tried his best not to cry.

"Will Sora ever come back?" the royal captain whined.

Noire sighed, feeling the gloomy atmosphere. "I hate to say it, but given what just happened, I don't think he's gonna..."

"NO!"

Everyone turned to Kairi, her clenched fist laid close to her heart.

She shook her head, refusing to believe this was really happening. "He's not gone! He's still here! I believe in Sora! I won't let him go!"

Hearing this caused Neptune to look at the islander girl in surprise.

"Yeah..." the de-powered CPU said, wiping off her tears. "She's right! Sora's not gone! He's the protag of this story! Er, one of them! Protags can't die 3/4th's into the story! They just can't!"

Everyone looked to each other, each with faces of hope and reassurance etched into them. Kairi in particular started to giggle a bit at Neptune's declaration.

"Leave it to you to say it in meta-terms, Nep..." IF sighed, having calmed down. "But if you're all willing to believe in that, I'll do the same."

"Same here" Noire nodded. "He's one of my friends now too! We mustn't lose faith in him!"

Everyone around nodded, their determination rising by the second.

"WHERE IS HE!?"

The seven turned their heads to see Arfoire, desperate and out of breath, holding onto the tome that held Histoire.

"Arfoire!?" Donald yelled.

"Back already!?" Noire shouted as she stood in front of Neptune.

"Hey!" Goofy shouted, pointing to the large tome on her hand. "Give Histy back!"

Ignoring their rumblings, Arfoire scanned around the area. "WHERE IS THAT BOY!? HE HAS WHAT I WANT!"

"What does Sora have that she wants?" Compa whimpered.

IF clicked her tongue. "So, she thought the same idea, too..."

Arfoire then glared at the recently-awoken princess. "You! Tell me where he is!"

Kairi instinctively took a few steps back. Whoever this old lady is, she's not good news...

"I'm not telling!" the islander girl responded.

Seeing this, Neptune and Noire moved in to defend Kairi.

"I won't ask again, girl..." the witch growled. "WHERE. IS. THE BOY!?"

"Hey! The princess says she's not telling!" Neptune snapped back. "And her word is law!"

She then turned her head to the islander and winked with a quick smile. Kairi couldn't help but giggle at the sight. She almost reminded her of Sora in a way...

Arfoire huffed. "What can you do? You're nothing but a powerless little worm now. All you can do is delay the inevitable!"

"Looks like she won't budge, huh?" Donald murmured.

"No" Noire answered. "She has Histoire and is close to having all the power she could want. We can't let her get through with her plans!"

Goofy nodded. "Then me and Donald will handle that meanie witch!"

Donald huffed in affirmation, standing bravely in front of the party against said witch.

Arfoire laughed. "What can you two lackeys even do!? I have the power of all 4 CPU's of Gamindustri in my hands!"

She then switched her weapon from a spear, to a battle axe, to a broadsword and finally into a katana to add to her boast. The witch then raised Histoire's tome with her free hand for good measure!

"And what's more, I have Histoire in my hands! With all these powers, I will have reign over Gamindustri, and once I do, I'll seize Kingdom Hearts and extend my rule towards ALL WORLDS! There's nothing I cannot do! Haa-hahahahaha!"

"*If Histy is the reason why she's able to gain all that power then...*"

[sneaky sneaky]

IF turned to the side and noticed the nurse silently walking to the other side of the area. "What is she...*Wait...*"

The guild agent then noticed the tome still raised on Arfoire's left hand, and immediately understood what her friend was going for. "I see...T*hen I'll get you all the time you need. Good thing she doesn't know what really happened to Sora right now. Better take advantage of that while I still can.*"

"But can you really pull that off?"

Everyone present turned to IF, who smirked.

Arfoire growled as she stopped laughing. "You dare speak against me!?"

"Face it!" the guild agent taunted. "The only reason you've been able to get this far was because you absorbed powers that weren't yours to begin with!"

"So, what if I did!? Those stupid CPU's wouldn't even KNOW how to use those powers right!"

"There's a fine difference between being stupid and not even knowing what something is!" Noire fought back.

[Sneaky, Sneaky]

"Yeah!" Neptune followed, focusing on the current conversation. "We didn't even get to learn our whole deal as CPU's, so what gives, old lady!?"

"That's because newborns like you are not worthy of the powers you were given!"

"Newborns?" Kairi noted.

[Sneaky, SNEAKY]

"So, what if they were?" Donald fought back.

"If they've just been born, that means they can learn a lot about themselves on the way!" Goofy pointed out. "Our King certainly took time to learn about his duties, after all"

"Yeah" the royal wizard agreed. "Besides, I'd take them as our goddesses over an old hag like you any day!"

"What!?"

"So..." Kairi tried to interject. "Please retire from now on. I'm sure these new ones will do a great job!"

Arfoire's growling got even louder. "Even you!?"

"Dang!" Neptune commented. "That's one sick burn you got, girl friend!"

Kairi giggled in thanks. She has got to know them more later.

[SNEAKY, SNEAKY]

"That's it...That's it!"

Arfoire couldn't contain her anger any further!

"I'll destroy you fools here and now! Maybe then you'll tell me where your friend is!"

"NOW!"

But then, a loud shout was heard near her and before the witch knew it, the tome in her hand is gone!

"I got you back, Histy!"

It was Compa! The nurse has somehow snuck into the scene and snatched Histoire from the witch's clutches while she was distracted.

"Wha-" If Arfoire wasn't completely incensed, she is now. "HOW DARE YOU!?"

"Eeeeeeepppp!" Compa whimpered. "Bye-bye!"

The nurse immediately ran to her friends while the witch primed spectral swords against her!

"Take cover, Compa!"

But Goofy dashed forth with shield in hand, blocking the swords from hitting her!

"Go away!"

Donald followed up with a **Blizzaza** to Arfoire's face, pushing her back!

"Nice job, Compa!" IF praised the nurse.

"That was really dangerous!" Noire shouted with worry. "One wrong step and either that witch would have you dead on their sights!"

"I...I know..." Compa gasped between breaths. "That was really scary!"

IF gave a warm smile as she patted the nurse's head. "It's okay, Compa. You did good."

"I had to" Compa insisted, giving the tome back to Neptune. "Nep-Nep gave her powers up for us. I feel I had to do something to pay her back."

"D'awwwww!" Neptune cried. "You didn't have to think of it like that! Pals don't need to repay favors or anything like that"

"Even so!" the nurse stood her ground. "I had to do something for you! Your words touched my heart like nothing else! I want to keep going with you too!"

"Compa..."

Donald and Goofy looked to their party members, and then nodded to themselves.

Arfoire growled. "So, what if you retrieved Histoire? I still have more than enough power to eliminate you all!"

She then began to summon black energy swords around her, all primed to assault the party.

"Hey!" Neptune shouted in anger. "She's using my technique! Not cool!"

Goofy immediately stood in front of the group, raising his shield forward. "Get behind me, everybody!"

"NOW, DI-"

An evil laughter was heard in the room, one that didn't come from the evil witch.

"Who...?" Noire wondered.

And then, Arfoire was suddenly blasted by a dark laser, causing the swords around her to be dispelled in the process

"This charade has certainly taken an interesting turn!" a deep voice declared.

"Who dares to attack me!?

Arfoire stood up and glared at the dark pathway, seeing a man, with tanned skin, amber eyes, white hair, wearing a gray open coat with a Heartless emblem on his chest, emerged onto the scene.

"Who are you!?" Arfoire demanded.

The man laughed. "If you must know, I am Ansem. One who seeks the darkness of all."

"Ansem?" Donald repeated.

"Isn't that the guys who led the Heartless into this world?" Compa asked

IF nodded. "Yeah. He's the reason why Leon and the others had to leave. The reason why the Heartless were able to invade the worlds to begin with."

"Oh man!" Neptune complained. "That guy definitely screams evil villain, alright!"

"Hmmmmm" Goofy closely inspected the new arrival. "You don't look like the kind of guy King Mickey described!"

Ansem laughed again. "What's there to mistake me for? My name is Ansem and that is a fact."

He then made his way to the exhausted evil witch.

"And as for you, witch. Your role in this story has long ended. It is time for you to depart..."

Arfoire growled in anger.

"LIKE I WOULD DO THAT!"

In her anger, she summoned several spectral swords, all aimed against Ansem!

"I HAVE THE POWER OF FOUR CPU'S! I AM STRONGER THAN EVEN YOU!"

The man, for his part, only chuckled in amusement.

"Truly the desperate cries of a false goddess..."

He then taunted her. "Come"

"RRRAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

In her anger, she aimed the swords at Ansem, and blasted him with them!

"A direct hit!" IF shouted.

"That's a lotta swords..." Goofy gulped in fear.

"Did that really do him in though?" Noire wondered.

Arfoire gasped for breath as the dust cleared in front of her...

"Is that all?"

The witch's eyes widened. The attack didn't even pierce through...

"Grrrrrr..."

...because Ansem has summoned a dark creature in front of him to protect him from harm.

"You've done well, **Guardian**"

The creature let out a light growl as he vanished from view.

"Wha-" Arfoire could let only let out. "What are you!?"

Ansem snickered and then sneered. "I told you, witch. I am the Seeker of Darkness. I will sink all of existence into the depths of darkness, for that is the truth of this world."

Arfoire growled. "Then keep your truth to yourself! I will have control over all! I WILL DEFINE ALL OF EXISTENCE IF I HAVE TO!"

Ansem smirked as he folded his arms. "Are you certain you have the strength? The resolve?"

Just as she was readying another attack, she looked and saw the party, still standing and ready for another battle.

Arfoire clicked her tongue as she retreated. "You will all pay for this! I swear it! FOR I AM THE ONE TRUE GODDESS OF GAMINDUSTRI!"

"Hey!" Neptune complained. "Get back here! What do you even want Sora for, anyway!?"

But the witch was gone, vanishing into the darkness.

"Worry about her later!" Noire warned. "There's still someone here we have to worry about!"

The tanned man chuckled. "Now that was an interesting diversion, but now..."

He turned towards the party, who remained wary of their new guest.

"I see you have awakened at last, princess" Ansem stated, eyeing the islander girl.

Kairi gulped, feeling nervous and anxious all of a sudden... "Who are you?"

He then encroached the party, ignoring the girl's question. "Still, you have fulfilled your role admirably, but now, it is over. It is time for you to depart."

As he encroached upon her, Kairi couldn't help but feel anxiety and fear as the man approached her.

Her mind flashed to a time when her tiny hands reached for the gates, only to be surrounded by tiny yet menacing monsters as a man in a lab coat approached her, grabbing her away...

"No..." Kairi whispered in fear. "Stay away..."

"Don't make another move!"

Kairi snapped out of her fear-induced episode, seeing the duck wielding a staff, the walking dog with his shield, the girl in the blue coat wearing blades on her wrists and the other girl wearing twin-tails wielding a rapier all bravely standing before her, defending her from the scary man.

"Are you okay?"

The islander girl turned to her right to see the crying girl who snatched the tome from earlier. Compa, right?

"I...I think so, yeah"

"C'mon, girl friend!" the tiny girl wearing the parka cheerily said. "You gotta cheer up and smile! It's...it's what Sora would have wanted..."

Kairi smiled at the girl wearing the parka. There's just something about her that cheers you up, no matter the situation.

It reminds her of Sora, in a way...

"Do ya think we can take him?" the dog asked his friend.

"I don't know..." the duck admitted.

"Even so, we gotta buy them some time" the girl in the blue coat said. "We can't let Sora and Nep's sacrifices go to waste!"

"Yeah..." the twin-tailed girl whispered. "At least, if we can get Neptune and Kairi out with Histoire, then..."

However, just as the man closed in on them, he suddenly stopped.

"I-Impossible!"

He began to shake, as if he was held back by some mysterious force...

"No...You won't...use me for this!"

Said force shimmered into view, revealing a familiar boy encased in light...

"Riku!" Kairi and Noire yelled.

"You gotta run!" Riku warned everyone. "The Heartless are coming!"

Sure enough, several Shadows spawned around them.

IF clicked her tongue. "Just what we need!"

"We can't stay here!" Compa cried. "We gotta run!"

Neptune growled. "Alright! I'll take 'em!"

She extended her hand out, but...

"Huh? What gives?"

"Neptune..." Noire grimly informed her fellow CPU. "...You gave up your powers, remember? That means your Keyblade's gone too..."

"Oh!" Neptune suddenly realized. "Ahhhhhhh! What do I do!? What do I do!?"

As she jumped around in a panic, her salvation was found.

"I got it!"

She leapt forth, landing into a roll as she grabbed a Wooden Sword that was lying on the floor.

"I'll make do with this!"

"But Nep-Nep" Compa tried to warn the girl. "You won't be able to do much with that! Not even Sora could damage the Heartless as much with it!"

Sure enough, the few hits she tried to do against the Shadows barely knocked them back.

"Geez" Neptune complained. "Well, I still got my magic! I ain't backing down from this!"

"Now's not the time to be reckless!" IF shouted, slicing down a Shadow. "We can't afford to stay here. We're already beat trying to defeat Maleficent. Besides, we got who we came here for, so let's book it already!"

"But...!"

"Neptune!" Donald called out. "Let's just go!"

Suddenly, three Shadows attempted to pounce on the party, only to be repelled by a slash from a rapier, causing Neptune to gasp at the sight.

"Go!"

"Noire!?"

The twin-tailed CPU turned her head with a fierce look.

"I'll keep them busy! Hurry and go!"

"But...but...!"

Noire gave a smirk towards Neptune.

"Don't forget, Neptune. I may be without most of my power, but I'm still a CPU. I won't fall that easily!"

She readied her stance, daring the Heartless to attack her.

"Besides, I still have someone to save here. Now go!"

Neptune gripped the wooden sword in frustration.

"No!" she insisted. "If you're staying, then I..."

"Neptune..."

The girl in the parka turned to see Kairi, tightly gripping her shoulder, her face conflicted and torn.

"We have to go...Please..."

"*Take care of her, okay?*"

Realizing that she still has one more thing to do, Neptune, her grip on the Wooden Sword never loosening, relented.

"Fine! But don't forget about our promise, ya hear!?"

The girl in the parka turned around and jumped off the area as the rest of the party ran down the stairs to join her in their flight.

Noire smiled. "You know I won't"

She then charged energy onto her sword, ready to make her last stand.

"Now, come here! I am Noire! Come and do your worst!"

As the battle raged on, one of the Shadows, surrounded by a purplish glow, slinked away, and as if beckoned on by curiosity, pursued the fleeing party instead of aiding it's comrades against the brave, yet stubborn CPU.

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"Did we lose them?" Donald asked, looking around the area.

"I don't sense any of them right now" IF reported. "But who knows when that can change."

"Kairi! Nep-Nep!" Goofy called to the girl above the fountain. "We gotta hurry!"

"But we can't just leave them here!" Kairi insisted.

"C'mon, girl friend!" Neptune cheered, trying to keep the islander girl's mood up. "It'll be fine! Once we rest up and meet with the others, we're gonna come back and get our buck-o's outta there!"

"Buck-o?" Kairi raised an eyebrow while trying to hold back her giggling.

"It's what I call Sora now and again" Neptune shrugged, escorting the islander down the stairs. "Dunno why I do, but it stuck to me, so, yeah"

"He must not like that, huh?" Kairi wondered.

"He wasn't complaining, that's for sure" the girl in the parka chirped.

"Strange" the islander mused. "Sora usually doesn't like being given nicknames or being called by anything other than his name."

"D'awwwww, I'm pretty sure he'd make an exception for you!" Neptune reassured as they are about to rejoin their comrades.

"Y-You think so?" Kairi said, her face flushed.

Neptune nodded. "I know it! In fact, I've got a neat-o suggestion..."

"Guys, get behind us!"

The rest of the party gathered in front of the two girls, their weapons armed and at the ready.

"What's up?" Neptune asked.

"There's one of them comin'!"

Goofy pointed to the strange Shadow Heartless making its way down the staircase.

"Doesn't that one look kinda strange?" Compa noticed.

"Yeah" IF remarked. "Like what kind of aura is that?"

"I'll take care of it!"

Donald charged forth, but since he's out of MP and out of items, he resorted to hitting it square on the head thrice with his staff.

"Confounded Heartless!" Donald yelled. "Get lost, will ya!?"

But it didn't even move. It just kept staring at them like a newborn baby.

In particular, the Heartless was staring at Kairi and Neptune.

"Hey, this purple-like glow..." Neptune noticed. "Is this..."

"Sora?" Kairi called out to the Heartless. "Is that you?"

"Wait!" Compa panicked, putting her syringe, that she had aimed against the Heartless, behind her back. "THAT'S SORA!?"

"Huh, that would make sense..." IF mumbled, kneeling down to observe the glowing Shadow. "For someone as nice as him, he would only have a little bit of darkness in him."

"But if he's like this" Goofy panicked. "How do we change him back?"

"Good question..." Donald said, folding his arms. "Nothing in my magic studies ever mentioned about this..."

"Why don't we take him with us, then?" Neptune suggested.

Everyone, including the Shadow, looked at the former CPU with widened eyes.

"Look, I know it's a silly idea" Neptune started, scratching the back of her head. "But, if this little guy really is our buck-o, then we really gotta change him back!"

Kairi nodded, scooping the glowing Shadow and holding it like a housecat. "I agree. I want to get Sora back, no matter what it takes!"

"Are you two sure about this?" IF asked, standing up. "For all we know, this Heartless could be someone else, or something more dangerous..."

"No" Kairi said. "I know this is Sora. He may not look like him now, but I feel it in my heart. This one IS Sora!"

Neptune nodded fiercely. "Besides, do you see that purple glow? I'm getting all the fuzzies just by feeling it, so, yeah! That's gotta be Sora, no doubt about it!"

IF hummed.

"Well, what do you think?" Donald asked the guild agent. "Is this one really Sora?"

"You don't believe us?" Kairi asked sadly.

Neptune groaned. "C'mon, Iffy! I get that's your name, but you don't have to doubt EVERYTHING, y'know!?"

IF sighed. "That's not what my name means, Nep. And...well, despite my thoughts saying otherwise, I wanna believe that this little guy here's our Sora"

Compa smiled. "Iffy..."

The guild agent sighed, sheathing the qatar on her right wrist as she patted the Heartless on the head. "This guy, I swear. Going out like that when he did. He and Nep really are two peas in a pod, huh?"

"Yeah!" Donald nodded and then turned to Neptune with a stern look. "Why did you have to give up your powers like that!?"

Goofy nodded, his eyebrows furrowed. "That was pretty reckless of ya!"

"W-What was I supposed to do!?" Neptune complained. "That Ar-somebody had us for rights! I had to do something!"

"Now, now, everyone" Compa said, smoothing over the atmosphere. "The important thing is, in a way, our party is back together again."

Neptune nodded, brightening her mood a bit. "Hear, hear!"

Kairi giggled. "You all must have a lot of fun together, huh?"

"Don't say like you weren't there!" Donald said.

Goofy nodded. "If what Donald heard back there's true, then you've been with us ever since Sora left the islands. In a way, you've been adventurin' with us too!"

The islander chuckled. "In a way, yeah. But I'd still like to hear all about it."

Neptune guffawed. "In that case, let's all chat about it when we get Sora back! I'm sure you two have a lot of 'catching up' to do, if ya know what I mean?"

Kairi's face flushed as she played with her fingers. "W-Well..."

The girl in the parka laughed. "Look at that! That's young love in its finest, I tell ya!"

And then Goofy yelled. "UH-OH!"

Suddenly, a swarm of Shadows surrounded the whole party, interrupting their moment.

"Rude!" Neptune complained, bringing out her wooden sword. "We were having a nice moment here!"

"How good are we to go?" IF asked around.

Compa nodded. "We can keep going, Iffy!"

The guild agent nodded back. "Okay, but fight sparsely. We're all out of items and our MP reserves are running low. We don't wanna kick the bucket just as we're reaching the finish line."

"Nep-Nep, take care of Sora and Kairi for us, okay?" Goofy requested.

Neptune gave the royal knight a thumbs up. "Leave it to me!"

The party scrambled to deal with the mass of Shadows surrounding them. Thankfully, the Shadows are still weak, and the party still has enough strength to spare...

"It's okay, Sora" Kairi reassured, petting the glowing Shadow. "This time, I'll protect you"

..but, more Shadows started spawning near the two girls, surrounding them.

"They're coming here!" Neptune yelled, swatting a nearby Shadow away.

"Blast!"

IF tried to move to them, but the nearby Shadows tried to pounce on her, forcing her to keep her attention on them.

"This is not good!" Compa whined, taking out a Shadow. "We'll be completely surrounded at this rate!"

Eventually, the Shadows converged on the two girls...

"Sora!"

"No!"

...forcing Kairi to hug the glowing Shadow, while Neptune shields the two with her own body!

"Oh no!" Donald cried as the girls were being consumed by the Shadows.

"Kairi!" Goofy yelled. "Nep-Nep!"

However, a bright light shone forth, blasting the nearby Shadows away, and on its center, embracing the red-haired girl...

"Kairi, Neptune..." a familiar boy said. "Thank you."

The red-haired girl opened her eyes and saw...

"Sora!"

"Sora!" Donald and Goofy cried.

"About time you showed up!" IF greeted.

"You came back!" Compa cried tears of joy. "I'm so glad!"

"O-Of course you came back!" Neptune said happily, tears flowing from her eyes. "The protagonist can't just die from the story. They just can't!"

Sora and Kairi looked at the former CPU, and the boy coyly said. "Are you crying?"

Neptune turned around and covered her eyes with the sleeve of her parka. "N-No! I just got something on my eye! That's all!"

"Since when did you and Noire swap places?" Sora teased the crying girl.

"Argh, shuddup!" Neptune shouted, lightly punching the boy's chest as she cried. "This is what you get for making me and the others worry, you know!? What's the deal, stabbing yourself like that!?"

The two islanders shared a laugh at that.

"Sorry, Neptune" Sora apologized.

Neptune sniffed. "It's cool, dude. I'm just...glad! Happy that you're back!"

The boy chuckled. "Glad to be back."

"Save the tears and greetings for later!" IF warned as she sliced another Shadow. "More of them are coming!"

Sure enough, more Shadows began to spawn.

"Is it me, or are there more of these guys than ever?" Goofy wondered.

"It must be because of the Keyhole!" Donald guessed.

"Um, do you think these ones will merge into something big?" Compa whimpered.

"I'd call that a load of bull-plop," IF started. "But considering everything else that happened, I wouldn't be surprised if they could form a Tower or a Tidal Wave or even a Hurricane."

"If that ever happens" Sora started. "You owe us a treat, IF"

"I WANT PUDDING!" Neptune chirped.

"Is this really the time for that!?" the guild agent complained.

Noticing some Shadows coming their way, Sora summoned his Keyblade and started taking them out, one by one!

He nodded to himself. "Yup! Still got it!"

"Aw, man" Neptune complained. "Sora's back in full force, and I still can't fight off these guys...What can I do...?"

She shook her head. "No, I can't think like that! Just focus on defending your friends! That's what important right now!"

The party returned their focus to the Shadows, but then...

"ROAR!"

...the Beast returned as well and lunged against the tiny Heartless.

"Go. Now!"

"Come with us!" Sora urged.

"I already told you! I'm not leaving without Belle!" the Beast insisted, standing his ground. "Now go! The Heartless are coming!"

"Okay..." Neptune said. "But you better stay alive, alright! We'll be back, ya hear!? I better not hear that you vanished, YA HEAR!?"

With the Beast holding the line, the party, with Kairi and Histoire in tow, immediately fled for the Gummi Ship and blasted off.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, NOW we are done with Hollow Bastion. I have to admit, a couple of scenes here was written differently, but due to certain expectations, I have to rethink my writing and adjusted accordingly. However, between this and the Dragon Maleficent debacle, I was a bit more motivated to do this rewrite (might be due to not being a complete action scene, which causes me to procrastinate, lol!). Also, yes, I adapted Compa's best scene in Rebirth 1 (and perhaps in all of Neptunia) in this chapter too! This world has been good to her in terms of scene adaptation between this and putting in her best Grandpa Quotes from the original PS3 game a few parts back.

Anyway, the world's first visit is done, but if you've noticed, I'm still talking here. Which means there's still one more part in this chapter to end it all. After that, Nepstation shall return! Do note though that the next chapter will ALSO be split into parts (not as much as this one, thankfully), so take note.

Hope to see you in the next part, where certain truths in regards to a certain world shall now be made to light. Be sure to ready some snacks and thinking by then! See ya later!

Chapter 19: Chapter 13.9: It All Began with a Letter (Curse)

Chapter Summary

> With Kairi and Histoire rescued, our party retreats back to Traverse Town, where certain mysteries began to unveil themselves...

Traverse Town – Third District – Vacant House

The party has flown from the ruins of Hollow Bastion, all the way back to the Refuge World of Traverse Town. Upon being informed of the situation, Leon and his group put their preparations on hold and had the two groups gather at the sole house in the Third District.

"You must've gone through a lot..." Leon said, noticing the weary looks of the party. "Tell me what happened."

"So basically, blah blah blah..."

The party then told Leon and his group everything that happened during their trek into Hollow Bastion, from their landing up until their exodus.

"I see." Leon said, taking in all the information. "The Final Keyhole opened, Maleficent gone, the remaining Princesses of Heart still being held, and Ansem's return as well..."

"That certainly explains why there are more Heartless everywhere..." Aerith said, petting the dogoo on her lap.

"Yeah" IF nodded, pocketing her cellphone. "I got info from all across the worlds. They say the Heartless have been reappearing throughout the worlds, including some really dangerous ones at that."

"Even after we sealed up all those Keyholes!?" Neptune groaned. "Great..."

Yuffie groaned as she laid down on the bed. "Just when we got the all clear, this had to happen..."

"Um, sorry?" Compa apologized weakly.

"It's not your fault" Artisan reassured. "Besides, it was at our request that you move in as much as possible, and from your progress, I'd say you exceeded our expectations at that."

Leon nodded. "Not only that, but with the Keyholes sealed, the Heartless will still have a hard time consuming the worlds they arrived in."

"So, they can hold out for a while, huh?" Donald summed up.

Goofy nodded. "And with our pals out there, I'm sure the other worlds are safe!"

"There's still the issue of that Keyhole back in the castle..." Artisan said. "It being left open like that will definitely cause trouble down the line..."

"Well, with an open problem like that..." Aerith pondered. "The only way to solve it is..."

"Seal the Keyhole, right?" Sora interjected, his Keyblade in hand.

"Maybe" Leon replied. "But who knows what'll happen once it's sealed..."

"Isn't this just like all the others, though?" Neptune wondered.

"Not quite" Artisan answered. "This Keyhole is artificially made. From what you all told us, we believe that this Keyhole does not lead to the world's core, but rather a passageway leading to where most of the Heartless spawned from..."

"The Realm of Darkness..." Aerith murmured.

"I heard that term before" IF recalled. "What is it?"

"Basically, it is an empty realm where the darkness of our universe resides" Artisan explained.

"Meanwhile, the Realm of Light is where the light of our universe resides" Aerith followed.

"It's also the Realm we are in!" Yuffie finished.

"Well, that's great and all" Sora interrupted. "But we can't just sit here and wait! I've got a friend back there!"

Leon closed his eyes in thought. "That's right. You've got one more friend to worry about."

Artisan turned to Donald. "You mentioned that a man calling himself Ansem possessed Riku and even wielded a sort of Keyblade with him, right?"

The royal wizard nodded. "What about it?"

"Have you all noticed anything strange about him?" the horned woman asked. "Aside from the fact that he possessed Riku, that is."

"I noticed that Keyblade he had had no keychain near the handle" IF noticed. "Does that mean something?'

"It can mean two things, actually" Aerith answered. "Either that Keyblade's a fake or a dead one"

"Fake?" Compa wondered.

"Dead!?" Neptune exclaimed.

"In that case, a Keyblade that lost it's power" Artisan said, taking over. "But from how recent you all saw it, that Keyblade must've been a fake that was made."

"From what?" Sora asked.

"The captive princesses' hearts" Leon answered. "Riku's Keyblade was made from their hearts, just like that Keyhole you saw"

His attention turned to Kairi, who was reading through Jiminy's Journal with a monoscope.

"Of course, without Kairi's heart, the Keyhole could not be opened" Leon continued. "However, once that Keyblade's destroyed, the princesses' hearts should have returned to their owners"

"I think it did" Compa interjected. "We saw some lights pouring out and went into where the princesses were held. Maybe they've woken up while we were running away"

"Meaning they're still in there..." Leon mused as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"That is a problem" Artisan mused. "While their hearts can resist the darkness, they can't withstand a direct assault from the Heartless on their own."

"Even though the Beast is there?" Goofy said.

"Don't forget Noire, too!" Compa interjected.

"They're quite tough!" Sora commented.

"Tough though they are" Yuffie said. "Even they can't hold forever without a Keyblade wielder with them, y'know!"

"But Noire has one!" Neptune protested.

"Nep" IF bitterly reminded. "Noire got her power absorbed like yours, right? That means she can't use it anymore..."

"Ah..."

The girl in the parka began to panic.

"Oh no! We gotta go back! Noire's in serious trouble!"

"Calm down, Nep-Nep!" Goofy tried to stop the girl.

"But she's up against the scary man all by herself!" Neptune protested. "What if she ends up becoming his puppet like he did to Riku!?"

"I don't think we have to worry about that"

Everyone's attention, including the reading Kairi, turned to the large tome lying in the middle table.

"Histy?"

"So, that's the Histy you've been talking about?" Artisan mused.

"Never thought I'd be speaking with a book of all things..." Yuffie commented.

"What do you mean by that?" Sora asked the tome.

"It will take a while to explain in full, but to sum it up" Histoire said. "It's because of Noire's latent Share Energy that she will be able to resist this 'Ansem's' possession."

"Share energy?" the boy asked.

"Wazzat?" the girl who once had the key asked.

"It is the latent energy that originated from Gamindustri" Histoire explained. "Do you recall how I thought you and Noire are CPU's, Neptune?"

"I think so" Neptune answered as the realization slowly dawned on her. "Wait, you saying me and Noire have this sort of energy in us?"

"Yes" Histy answered. "If you wish to know more, may I please be released from this seal? I'm honestly starting to get tired due to the strain placed upon me from it..."

"Yeah, but, uh" Neptune said, scratching her cheek. "How do we do that, exactly?"

"Is there some sort of trick to this?" Sora asked. "Like, what kind of magic seal is placed, exactly?"

"Maybe the answer's simpler than you think"

The two Keyblade wielders turned to Kairi.

"Kairi?"

The girl stood up from her seat and turned the large tome around, pointing to a keyhole lock on it's handle.

"How did we miss that?" Neptune wondered.

"I don't think we did" IF pointed. "The lock didn't look like that when you first got it"

"Maybe when that old lady tried to use her power, the seal on her tome weakened." Kairi theorized. "The reason why I pointed this out was because you were all talking about Keyholes and whatnot, and I happen to notice that tome had a lock looking like that."

"And if it's a lock" Donald noted. "It can be opened"

"And since the Keyblade can open any lock..." IF concluded.

From there on, the answer was clear...

"Kairi..." Neptune approached the islander girl with cheer. "You are a genius!"

Sora chuckled. "You always were the observant one!"

Kairi giggled, fixing her hair. "I had to. Who else will tell you how badly you lost to Riku in all the duels you had?"

Sora became flustered. "C-C'mon! Do you have to say that?"

Yuffie snickered. "Everyone's a loser at some point in their life!"

"Not all the time!" the boy complained.

Everyone began to laugh at the boy's expense.

"Oh, what's with all this laughter now?"

Suddenly, a puff of smoke appeared in the room, revealing a familiar wizard.

"Hey, Old Man Merlin!" Yuffie greeted.

"What are you doing here?" Aerith asked.

"I sensed a being of great power here" Merlin answered. "And since the Fairy Godmother's away on an errand, I figured I'd investigate this for myself."

"Well, you're just in time!" Neptune chirped. "This buck-o and I are at the ready to unseal Histy!"

"With your Keyblades, hm?" Merlin inspected the tome in question. "Hmmmm, it appears you both may be right on the munny on this one. The seal's located on the keyhole lock right here. With your powers, you should be able to undo the seal!"

Sora chuckled, glancing at his fellow islander. "Thank Kairi for that. She took notice of it and showed it to us."

Kairi chuckled nervously, twirling the edge of her hair. "It was nothing. I just pieced it together from what everyone's been talking about and took a gamble from there"

"Either way, you pointed them to the right direction" Merlin insisted. "I feel like that alone deserves praise, don't you think?"

Kairi nervously scratched her cheek.

"Oh, just take the W for this one, girl friend!" Neptune cheered. "It's not everyday you get to do stuff like this, so just take it!"

Kairi nodded. "Okay. Thanks!"

Merlin nodded as he stepped aside. "Now, allow me to step aside so you two can do your work."

As the Great Wizard moved, Neptune and Sora went to the front of the tome, ready to undo the seal...

"Oh yeah..." Neptune remembered, stepping back. "I don't have a Keyblade anymore. I can't undo the seal like this..."

"Huh?" Sora looked to his fellow Keyblade wielder, looking a bit sullen.

Neptune forced a smile. "Go on, buck-o. Unseal her. You have the Keyblade, after all."

But the boy shook his head. "No. You do it"

The girl was taken aback. "Huh!? But I can't! I don't have a key anymore!"

"Then use mine!" Sora insisted, pushing his Keyblade onto her.

But Neptune pushed it back to him. "Nuh-uh! You got this, Sora!"

Yet Sora was persistent. "No, you! You made the promise, not me!"

"No, you!"

"No, you!"

This trade went on and on for three whole minutes, until...

"Um, guys?" Kairi stepped in, causing the two to stop. "Why don't the both of you undo the seal instead?"

The two Keyblade Wielders looked at each other for a bit, and then back to Kairi.

"Girl friend" Neptune chirped. "Have I mentioned that you are a super genius?"

Sora chuckled, scratching the back of his head. "Thanks again, Kairi."

Kairi giggled in thanks as she stood back.

"Ready, Neptune?" Sora asked his fellow Keyblade wielder

The girl nodded, gripping the handle of Sora's Keyblade. "Time to fulfill my promise!"

Holding out the Keyblade together, they shot a beam of light that hit the keyhole on the time, an unlocking sound is heard across the room.

"Ah!" Histoire breathed. "I can feel my senses returning to me! Neptune, Sora, thank you both so much! This is truly a joyous day!"

As the large tome opened, releasing a flash of light, someone appeared from the tome's pages.

"Greetings, everyone! I am the tome Histoire. I hold the records of the Lost World of Gamindustri, and was once the Oracle of one of the world's nations. It's finally nice to meet you all properly!"

A fairy, much larger than Tinker Bell with blonde, wavy hair, wearing a purple outfit and a small white cap appeared out of the once-sealed tome.

"Compa, IF, Donald, Goofy, thank you all for guiding Neptune and Sora on their journey. They could not have made it this far without you all."

She then glanced around, taking in the faces of the people she had the honor to meet.

"Squall Leonhart, Yuffie Kisaragi, Aerith Gainsborough, Artisan, Great Wizard Merlin and Princess Kairi. It is an honor to make your acquaintances. Thank you all for providing aid to Neptune and Sora in your own ways."

"Wow..." Aerith gasped in amazement.

"She's so freakin' tiny!" Yuffie screamed, the dogoo barking in tandem.

"How'd you know our names?" Leon asked the fairy.

"It is a function that is embedded into my being" Histoire explained as she floated along with the tome. "Whenever I set foot, so to speak, in a world, I essentially copy the records of history that are embedded into that world's heart. In short, I enter a world, and then it's history is recorded into my tome. The events that occurred in it. The people who walked into it. How many times it rained or flooded. Everything that the world can recall. All recorded into my tome."

"Wow!" Neptune's eyes sparkled. "So, like, you're the ultimate copying machine, is that it?"

IF sighed. "Nep, I'm pretty sure she's more than just that."

"Still" Compa approached the tiny fairy and gently rubbed her cheek. "Histy's so small and cutesy! I wanna keep her!"

"Get in line, mucha-cho!" Yuffie exclaimed. "She's gonna be telling me where all dat phat lewt is!"

Aerith sighed. "There she goes…"

Artisan could only laugh nervously while Leon pinched his nose in annoyance.

The tome fairy cleared her throat, grabbing everyone's attention. "Now, I understand that you all have several questions for me. I will try to answer them to the best of my ability, so please, do not hold back on your inquiries!"

"Well, you heard the tome lady!" Neptune chirped. "Grab your snacks and drinks, cuz tonight's the time for..."

Teach Me Histy – Introduction

"Okay..." Compa started, raising her hand. "First off, what, exactly are you?"

IF sweatdropped. "Starting right off with the loaded ones, huh?"

"Hmmmmm" Histoire hummed. "As I said, I am a tome, one that was made with the express purpose of watching over and recording the history of Gamindustri as it goes."

She then placed a hand on her chest. "I am it's everything, just as Gamindustri is my everything. There is almost nothing I do not know about our Lost World..."

"So" Sora wondered. "You are its heart, in a way"

Histoire giggled. "In a way, yes. Though, it's more accurate to say I was created from it."

"A being created from a world's heart to observe its history, huh?" Artisan noted.

"Oh! Oh!" Neptune chirped. "Then, can you tell when someone snuck into the kitchen at 3 AM? Or when the next big game is released? Oh! Or when the next round of pudding is coming?"

"Certainly!" the tome replied. "So long as it occurs in the world I am residing in, I can tell what has happened."

"Then try us!" Yuffie dared.

"Very well" Histoire accepted the challenge. "At 11AM-"

Several embarrassing secrets later...

"Okay okay okay!" the great ninja screamed. "You can stop! That's enough!"

Aerith sighed as she covered her face in shame. "This is embarrassing..."

"Yuffie..." Leon called out as he facepalmed. "You should just shut up from now on..."

"Don't say I didn't warn you" Histoire said with a smile.

Neptune grimaced. "Who knew Histy had a playful side like that?"

"I guess she must've wanted to do something like that after being sealed for so long..." Donald guessed.

IF sighed. "Idiots, the lot of you..."

Teach Me Histy – Gamindustri

"So...Gamindustri" Neptune started. "What's it like?"

"Geez, another one?" IF facepalmed. "Try some lighter questions next time"

"It is alright, IF" Histoire reassured. "I can handle this"

IF hummed. "If you're sure..."

The tome fairy cleared her throat. "**Gamindustri** is a vast world, filled with all kinds of unique creatures and people of several faiths."

Her eyes turned to the sole wild animal in the room. "This little dogoo here is one of the aforementioned creatures!"

The dogoo barked loudly.

"So" Artisan mused. "These little ones really did come from Gamindustri, huh?"

Histoire nodded. "Indeed. There are other various creatures that once lived there, such as kupokitties, pixelvaders and even horsebirds!"

"Horse-birds?" Yuffie wondered. "What, do they have yellow feathers and run around the plains or something?"

"Those are some...unique creatures, to be sure..." Donald mused.

"Were there any standout locations?" Leon asked.

"Yes" the tome lady nodded. "Much like how your worlds have certain landmarks that make up most of their identities, Gamindustri has four nations that comprised it."

"Four nations?" Aerith asked.

Histoire nodded. "First, the land to the south, an island filled with lush greenery, high-class services and a motto of 'bigger is better'. That is the Land of Green Pastures, **Leanbox**"

"An island with lots of greenery, huh?" Artisan imagined. "I don't know why, but I feel nostalgic when I hear about that."

"Oh!" Aerith gasped. "Do you think that might've been your hometown?"

The horned woman hummed. "Maybe? I'm starting to see the problem IF and Compa had when they were recalling their hometowns..."

"Still" the flower girl mused. "that place is bound to be beautiful. Maybe it'll have a huge flower garden there!"

Histoire nodded. "It has plenty of forests across the nation. I'm sure there are bound to be flower gardens there if you looked"

The tome fairy then cleared her throat. "Now, to get back on topic. The second is the land to the north, which is best known for its perpetual winter, family-oriented traditions and a belief that 'small is justice'. This is the Land of White Serenity, **Lowee**"

Neptune shivered. "Perpetual winter? Does that mean it snows every day?"

Histoire nodded. "Even in the hot seasons, Lowee continues to snow."

"Snow, huh?" Sora imagined. "I wonder what that's like"

"You've never experienced snow before, Sora?" Compa asked.

The islander boy shook his head. "Never even seen 'em"

"Considering your world's an island" Yuffie commented. "I'd be more surprised if it DID snow at one point!"

"I..." Sora started, but then deflated. "...concede to that..."

Histoire chuckled. "Moving on, the third land lies to the east. It is known for its industrial revolutions, boasting some of the hardest-working and competitive forces in the world, and a motto of 'work hard, live better'. This would be the Land of Black Regality, **Lastation**"

"Hard working and competitive, huh?" IF thought aloud, her thoughts reach to a familiar someone. "Sounds like someone we knew, eh Nep?"

Neptune gave a wistful smile. "Yeah..."

Histoire's expressions soured. "I apologize for what has happened to Noire. I truly wish she could be here with us as well."

The tiny CPU shook her head. "It's alright. Besides, even if she does go down, I'll just go in and rescue her!"

Kairi cheered her on. "We know you will!"

Histoire continued her explanation. "And now, the last nation. It is hailed for its progressive ideas, technological advancements and the motto of 'life is fun, so enjoy it'. It is the Land of Purple Progress, **Planeptune**"

"Pla-neptune?" Yuffie said slowly. "Are you for real?"

"Why does that nation have Neptune's name on it?" Aerith wondered.

Everyone looked to the tiny CPU, who only shook her hands in protest.

"Don't look at me! I didn't even know a Planeptune before two chapters ago! Heck, I didn't even know my NAME before Histy guided me out"

"As for that" Histoire butted in, bowing her head. "I apologize. In my elation over finding her, I quickly gave her a name based on the nation I presided over."

"That explains why Nep-Nep is named like that..." Compa summed up.

"So" IF said. "Planeptune is the nation you ruled over, then"

The tome fairy shook her head. "No, the nations in Gamindustri are ruled over by the Console Patron Units, or CPU's for short. I am simply it's Oracle."

"Like an advisor, then?" Artisan guessed, to which Histoire nodded.

"Which leads us to our next question..."

Teach Me Histy – Console Patron Units & Share Energy

"What are these CPU's?" Leon asked this time. "And why is Neptune one of them?"

"Yeah" Yuffie agreed. "What's the big deal with these CPU's, anyway?"

"From what we heard from Noire" IF recalled. "These Console Patron Units are hailed as goddesses in Gamindustri. Do note that she was essentially acting on information that old hag told her, so it could be wrong..."

"Actually" Histoire said. "That information is correct. **Console Patron Units**, or **CPU's** for short, are the divine rulers of each of the nations. These goddesses preside over their respective nations and over Gamindustri as a whole"

"Seriously!?" Yuffie shouted.

"Neptune, a ruler!?" Donald screamed.

"Hey!" Neptune complained. "What's so wrong about me being a ruler of a nation?"

"I dunno" Sora shrugged. "It's just...weird to see you ruling over something, that's all"

"You're about as lazy as a house cat when we're not on the ground..." IF pointed out.

"I cannot see anything good happening if she's a ruler..." Leon said, shaking his head.

"Aw, c'mon!" the tiny CPU exclaimed. "Since when is today 'Pick on Nep' day?"

Compa giggled as she patted Neptune on her head. "Don't worry, Nep-Nep. I'll always care for you!"

"I think a land ruled by you could be loads of fun!" Goofy cheerily said.

Neptune, feeling touched, glomped on the two. "Oh, you two! I can always count on you to be in my corner!"

Histoire cleared her throat again. "Anyway! CPU's not only govern the nations, they also protect them and the people that live in them. This, in turn, provides them with Share Energy."

"Share Energy?" Merlin asked.

"Yes" the tome lady nodded. "It is energy native to our world. It is also from said energy that these Console Patron Units are created, goddesses shaped by the people's faith to govern them and their nation."

"Sooooo..." Goofy wondered. "How can we tell the difference with this Share Energy?"

"Quite easily" Histoire boasted. "**Share Energy** is quite distinct and unique compared to light and dark energy. In this case, Share Energy is color-coded and shines brightly."

"You mean like that purple aura around Sora when he was a Heartless?" Kairi wondered.

"Yes" the tome lady nodded. "Share Energy is a type of energy native to Gamindustri. It is generated as the people pray and give thanks to the goddesses of their nations."

"Hold up!" Neptune interrupted. "Before we continue, Histy, how is someone like me and Noire able to wield Keyblades and what's the deal with Sora having some of my Share Energy?"

"Huh?" Sora said with a raised eyebrow.

The tome lady hummed. "For the first question, I can only make an educated guess."

"What is it, then?" the purple CPU asked.

"I believe the reason why you and Noire are able to wield Keyblades, is because of your powers as CPU's."

"Uhhhhhh, come again?"

"How does that work?" Sora asked.

"How do I put this?" Histoire thought aloud. "I believe it may be because of how Keyblades themselves are revered across the worlds according to their legends, and that, in turn, caused your CPU abilities to essentially crystallize themselves into the shape of these legendary weapons, even being able to perform their functions to manipulate any type of lock."

"That would make the most sense" IF figured.

"How so, Iffy?"

"It's pretty obvious" the guild agent answered. "When you and Noire transform into those HDD forms, your weapons are replaced with new ones that are well-suited to your fighting styles."

"Oh." Now Neptune is starting to get it. "Ohhhhhhh~"

"Not only that, there's also the matter of your Keychains" IF pointed out.

"Keychains?" Neptune wondered. "The ones hanging around our Keyblades?"

"Like Aerith said before, the Keychains hold the identity of the Keyblade itself. Your Keychain is a purple crystal with a power symbol on it, right?"

"Yeahhhhh?"

"Oh!" Compa figured out. "Then Noire's Keyblade must also have something similar to it, right?"

IF nodded. "Precisely. I believe those Keychains, and thus the Keyblades they wield, hold proof that Nep and Noire are CPU's, Lost Goddesses of Gamindustri"

"You are correct, IF" Histoire chimed in. "Those crystals with power symbols are the shape of **Sharicite**, the central source of power of a Gamindustrian Nation."

"Are you following along with this?" Kairi asked the girl in the parka.

"Yeah, I think I am" Neptune nodded along.

"Then, what about Sora?" Donald asked.

"Yeah, why does he have Nep-Nep's Share Energy?" Goofy pointed out. "Not only does he still have it as a Heartless, but it's likely thanks to that that he was able to hear Histy when the rest of us couldn't before!"

"Yeah!" Sora exclaimed.

"As for that..." Histy said, clearing her throat. "Neptune, do you recall when we first met?"

"Duh!" Neptune chirped. "Couldn't forget it even if I wanted to, and I don't want to!"

Histoire nodded. "Indeed. Before you took your trials, you asked me for a way to escape the void you are in, correct?"

"Yeah" the girl nodded. "Then you said something like 'try feeling with your heart' or something, right?"

"Yes, and then you felt someone whose world was lost to darkness and began to Drift away."

"Uhhhhhh..." Sora stammered. "What are you getting at?"

"I see" IF understood what they were talking about. "So that's how she did it..."

"Did what, Iffy?" Compa asked. "What did Nep-Nep do?"

"And what's this gotta do with Sora?" Goofy followed as Sora nodded.

"Basically" Histoire explained. "I guided Neptune into connecting her heart with someone to help her establish a link to the outside world. By connecting her heart to theirs, this not only grants her a way out of the void she was in, but also grants the one she has connected to protection via her Share Energy."

Her eyes turned to the now-confused Sora. "In short, Neptune has connected her own heart to that of yours when you were Drifting in the darkness, Sora. That's what allowed you to survive and for Neptune to arrive here in the Realm of Light."

"I see" IF understood. "So, the two established a **Share Link**, then"

"That's an appropriate term for it, yes!" the time lady approved.

"Really?" Neptune asked. "Is that how it worked?"

"It couldn't be anything but that" the guild agent said confidently. "Remember that time when you and Sora fought Noire and Riku?"

"Yeah...?"

"During that fight, didn't you feel like you're glowing? Like we were right there with you even when we're apart?"

"Uh-huh" Neptune nodded along.

"And around that time, Sora was also starting to glow. Heck, during our fight, he began to use your techniques, too!"

"Huh?" Sora asked, looking confused. "Really?"

IF chuckled. "You didn't notice? You were using moves like Cross Combination against Riku. You even used magic like Blaze Break on him, and I'm betting Nep was using your moves, too."

"Huh..." Neptune hummed. "So, that's what it was, huh?"

"And there's more to that" the guild agent continued. "Remember those dreams you've had?"

"Wait..." Neptune began to figure out. "You're saying the reason we can see each other's dreams is because of our...Share Link?"

Artisan hummed. "That seems to be the most plausible conclusion."

"Wow..." was all Yuffie could say.

"This Share Energy is really amazing, huh?" Aerith summed up.

"Is this true, Sora?" Donald asked the boy, who is taking in all the new information.

"I...think so" Sora answered. "When my island was destroyed, I recalled floating away, not knowing where I am. That's when I felt something in my heart, something warm and fuzzy. Something that just makes me feel like I'm gonna be okay. When I came to in this town, I barely felt it until I met Neptune, but even then it wasn't as...intense as before?"

"That much is understandable" Histoire understood. "Neptune, as of her awakening, has yet to familiarize herself with concepts such as CPU's and Share Energy. Not to mention, she just woke up and started out. The feeling within has gotten stronger as the two of you travelled together. It certainly helps that Neptune has gained more knowledge through Noire and Arfoire."

"I see..." Sora nodded. "So, in a way, you saved my life, Neptune."

"Huh?" Neptune said, tilting her head. "I did?"

The boy nodded again. "If it weren't for you, I don't think I would be able to arrive here safely. If I didn't, I don't think I'd be able to meet you all and find Riku and Kairi again. So, thank you, Neptune. I owe you my life."

Neptune chuckled. "Shucks! You don't have to say that. I bet that you'd be able to survive even without ol' Nep's help."

"Really?"

"For realsies! I already knew from the moment we met, that you were gonna be one heck of an awesome-sauce Keyblade Wielder!"

"You think so? I don't think I could've gone anywhere without you cheering me up!"

"Naw, dog! You totally got this!"

"I don't know. You do things better than I can..."

"Dude, you took on that snake guy and that old sea hag without me, right?"

"I mean, Arfoire split us up, and yet you foiled most of her plans time and again..."

"Aaaaannnnnndddd...I heard you even took on that possessed Riku by yourself and won too!"

"But you managed to beat Noire and got her AND Histoire away from that old hag and..."

And this exchange went on for three more minutes...

"Geez, look at these two... " IF sighed, shaking her head. "Exchanging humble remark after humble remark..."

"It's almost like seeing someone speaking to a mirror image of themselves!" Compa chirped.

"Yeah!" Kairi giggled. "They feel like long lost siblings who just found each other after so long!"

Neptune perked up at that. "Siblings, huh?"

"Huh?" Sora said, not liking the grin on his fellow Keyblade Wielder's face. "What are you on about?"

"Sora!" Neptune shouted. "You soul-sister demands a fresh-supply of egg pudding, stat!"

"H-Huh!?" Sora yelled.

"Soul-sister?" Donald repeated.

"Well, we ARE connected, quite literally" Neptune explained. "Via my Share Energy and soulmates tend to be used for more romantic purposes, right Kairi?"

The aforementioned girl looked away, her face flushed with embarrassment as she nodded.

"So, we're going with this soul-sibling vibe instead!" Neptune nodded. "Yeah, this totally works for us! Now get moving, soul-brother! Chop, chop!"

"C'mon, I'm not your butler!" Sora complained.

"Poo!" Neptune pouted. "You're making your sister very sad..."

"Uh-oh!" Yuffie exclaimed. "You better not make your sister sad~"

"That will not do at all..." Aerith joined in, shaking her head as the dogoo whined.

"C'mon, guys..."

After another round of hearty laughter, the group returned to their discussion.

"So, going back on topic." Compa wondered. "Since Nep-Nep is a CPU, do we need to pray to her so she gets stronger?"

The tome fairy shook her head. "Not necessarily. Prayers are not the only way to generate share energy. Simply having faith in them, or believing in them will suffice as well."

"Basically, what we've always been doin', right?" Goofy asked.

Histoire nodded.

"Well, that's a relief" IF commented. "I'd feel weird kneeling down and offering a sincere prayer to a dunderhead like Nep"

"And what's so bad about that, Iffy?" Neptune replied, causing the guild agent to simply shrug.

"Incidentally" Histy continued. "We **Oracles** are assigned to preside over the CPU's in maintaining their nations. While I was created from Gamindustri itself, I became attached to Planeptune and became its first ever Oracle"

"So, that means the other nations have Oracles too?" Kairi asked.

"Yes" the tome lady nodded. "Though unlike me, these Oracles are humans, personally handpicked by yours truly to preside over the other nations."

"You must have some good standards to be able to pick out advisors for the other nations, huh?" Yuffie wondered.

"Question!" Aerith shouted, raising her hand. "Is it possible for someone to not believe in any of the CPU's?"

Neptune gasped. "Et tu, Aerith!?"

The flower girl giggled. "Not like that. I like you enough, Neptune. It's just a curious question. Is all!"

"To answer your question, Aerith, it is possible" Histoire explained as her expression darkened. "However, those people tend to harbor resentment towards the CPU's and are considered outlaws in our world. Some have even formed organizations that wished to abolish the governance of CPU's in Gamindustri"

"Did it work out?" Artisan asked.

"Not a single one" Histoire shook her head. "Though, that doesn't really matter now..."

The atmosphere darkened at that moment.

"Why is that?" Sora asked.

"Because..." Histoire started, her bangs covering her eyes. "Gamindustri has been consumed..."

Teach Me Histy – The Rise and Fall of Gamindustri

"Consumed?" Donald asked.

"By the darkness?" Merlin followed.

Histoire nodded sadly.

"How did it happen?" Artisan asked.

The tome lady looked down in shame.

"I understand how difficult it is to recall such painful memories" Artisan pleaded. "But...I feel like we're at the cusp of remembering something important, and I believe you hold the answers to it."

The horned woman approached Histoire, kneeling down. "Please. Tell us what happened. We're right here with you."

"Artisan..."

She looked around, seeing everyone who gave her a reassuring nod (numerous in Neptune's case). Seeing this sight, Histoire breathed in and let out a deep breath.

"Very well" the tome lady said, bracing herself for a long story. "I will tell you all what has transpired. The Fall of Gamindustri..."

The Fall of Gamindustri – The Beginning

"But first, let me start from the beginning. Ages ago, when our world was young, before the concept of nations was ever conceived, the people lived in lawless lands. They hunt to survive, bartered with fellow groups and even waged battles with them that resulted in pain and death."

"One day, however, a being of great power appeared before them, promising them guidance, wisdom and safety in exchange for their services and gratitude. The people flocked to this being, eventually creating the first ever nation of our world. The ***Great Nation of Tari****"*

"It thrived for a long time. With the being's knowledge and innovations, the nation of Tari enjoyed a long period of peace and order. More and more people flocked into the nation, causing it to swell. But such days were never meant to last..."

"As more people came into the nation, more problems began to arise. Over time, the being became despondent, uncaring and unwilling to provide aid to matters that did not interest her in the slightest. The people became disgruntled and displeased with her, and eventually revolted against her."

"But the being, despite being deprived of most of her followers, was still powerful enough to quell the revolts. This, however, only served to stoke the flames of rebellion further amongst the populace. Eventually, a group of heroes gathered and, with the aid of the common folk, led a disastrous charge against the tyrannical being."

"The clash was fierce and destructive. Numerous lives were lost in the battle, even most of the heroes. However, just before the being could flee, one of the heroes stood up and in a last charge, was able to cripple her, causing her to remain within her citadel that was on the verge of collapse. And thus, with the loss of both the nation and it's citizens, the ***Great Crash of Tari*** *came to pass..."*

"However, that was not the end of the being. In her grief, she had wandered the world again, never daring to enter human contact in fear of continued persecution. In her sojourn, she had come across a peculiar door in an ancient ruin located within the world's center. She entered the ruin and discovered something incredible."

"The being had come to realize that what she discovered was, in fact, the living beating heart of the world she lived in. Still wracked with guilt and fear, she prayed to the heart for her salvation, but it did not respond. She instead wished that the world be at peace, that the people would learn from their mistakes and move on from their disastrous pasts. And thus, the heart responded, giving birth to a being it could consider its other half. That would be me, the tome Histoire"

The Fall of Gamindustri – After The Crash

"Soon after the Crash, the people have lived on in anarchy, waging battle after battle for their rights to land, resources or whatever inane reason they could come up with. Despite the disaster that occurred, there were still people who wished to be guided by beings like the ruler of Tari, whom these people now referred to as the ***One True Goddess.*** *Whether it was out of true devotion or regret over what happened then, I could not say. However, the world had responded to their pleas, and in the cold north, another being as strong as the last emerged. She would become known as the first true CPU, and with her followers, would eventually establish the nation of Lowee."*

"Much like the last, the people flocked to the new CPU and her nation, and much like the last, the new nation thrived. However, armed with the knowledge of the Crash, I paid the new CPU a visit and informed her of such events that transpired. She heeded my warnings, creating strict laws and impositions to ensure the nation would remain and thrive without the risk of a second Crash. However, much like the last, some people grew dissatisfied and eventually led rebellions as well, and much like the last, they were repelled."

"But, a group of people who grew disillusioned with the draconian rule of the First CPU fled to the southwest and prayed again to the world. They prayed to it that they be guided by a CPU who understands and practices the value of fun and entertainment and most importantly, peace and freedom. It responded, creating a new CPU born of their faith, and thus, the second CPU was born and with her followers, founded the nation of Planeptune."

"This event eventually drew the ire of the first CPU and led an assault on the rising nation herself, leading to a fierce clash between both beings. This, however, was not a one-time occurrence. Time and time again, the CPU's continued to clash over their differing ideologies and methods to rule, sometimes with even the common populace being involved, whether by their own choice or not. Despite the continued clashes, the two nations thrived for a time."

"However, within the confines of both nations, some people have grown discontent, whether from Lowee's draconian policies or Planeptune's lack of desire to progress. These people gathered to the eastern border and began to pray as well, promising that they would work hard, harder than any one nation to prosper. The world responded and thus emerged a third CPU, one who would establish the nation of Lastation. This, too, caught the attention of the other CPU's and eventually, the three CPU's clashed over and over, with Planeptune leading more assaults against the new nation due to their close proximity to each other. In spite of their hardships, the nation of Lastation managed to thrive through hard work, effort and most importantly, tenacity."

"However, despite all this, there are still people, especially those of the higher class, who were still dissatisfied with the current status quo. Since they felt none of the nations could cater to their desires, these higher-class citizens fled to the southern island, a land of lush greenery and bountiful forests. From this land, these people prayed, prayed for a goddess to bless them with a nation just for them. And thus, for a fourth time, the world responded, granting these people their own CPU, and with her guidance, their own nation named Leanbox. And thus, the Four Nations of Gamindustri were founded."

"Once Leanbox made themselves known, the four CPU's convened to assess each other and that of their nations. Seeing such a momentous event, I decided to preside over it as a neutral arbitrator. You would expect there to be a formal exchange of words, of four leading heads coming to a civil agreement in the name of peace and prosperity, but none of that happened. What happened was a clash of words, weapons and even powers against each other, leaving this gathering with no true victor or resolution. This would later lead to the next catastrophe, which would then be known as the ***First Console War****."*

The Fall of Gamindustri – The End of the Console Wars

"Despite the disagreements, the nations lived in, albeit somewhat, harmonious times in the surface, but underneath that surface, the CPU's were preparing for when the next war would erupt. It eventually did at least twice, and it was during the Third Console War that the tides had changed. In a bold move, three of the nations have formed a secret alliance to ensure a change in the flow of the war, and thus during the Third Console War, these three nations have joined forces against the ever-advancing nation of Planeptune, with ***then-CPU Uranus*** *being grievously injured and forced to flee."*

"It was during my visit in the nation that I heard the news of her loss. When I came to see her, I saw her, face wounded, body scarred and bruised and her Share Energy almost ready to give in, kneeling to the Sharicite in her room and praying for a successor, one who would guide their nation to true peace. I still remember the words she said..."

'I failed them. I thought I was created to guide and protect my people, but in doing so, I have forsaken my heart, discarding my desires to ensure their prosperity. This cannot happen again. I pray to you! I beseech you! Grant me a successor that will not only ensure our nation's happiness, but their own happiness as well! They must not repeat my mistakes again!'

"I remained behind in Planeptune to care for the ailing Uranus, treating her condition and talking to her whenever we had the time. In that time, I had come to understand the burdens laid by the CPU's. They were no miracle workers, only flawed beings who were created to guide equally flawed people. Eventually, three days have passed and Uranus passed away. In that same day, a new CPU was born with Planeptune's Sharicite."

'Who are you?'

'I am...'

'Are you sad?'

'Huh?'

'P-Please cheer up! It's not okay to stay sad forever! You know what? U-'ll cheer you up!'

"She was cheerful, full of youth and vigor, very unlike the previous CPU who was noble and mature. It was then that I knew, I HAD to guide her. I MUST ensure that the hopes of the being who created me and the wishes of my dearly departed friend, whom I only knew for three days, be realized, and thus..."

'Oracle?'

'That's right! I am Histoire. I will be your nation's Oracle starting today! It's a pleasure to meet you!'

"Once she became acclimated with her role as a CPU, the successor would later meet her fellow CPU's for the first time. Despite the initially hostile reception, she would..."

'Why are we fighting a lot!? Sure, we have differing methods and all, but does that really mean we had to keep beating each other up for it? Why can't we just get along?'

*"With her fists, her words, and most importantly, her heart, she was able to quell the feud between the four nations and proposed an end to the Console Wars. As per their agreement, she and the other CPU's signed the **Friendship Treaty**, putting an end to the long-blood feud between their nations once and for all, and ever since then, the world of Gamindustri long knew peace."*

"But even then...that was never meant to last..."

The Fall of Gamindustri – Fall to Delusion

*"Within the nation of Planeptune, the newly-christened **Orange Heart**, as she would later be called by the people for her efforts to bring peace, was increasingly burdened with the tasks of watching over her nation. Several efforts were made to lessen her burden, like the establishment of numerous services, such as the Intelligence Grid, the Medical Schools, the Guild Network and the Volunteer Services. However, even with the aid of these establishments, Orange Heart's burdens were too much. These burdens led to her losing control over her powers, causing disillusionment amongst her people, even leading to the formation of several rebel groups. One such group even tried to assassinate her, but a brave volunteer managed to keep her safe physically. But with such burdens to her mind and heart, she eventually closed herself off from even me. She stayed indoors and refused to come out, even to the pleas of the children and for a time, Planeptune declined."*

"But that's when I began to hear them..."

"As I did my routine checkups on Orange Heart, I began to hear mumbling and whispers. At times, I even hear her cry in pain. In others, I even hear her laugh like a woman possessed, as if she was haunted by something terrifying. Even though the medical checkups all came out normal outside of her dwindling share energy, I could not help but fear for the worst."

"Three weeks have passed since then, and, all of a sudden, I couldn't find Orange Heart in her room. However, I did find a letter saying 'Come to the Sharicite Room'. I did so immediately, and I found our CPU, staring blankly at the Sharicite itself. I approached her, asking her if she was feeling better, and do you know what she said?"

'Oh, I'm feeling fine, Histy. I just...had a revelation.'

'Oh?'

'This world's history has been stained with nothing but pain and suffering. From the Great Crash to the birth of our nations to the Console Wars. There's been nothing but hurt. Hurt so painful my heart will burst out!'

'Orange Heart, what are you saying!?'

'I'm going to impart this truth to you, Histoire. The one truth that this world will soon come to know.'

'Stop it! What are you doing to the Sharicite!?'

'The truth...that this world belongs to darkness...'

"She eventually corrupted our nation's Sharicite and flew off to parts unknown. As I felt weakened from the loss of our nation's Share Energy source, I could not give pursuit. With what strength I could muster, I warned the other nations immediately of what transpired and last I heard, all the other CPU's gave pursuit, leaving me and the other Oracles to come up with contingencies."

"And then...three days later...that's when it happened..."

The Fall of Gamindustri – The Final Hours

"The sky has gone red. A large dark orb emerged above, threatening to swallow all that exists. As it did, strange black creatures started spawning across the world, ravaging everything in their path."

'My goodness! This is a nightmare...'

"These creatures come in endless waves, and for each being they consume, more will spawn. People, wildlife, it didn't matter. These dark dwellers consumed all in their path. It was an endless tide that threatened to swallow everything whole, and from then I realized, our world was doomed..."

'There's nothing left. Then there's one thing left to do!'

"Sensing our world's doom, I convened with my fellow Oracles one more time, and with their aid, we initiated a ritual that will ensure that our world will one day be restored. As I began

my preparations..."

'Tsk tsk tsk. You shouldn't be too hasty, Histy'

'You!'

'Come now, no more Orange Heart? I'm hurt.'

'You are not Orange Heart anymore. I can see it plainly now. You have consumed her heart.'

'You are half correct. I did consume her heart, but in a way, I am also her.'

'What!?'

'To be more precise, I was created from the depths of her aching heart. Her heart that experienced the pains of burdens, the hurt of never doing enough, and the suffering that came from failing the people she was in charge of protecting. I am her Darkness. I am ***Dark Orange****!'*

'...!'

'That's right. Ever since the burdens of leadership became too great for her, I began to grow, and as she continued to suffer each and every day, I grew greater still. Eventually, once she felt the suffering of loss, I began to whisper to her ear, lulling her ever closer to the darkness, to me. Once she realizes the truth, she allowed me to swallow her being, sinking her heart into the deepest abyss while I rise to claim my prize.'

'We won't let you consume our hope!'

'Ah, yes. Your 'hope"

Laughter escaped her face.

'What can you hope to do with that little ritual of yours? Even out there, their successors won't be able to remember or know anything about our world. And let me remind you, I corrupted our Sharicite. It will be near impossible for you to create 'my' successor. What you're doing is the height of idiocy! I thought you were smarter than that, Histoire.'

'That may be...What I am doing may be the height of foolishness, but even so, I believe in our hope. The hope that one day, our world shall return to the light and become something new, something better! I'm sure of it!'

'Quite the optimist, aren't you?'

'Well, I learned that from 'you', after all'

'Is that so? Then I'll snuff your hope right out of you!'

'Not today!'

'What!?'

Dark Orange jumped out of the way as cards were flung into her direction. She snarled at the sight of her attacker.

'You!'

'You came back!'

'Histoire, keep going! I'll keep her busy!'

'You dare!?'

"Thanks to a timely rescue, I was able to initiate the ritual. However, due to the lack of Sharicite on my end, I was forced to expend most of my latent energy to compensate for it. But thanks to the ritual, I was able to take the share energy from each of our nations and thrust them away to the unknown. They may be scattered across certain worlds, to different times even, but I have faith that they will come one day and restore our world..."

'May this hold the last salvation of our world...May they fly away to parts unknown...'

A sigh of relief escaped my lips...

'*It is done...Now, to ensure that those who are still alive can find peace out in the worlds...'*

"Eventually, I began to perform another ritual, one that only I can cast. In case of world-ending emergencies, I can send whoever's left alive away from Gamindustri and send them to other worlds. However, due to the unstable nature of this ritual, those sent away may end up with impaired or damaged memories, so much so that they cannot remember this world even if they connect the clues leading to it. Still, it may be for the best that no one knows what happened here until our world has been restored once more. Then, and only then, can we learn about our mistakes and how to avoid them in the future. And thus, with a heavy heart, I performed my last ritual with a hidden prayer..."

'May those who survive...continue to live in peace...their memories of this world be reduced to nothing but a dream...And perhaps...one day...this world will be restored...so that our sins...may be redeemed...'

"And that...is what happened. That is the ***Fall of Gamindustri****. Our mistakes. Our pain. Our hubris. All of them have casted our world into the darkness."*

Traverse Town – Third District – Vacant House

Everyone looked shocked at the massive infodump that they have just gotten.

"So" Leon started, trying to keep it cool. "That's what happened..."

"To think..." Aerith said, hugging the dogoo tightly. "That much has happened in such a short time..."

"That's..." Yuffie stuttered, and then groaned as she fell onto the bed. "That's just not fair! How much more are the Heartless gonna take from us!?"

"I'm sorry, Histy..." Goofy apologized

Donald moaned in sympathy.

"I can get it" Sora murmured. "The feeling of helplessness as our world was being consumed. The desperation to do anything to save it. I can relate with that."

"Sora..." Kairi called, putting a hand on his sleeve.

"Dang..." Neptune managed to say, feeling flabbergasted. "I...I don't know what to say. There's just so much, I-I can't even process all of this. What do you think, If—huh?"

As the girl turned to her friends, she saw them crying out in tears of pain and sadness.

"O-O-Our home..." Compa cried.

"That's..." IF whispered. "That can't be real, right?"

Artisan tried to keep the tears from flowing out of her eyes, but some managed to leak out.

"What's wrong?" Sora asked the strange Drifters. "Why are you all crying?"

"We..." the horned woman said through her tears. "We remember everything now...Who we were. Where we lived. Who our friends and families were. How everything went down before we arrived here..."

"It was..." IF cried as she clutched her head. "It was dark and chaotic...Everyone in the guild was scrambling around to contain the damage from those weird monsters. But then, as we were helping with the evacuation, we lost contact with some of our guild members. When we went to where they were last, there wasn't a trace of them left, and then those monsters showed...and then..."

"I was on my way home to my family's place" Compa stuttered as tears flew from her eyes. "The sky was getting dark, and then those weird monsters showed up. People were panicking everywhere but all I could think about was how my family was doing. I ran and ran as fast as I could, but by the time I got there, all I saw was my grandpa...fading away as those monsters started crawling up to me and then...and then..."

The nurse began to wail loudly. IF, who was also crying began to hug her as they both mourn the loss of their home.

"Artisan!"

Leon and Aerith, who passed the dogoo onto Yuffie, immediately went to support the horned woman whose legs started giving out on her.

"Sorry about that...It's just..." Artisan apologized. "I remember stuff too. I was sent along with my team to Leanbox to observe the movements of the CPU there. But then the sky darkened and those monsters attacked. One by one, my teammates were being consumed by them and then more took their place. I was cornered, and then...I was engulfed in a pillar of light, and the next I knew, I woke in Leon's world..."

"But wait" Yuffie noticed. "How come they're just remembering what happened now?"

"I am not sure myself" Histoire admitted. "The ritual's side-effects are apparent, but I have no idea if such effects can be reversed."

Merlin hummed. "I do have some theories to it, but the main line here is that hearing your story must have triggered something in their minds to finally link together that Gamindustri was their home and thus, recall everything they lost before the Fall."

"Is it really that possible?" Kairi asked.

Merlin hummed again. "Like I said, it's just a theory. I'm afraid memory spells are not my forte."

Neptune, noticing that her closest friends were still sobbing, approached them. "H-Hey. C-C'mon, you two, cheer up."

The two, still with tear-stained faces, looked at Neptune.

"Sure, things aren't looking good right now, but things will work out somehow and..."

"Work out?" IF started. "HOW WILL THIS WORK OUT!?"

Neptune yelped when the guild agent raised her voice.

"WE JUST REMEMBERED WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR HOME, NEP! OUR HOME! OUR FRIENDS! OUR FAMILIES! ALL OF THEM ARE GONE NOW AND I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF THERE'S A WAY TO GET IT ALL BACK!"

"C-Calm down, Iffy" Neptune grimaced. "You're scaring me..."

"Calm down? Calm down!?"

The guild agent swiftly grabbed Neptune by the collar and lifted her up in anger.

"HOW IN THE HECK AM I SUPPOSED TO CALM DOWN!? IF YOU WANT US TO CALM DOWN, THEN DO YOUR GODDESS-DARNED JOB AND GET OUR HOME BACK ALREADY!"

The atmosphere in the room was tense, with only the loud breathing of a weeping IF filling the room with noise...

"I...I...I don't know how..."

IF, in her anger, pushed Neptune away and stormed off the house.

"Iffy!"

And Compa gave pursuit...

"W-Wait..."

Neptune attempted to do the same, but Merlin grabbed her by the shoulder and shook his head, beckoning her to NOT go after them.

"Ooooooohhhh..." Goofy muttered.

"What do we do now?" Donald asked around.

"Everyone's feeling flustered right now" Aerith said. "Why don't we take the time to cool our heads for now? Sound good?"

Leon nodded. "We'll halt our preparations until everyone's feeling better."

"You don't have to..." Artisan said, struggling to stand. "...worry about me..."

"Nuh-uh!" Yuffie protested. "We're all getting our home back! That's means you're with us, too, Arty!"

"DO-GOO!"

The horned woman chuckled sadly. "I'm sorry, guys."

"What should we do?" Sora asked.

"I actually have a favor to ask from you." Merlin said. "Will you, Neptune and young Kairi come with me and Histoire?"

"Oh, sure" Sora nodded, turning to the two girls. "You two wanna come?"

Kairi nodded. "No problem. What about you, Neptune?"

But Neptune was staring at the door with a forlorn expression...

"Neptune?"

The girl jolted. "Oh, uh, yeah. Sure. What-ev's"

Histoire hummed as she turned to two particular people. "Donald, Goofy, can you keep IF and Compa company for now?"

"You got it!" Goofy exclaimed as Donald nodded.

"Splendid!" Merlin said, bringing out his casting stick. "Now, this might feel a bit nauseating at first, but you will get used to it, I assure you!"

"Wait, are you teleporting u-"

And just like that, the aforementioned five have vanished in a puff of smoke...

NEPSTATION

Sora: You're watching Nepstation! As you can see today, a certain someone's not around to host today's news.

Kairi: The previous host is currently feeling under the weather and is resting today, so for this broadcast, Sora and I will be delivering the news!

Sora: It sure feels surreal to be hosting with you, Kairi. I...never thought I'd get to do something like this with you...

Kairi: *giggles* You know what they say. Life takes unexpected turns every now and again, and considering who I'm with right now, I'm glad for it.

Sora: Kairi...

Kairi: Sora...

Histoire: *clears throat* Please get on with the program! You both are still live right now *>_<*!

Sora: *flustered* Ah, right! Sorry! Let's...get to the news, okay?

Kairi: *blushing* Y-Yeah! Of course!

---

an image of Heartless swarming out of Hollow Bastion appears onscreen

Sora: There has been a recent surge of Heartless attacks in the outlying worlds. Reports state that a huge wave of darkness that emerged from the fallen Hollow Bastion may be the source of this problem.

Kairi: The worlds have reported that stronger Heartless has emerged into their worlds. Some with unique properties. Others that are large and powerful. Everyone, please tread carefully when moving around, more than ever. The Heartless do not play around when there are hearts to feed.

Sora: Hm-hm! However, we do have some good news.

---

an image of Hollow Bastion surrounded by a magic barrier appears onscreen

Sora: Recent scans has shown that the surge of darkness within Hollow Bastion seemed to be contained within it's own borders. Later scans shows that a barrier of light was erected

around the world.

Kairi: This barrier seems to be holding back the huge wave of darkness coming out of the world. While some dangerous Heartless managed to break through, most were being held back inside the world itself. I hope whoever's left there is doing okay...

Sora: Me too...I'm worried about Beast and the other princesses there...

Kairi: Then let's pick up the pace, Sora! We still got news to cover!

Sora: Right! Now, to the last bit of news.

---

an image of the Gummi Ship parked outside of Traverse Town is shown onscreen

Kairi: There have been talks of a group of Drifters who are ready to head out and take back their world. For the longest time, there has been nothing but radio silence from them. However, a recent call came in saying that 'We are ready'. This gives people hope that these Drifters can at least fight back against the growing darkness.

Sora: I'm sure it will be fine! If they have been preparing and training for that long, I'm sure they can handle a couple of Heartless, no problem!

Kairi: *giggles* Always appreciate the optimism there! It's one of the things I like about you, Sora.

Sora: *blushes* Oh...really?

Kairi: Really...

Sora: ...

Kairi: ...

Histoire: *clears throat* *>_<*

Sora: *flustered* Uh...That's all the news we got for you today, ahaha! T-Thanks for hosting with me on this one, Kairi!

Kairi: *giggles* Sure thing. Always happy to help out, Sora!

Sora: Since we still have some time, why don't we talk about a topic, Kairi?

Kairi: Sure thing! What topic do you want to discuss about?

the words Seven Pure Hearts appear onscreen

Sora: Well, since you're here, we may as well talk about the Princesses of Hearts or Seven Pure Hearts, whichever one's right.

Kairi: That’s...interesting.

Sora: How so?

Kairi: I mean...I’ve only learned I was one just today, so I’m afraid I’m a bit lost when it comes to specifics.

Sora: Oh, that’s okay! Someone’s got us covered.

Kairi: Really?

Sora: Yeah. I got some notes from the Fairy Godmother. Okay then...*unfurls notes* The Seven Pure Hearts are the beings who safeguard the light in this realm and ensures it’s safety from the darkness. You can tell who these beings are from the simple fact that they only have light in their hearts. Not a single hint of darkness is present in them.

Kairi: No darkness, huh?

Sora: So, it says. As stated here, there are always Seven Pure Hearts, and this time, they all reside within females, hence the other term described for them, the Princessess of Heart.

Kairi: So, anyone or anything can be one of the Seven Pure Hearts?

Sora: I think so. Anyway, the current people who hold these hearts now are Alice, Jasmine, Belle, Snow White, Cinderella, Aurora and you, Kairi.

Kairi: So...what does being a Pure Heart entail exactly? We just keep the realm safe just by existing?

Sora: Uhhhhh...*scrambles through notes*

Kairi: You’re...not exactly prepared for this, are you?

Sora: Can you blame me for that? Neptune always seemed to be one step ahead about this. Despite what she shows, she actually does the research when she can. She takes this news platform very seriously and I just felt like I rolled out of bed...

Kairi: *giggles* Don’t feel too bad, Sora. I think you’re doing a fine job out here!

Sora: R-Really?

Kairi: *snickers* You certainly did more here than on our little raft back home!

Sora: C-C'mon! I pitched in! I was the one who got our supplies for the trip, remember?

Kairi: Of course. Of course! It’s just funny to see how you react to this!

Sora: *sighs* Kairi...

Kairi: But I’m serious. You’re doing good so far. Going through all of this just to find me and Riku...even helping your new friends find who they’re looking for. You really go all the way

for everyone, and that’s another thing I like about you, Sora...

Sora: *blushes* W-Well, I could’ve gone this far without everyone helping me out. The more I think about it, the fact I kept your heart safe within me, just...imagining you cheering me on behind me...it helped me kept going. So...thank you, Kairi.

Kairi: Sora...

Sora: ...

Histoire: If you’re going to flirt, then please end the program, you two *>_<*

Kairi: R-Right! One last thing. The upcoming chapter will also be split into parts! Thankfully, not as many as this one. So, the 3-day upload schedule will still go on. We’ll update you all again in regards to the upcoming chapters after that, so stay tuned!

Sora: And from all of us here at Nepstation...

Sora and Kairi: See you next time!

Chapter 20: Chapter 14.0: A Walk (Rediscovery) in Andante

Chapter Summary

> After a night of retrospection comes a night of introspection. For three in particular, theirs shall take place in a lovely little storybook...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Traverse Town – Third District

IF sat on the nearby staircase, still crying over her restored memories...

"I can't believe I forgot all about you guys..." the guild agent murmured through her tears. "Suzuka...Otome...Navi..."

"Iffy..."

She didn't look up, but she recognized that sweet voice anywhere.

"..."

"I'd ask if you're feeling a bit better..." Compa started. "But I don't think we're any better since the first few seconds, aren't we?"

"..."

The nurse, her face no longer strewn with tears but still a mess from it, sat down next to her grieving friend.

"Listen, I know how badly you're hurting from this" Compa started. "Even now, after remembering everything about Gamindustri, I still miss my beloved grandpa, and I'm sure you feel that way for your guildmates..."

"..."

"I want to go see our home too. I'm sure we all miss it in one way or another, but..."

"..."

"I don't want our time with Nep-Nep to end. I want to keep travelling with her, Sora, Donald and Goofy too. Even though there are certain worlds I wish I prepared for sooner, even

though our journey has been going through scrape after scrape, I still enjoyed all the time we had together."

"..."

"So, I'll be okay. I've already given it a bit of thought. I'd like more time, but I feel like my heart has long settled on an answer. I'm not stopping, nor will I ever stop going to other worlds, even if Gamindustri is somehow restored on the way."

"...rry..."

"Hm?" Compa turned to her friend. "Did you say something, Iffy?"

"I'm sorry. It's just..." IF sighed. "I really messed up back there, huh?"

The nurse tilted her head.

"I was supposed to be the reliable one, you know? The cool-headed gal who keeps the whole group under control. Look what happened back there. I lost my cool, yelled at Nep and said something that she'll keep thinking about now."

Compa hummed.

IF chuckled. "I don't want to burden Nep with such a huge responsibility on her own, silly as it sounds. Restoring a whole world that fell to darkness...It may just be too much for her, a girl who didn't know a single thing about being a goddess until recently. A girl who didn't even know what her home even is, and all I did was thrust her into her responsibilities without ever giving her a chance to defend herself or familiarize herself with them."

She chuckled again as she looked up, her bangs covering her eyes. "I bet she's racking her brain on how to fulfill my foolish wish. If not, she's thinking of ways to apologize to me for being an insensitive jerk..."

"I'm sure she didn't mean it like that..." Compa tried to defend.

"Yeah" IF agreed. "We know Nep too long to know that. Still..."

The guild agent fixed her bangs as she kept looking up. "It's like you said, Compa. She's happiness, and to her, our happiness is her happiness. But I don't want her to overwork herself to death just to please us..."

She then looked down. "If only I had told her that instead..."

"Iffy…"

A weary sigh escaped her lips. "I bet she thinks we'd rather have our old life back instead of going on with her on her adventures instead...Why am I so pathetic?"

Compa grabbed her friend's head and hugged it to her chest, rubbing her brown hair.

"It's alright, Iffy-poo" Compa soothed. "We both miss our home. Miss everyone we knew. But we still have each other. We have Nep-Nep, Sora, Donald, Goofy and everyone else here. We are not alone out here in this vast Ocean. Lean on us, Iffy."

IF chuckled through her tears. "How do you do it, Compa? How do you comfort people so...naturally?"

Compa tilted her head, still smiling. "I just did what my heart told me. That's all"

"Your heart, huh?" IF sniffed. "Thanks, Compa...I...needed to hear that, I guess"

"You can rely on us, too!"

IF yelped, looking up to see Goofy and Donald right behind them.

"Since when were you two eavesdropping!?" the guild agent complained.

"Um, for a while now?" Donald tried to answer.

Hearing that caused the guild agent to blush as she hid her face on Compa's chest.

"Don't feel embarrassed!" Goofy said. "Nothin' wrong with seekin' comfort every once in a while!"

IF groaned.

"What are you two doing here, anyway?" Compa asked.

"Well..." Donald tried to come up with an excuse. "We were planning to pay a visit to the Dalmatian's mansion by the Second District."

"We were?"

A bump from the shoulder changed Goofy's tune.

"Oh yeah! We were! Wanna come with us?"

"I'd love to!" Compa cheered. "Let's go with them, Iffy"

IF wiped out the snot coming out of her nose as she and her nurse friend stood up. "Sure. I could use a break, anyway"

---

100 Acre Wood – Gathering Spot

"So, remind me again..." Neptune started. "Why are we inside this empty book?"

Sora and Kairi stopped for a moment.

"Well" Sora reminded. "Remember those Torn Pages we gathered around the worlds?"

"Uhhhhhhhhh..."

"Merlin said these pages are part of this book" Kairi took over. "He asked us to help repair the book on the inside while Histoire is handling everything on the outside."

"Oh" Neptune said, getting the gist of it. "That's all?"

"Yup" Sora nodded.

"Oh. Alright." Neptune nodded simply. "Lead on, I guess"

The trio kept walking while Kairi closed in on Sora.

"She's still feeling down, huh?" Kairi asked her fellow islander.

"Definitely" Sora noticed. "She'd usually go forward and take the lead on stuff like this. Now's she's just...playing along"

"And she usually doesn't do that..." the female islander observed.

"All the more reason we gotta go through this!" Sora said, pumping his fist. "If nothing else, we gotta cheer Neptune up!"

"Sounds like a plan!"

Kairi then spotted someone over by the log in the clearing.

"Oh, look! We got first contact!"

"Alright! C'mon, Neptune!"

"Yeah. Coming!"

The trio approached the stranger by the log, who appears to be a small yellow bear wearing nothing but a red shirt that only goes halfway on his top.

"Think, think. Think, think."

"He's just sitting there..." Neptune observed. "Thinking..."

"About what, exactly?" Kairi wondered.

"Let's go ask him"

The boy approached him.

"Hi there. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just thinking" The bear answered.

"Oh"

"About what?" Kairi asked.

"I was thinking of how to say goodbye to Pooh" the bear answered.

"Pooh?" Neptune said, tilting her head.

"Yes?" the bear responded, having stopped his focused thinking.

"Wait a second..." Sora noticed, taking a seat by the bear's right.

"YOU'RE Pooh?" Kairi concluded, taking a seat by the bear's left.

"Yes, I'm Winnie the Pooh" the bear introduced himself. "Pooh for short. Who are you?"

"I'm Sora"

"Kairi. Nice to meet you!"

"Name's Neptune, or whatever nickname if you can't pronounce it for some reason"

"Oh, Hello, Sora, Kairi, Neptune" Pooh greeted his new friends back. "Have you all come to say goodbye to Pooh, too?"

"Uh, no?" Neptune shook her head.

"Why would we do that?" Kairi followed.

"We've only just met, after all" Sora finished.

"Because everyone's gone away" Pooh replied.

"What do you mean?" the boy asked.

"Well, we all lived here in the Hundred Acre Wood" Pooh recalled. "And we'd take walks together, or play Pooh sticks..."

"Pooh sticks?" Neptune wondered but her question was ignored.

"And every day, I'd eat some honey" Pooh continued. "Just one small smackeral would taste very good right now."

"Sounds like someone I know" Sora quipped. "Right, Neptune?"

"Huh?" Neptune just looked at him funny. "Yeah. Sure"

This only made the boy grimace at the sight.

"Well" Kairi suggested. "We could all go and find some honey for you if you'd like"

"Ah, that would be lovely" the bear cheered a bit. "But now everyone's gone..."

"Gone, huh..." Neptune mumbled to herself.

"All my friends, and my favorite Hunny Tree, too..."

The girl in the parka clenched her fist. "No. Not this time..."

"Everyone must've gone away while I was napping. I think..." Pooh thought aloud as he hopped back down. "So, who knows? Maybe I shall end up going away somewhere as well."

Neptune gritted her teeth. This is all starting to sound distressing similar...

"But I wonder, how do I say goodbye to myself? Think, think, think"

This is too much. Neptune's gotta say something...

But a loud, rumbling noise interrupted her train of thought.

"Oh, my tummy must be getting rather rumbly..."

And so, Winnie the Pooh marched on, leaving the open area for his humble abode.

"This is troubling..." Kairi pondered.

"No kidding" Sora said. "He's been out here for a long time now"

"Well, we got all the pages" the islander girl beamed. "So, we'll manage this step-by-step. Eventually, Pooh will get all his friends and honey back!"

Sora nodded. "Sounds like a plan!"

But then, he looked around and noticed something strange...

"Wait, where did Neptune go?"

---

100 Acre Wood – Pooh's Howse

"Oh bother" Pooh bemoaned as he inspected his only hunny pot. "There's no more hunny left"

"WAAAAAIIIITTT!"

"If only the Hunny Tree would visit..." Pooh pondered as he put the pot down. "then, I could eat my fill."

"STOOOOOPPPPP!"

Suddenly, a girl wearing a white parka barged straight into his house from the window (which was open, thankfully)!

"Oh dear!" Pooh jumped in surprise. "Who goes there?"

Wasting no time, Neptune immediately grabs the bear by his shoulders.

"Don't throw your life away yet! You've got a lot left to live for!"

Pooh could only look at the desperate girl with confusion.

"Are you okay?" the bear asked the girl. "You seem out of sorts. I would offer you some hunny to feel better, but alas, I am all out..."

"You want honey, right?" Neptune said quickly. "Then I'll scour the whole book for a source! Nothing will stop me from making you happy!"

She then dashed out of the house, leaving as quickly as she came in, not even noticing her companions entering the scene as they did.

"She's running around like a woman possessed..." Kairi noted.

Sora nodded. "I hope we can calm her down, somehow"

"Was she really being affected by what IF said?" the islander girl wondered.

"Maybe, but I don't think either of them meant anything bad from what they said." the islander boy figured.

"Excuse me" Pooh said, approaching the pair. "I would like to go get some hunny, but I do not know if my favorite Hunny Tree is still there."

The pair looked to each other with knowing smiles.

"In that case..." Sora started.

"Why don't you lead the way, Pooh?" Kairi finished.

---

100 Acre Woods – Hunny Tree

"Oooof!"

Neptune fell down for the umpteenth time as she futilely tried to climb up the Hunny Tree.

"Why does climbing a tree feel so difficult!?" the girl in the parka complained. "If only I can transform into that tall me again..."

Neptune slapped herself. "No! Don't think like that. Right now, you gotta focus or Pooh Bear will never be happy!"

Getting up, she tried climbing up again to grab some hunny, all the while she was being watched by a small figure.

"She sure is quite reckless out there..." the figure said, shyly hiding within a log. "Will she be okay there?"

"Hey, there she is!"

"Neptune!"

The figure immediately hid upon hearing the sound of two strangers, a boy and another girl, entering the area.

"Who are they?" the figure wondered, noticing how unusual the two appeared. "They d-don't look like they're from around here..."

"Hey!" the other girl shouted.

"Get down from there!" the boy yelled.

"No!" the first girl shouted back. "Not until I got some honey!"

"Hunny?"

The figure, a small pig-like creature who is rather thin, popped his head out of the log to see what was going on.

"Well, you're not going to get it like that!" the boy shouted.

"Besides, shouldn't you worry about the bees that are defending their honey?" the other girl shouted.

"Bees?"

Neptune looked around, and sure enough, a swarm of bees came, bearing down on the invader.

"Gah! Get away! My bod's too adorable to be stung!"

In her efforts to swat the bees away, she stumbled and fell down the tree...again...

"Oof!"

"Neptune!"

"You okay!?"

The figure saw the other two approaching the first girl, but couldn't move out of his hiding place.

"Will they be okay?"

"Oh! I found them! And my favorite hunny tree, too!"

The figure turned around and saw a familiar friend entering the area.

"Pooh!"

He then ran out of his hiding place and approached the round bear.

"Oh, Piglet!" the bear greeted the tiny figure. "It's so good to see you!"

"And you, too!" Piglet greeted back. "I was getting so scared being alone around here."

"Really now?" Pooh asked, glancing at the figures ahead. "Even though my new friends are right there?"

"New friends?" Piglet looked at the bear's general direction. "You know them, Pooh?"

The bear nodded. "They said they will help get me some hunny from the Hunny Tree!"

"Well" Piglet stuttered. "One of them tried to, but she kept falling from the tree. At this rate, she could get hurt from tumbling too much."

Pooh got to his thinking pose. "Think, think. How do we get up the tree for some hunny?"

Piglet looked around and noticed a strange object near the log.

"Maybe that will help!"

Eventually, Piglet took the object, a blue balloon and gave it to Pooh, which didn't escape the notice of the others.

"Excellent!" Pooh cheered. "With this, I can finally get some hunny."

"But..." Neptune started. "Wouldn't it be more effective to just store it up?"

Sora raised an eyebrow at that.

"Well" Kairi answered. "It's more fun this way, right Pooh?"

The bear nodded, looking up to see the top hole of the tree where the most honey would be stored.

"Okay, here I go!"

Letting the balloon guide his path, Pooh made his way up to the Hunny Tree.

However...

"The bees!"

At Piglet's warning, the trio noticed that the swarm of bees have returned.

"Oh no!" Sora cried.

"We gotta swat them away or they're gonna pop the balloon!" Neptune shouted.

The two brought out their weapons and started jumping up the branches to swat the bees away.

"Go get them, guys!" Kairi cheered. "You can do it!"

The two kept swatting the bees away, but they're just too many!

"Oh no!"

One of the bees snuck away and encroached upon Pooh's balloon...

POP!

"Oh dear..."

...and popped the balloon the bear was riding on, causing him to fall...

"Pooh!" Sora called out.

"He's falling!" Kairi panicked.

Thinking fast, Neptune immediately scaled the branches and caught the falling bear before he could fall!

Sora groaned as the bees became too numerous.

"Why don't you all buzz off!?"

He cast a mighty **Aeroga** spell around himself, scattering all the bees away!

"Is Pooh alright!?" Sora shouted, catching his breath.

"He's cool!" Neptune shouted back as she faced the little bear. "That was reckless. You gotta be more careful next time"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Neptune..." Pooh apologized as his tummy rumbled. "But as you can hear, my tummy's all a-rumbly..."

Neptune sighed. "You know what, we're getting pretty close, so I'll carry you the rest of the way. How about that?"

Pooh brightened. "That would make me a happy bear, Neptune. Thank you!"

The girl gave a small smile. "Glad to hear it."

Holding the bear tight, Neptune bucked her legs as she prepared to make a dash for the top.

"Now hang on tight!"

She then leapt branch after branch. Without the bees, the climb was relatively peaceful.

"There we are!"

Neptune stopped her climb once she noticed that they were on the top of the tree, with the largest source of hunny located near it.

"Here you go" Neptune said, putting the bear in the nearby hole. "Now eat to your heart's content!"

"Oh, gladly!"

Pooh began to eat through the honey storage like the hungry, hungry bear that he was.

"It is rather funny what I'd do for hunny..."

Traverse Town – Third District - Merlin's Hut

"And thus, with the help of his new friends, the hungry Pooh Bear managed to eat up his fill of hunny from his favorite Hunny Tree..."

Histoire was busy observing the once-empty book for any changes, in addition to inserting the torn pages in once she was called to do so from the inside.

In fact, she has inserted the next page on the book, causing a small shimmer to emerge as the book's contents began to be restored.

"I see they're making good progress on that book" Merlin noted as he sipped his tea.

"Indeed" the tome lady nodded. "I hope that not only will be the book be fully restored, but that Neptune can find the spring in her step again after what happened..."

"Indeed" Merlin noted, stroking his large beard.

Histoire looked back at the book glumly. "I wonder if it was a good idea to tell them all what happened. Even though I had no idea, I may have caused a friction in our ranks because of my story..."

Merlin, still stroking his beard, gathered his thoughts. "That may be, but I do not believe that it is meaningless."

Histoire looked to the great wizard.

"People go through their lives, faced with not only joy and reward, but also with pain and tribulations. It is simply a fact of life. Right now, they're all going through the trauma that they should have experienced that came with their memories. If they cannot overcome that pain and move forward, then they will never succeed in life..."

The tome lady pursed her lips. "You certainly give some...interesting advice there, Merlin"

Merlin sipped his tea again. "I am not only a Great Wizard, but I was once the royal advisor to a great and noble king! I've been around the youth's time, from his birth to his eventual departure. Though there were times I wished I could've advised him better. Perhaps then, his kingdom could still stand after that one rebellion..."

Histoire hummed. "Perhaps this is your trial as well..."

"Oh?"

"Your experiences have taught you much, and though you have left your king's service, you still go out of your way to provide aid and advice to those who seek it. In a way, this is your trial to put everything you have learned, and will learn, to good use for the future. That is how I see it, anyway"

She then looked back onto the book, its contents filling out. "Although, that could also be me wishing to take in such an advice"

Merlin hummed. "We long-lived folks have much on our plates now, don't we?"

Histoire giggled. "That we do."

---

100 Acre Wood – Rabbit's Howse

"GET BACK HERE!"

"Bouncing is fun!"

Neptune was busy chasing around a bouncing...tiger(?) across the carrot garden.

"Please!" Rabbit, a yellow-furred...rabbit, pleaded. "Do keep Tigger and his incessant bouncing away from my carrots! Pooh needs that juice to get out!"

"I'm...working on that!" Neptune exclaimed as she prevented the bouncing Tigger from hopping onto another carrot.

"Woo-hoo!" Tigger cheered. "This new bouncing spot is quite vast! I think I'll enjoy it here!"

"Oh no!" Neptune yelled. "Vegetable gardens DO NOT make good bouncing spots!"

"Will we be okay with this?" Kairi wondered, shaking her head as she sneakily gathered some carrots.

"She's still not feeling well..." Sora noted, keeping an eye on Neptune and Tigger. "Normally, she'd be bouncing off with him. You know, 'Like a Kangaroo!'?"

"Kanga-Roo?" Piglet said, tilting his head. "You know Kanga and Roo?"

"Ah, no" Sora quickly corrected himself. "It's...an expression of speech. Yeah"

"If you say so" Piglet said. "Still, Roo loved bouncing around with Tigger, especially in their old bouncing spot. I wonder where it went..."

"Don't worry" Kairi reassured. "We'll find it"

Sora nodded. "But first, we gotta get Pooh out of that hole."

Once they gathered the carrots they needed, they went back to Rabbit's House to prepare the juice.

Meanwhile...

"What's goin' on?" Tigger bemoaned, having lost his energy. "Nobody keeps up with Tiggers!"

Neptune, gasping for breath, replies smugly. "How's...that? Don't mess...with this Nep..."

Tigger, however, ignored her, opting to check his tail instead. "Maybe there's somethin' wrong with my tail..."

Satisfied with his round of bouncing, he jumped off the garden.

Neptune slumped down. "At least...the rabbit'll be...happy..."

But then, she heard a loud thud coming further ahead.

"Not good!"

She ran to the scene of the crime, and found Pooh, now out of the rabbit hole, and sitting on the ground with scattered vegetables and his head stuck in a pot of hunny.

"You're kidding me..."

"Oh bother. Where am I? It's ever so dark in here. Well, it isn't so bad, I suppose. There is plenty of hunny."

Neptune sighed at the sight. "Well, at least the bear's satisfied. Small mercies or whatever..."

---

100 Acre Wood – Starry Hill

"Oh dear..." Pooh bemoaned as he shook the water out of his system. "I didn't think I'd be taking a nice soaking today..."

Neptune groaned. "Why are we even doing this!? How is THIS going to find a stinkin' tail!?"

"Hey, hey" Sora tried to calm the girl down. "Relax, Neptune"

"How am I supposed to relax like this!?" Neptune snapped back at him. "We're in the middle of a problem here!"

Sora was taken aback by her declaration, and after a few seconds, Neptune was too.

"Oh, sorry!" Neptune apologized. "I'm sorry! I didn't know what I was saying! I...!"

"No, no" Sora said, shaking his hands. "It's alright. I can take it."

"Sorry, I just..." Neptune said glumly. "I...need a minute..."

She then walked down the hill, leaving a confused Pooh and a distressed Sora and Kairi behind.

"Oh dear..." Pooh said. "Will she be okay? She seemed very sad..."

"You know what?" Sora replied, crossing his arms. "I wonder about that, too..."

Meanwhile, Neptune walked past the bridge and took a seat next to a set of sticks near the riverbank.

The girl sighed, burying her head on her knees. "What am I doing? I normally don't feel this down...or obsessed...or...RESPONSIBLE!"

"Maybe you're just having a moment of doubt right there..."

She raised her head to see a rather blue (both in body and attitude) hippopotamus talking to her.

"Oh, hey Eeyore" Neptune greeted. "Sorry, we're still trying to find your tail..."

"It's alright..." Eeyore said. "No point in crying over spilt milk anyhow..."

"Hey..." Neptune said, scooting closer to the depressed animal. "Don't give up just yet. I'm sure your tail is out here somewhere. We just hafta find it..."

Eeyore hummed. "I appreciate the sentiment, really. I just hope you find what you're looking for, too..."

"Huh?"

"Your eyes look like they're looking for something. Something that seems impossible and out of reach. My advice? Better just give up on that while you're still ahead..."

Neptune became incensed upon hearing this, standing up in defiance. "No way! I'm not giving up on that! Not when I know that finding that makes her happy! I'm not going to stop making people smile! That's not me!"

"Neptune! Watch out!"

"Kairi?"

Upon hearing that, she looked up to see Pooh flying towards her...

"Hit the deck!"

...and in her haste, she grabbed Eeyore and jumped down for cover!

"Oh dear!"

The two looked to see Pooh landing on the stack of sticks, leaving them scattered on the floor.

"Well, so much for a safe haven..." Eeyore lamented.

"That's alright" Neptune reassured. "We can just build a better one..."

"You don't have to go all the way for me..." Eeyore said.

"Nonsense!" Neptune cheered. "I won't stop until I see a smile on your face!"

Eeyore sighed. "Alright. Don't let me stop you..."

"Is everyone okay?" Kairi asked around.

"We're good!" Neptune tried to reassure her. "What about you, Pooh?"

"Oh, I'll be alright" Pooh said as he got up. "Hold on..."

He then noticed something unusual from the plle of sticks on the ground...

"Hey, isn't that...?"

"Yes, it's Eeyore's tail!"

With his tail found, Kairi reattached the tail and with that, Eeyore was satisfied with the outcome, for the most part.

Neptune, on the other hand, still feels down, judging by her heavy sighing.

"You look quite down, little fella!"

She looked to see Tigger facing her, keeping his balance with his tail.

"I'm not down..."

"Oh, I don't think so!" Tigger exclaimed. "I can spot a sad face when I see 'em! What you need is a lil' bouncin'!"

"Huh?"

"He's right!" Kairi said, grabbing Neptune's arm. "A little bit of bouncing might be just the thing you need to cheer up, Neptune!"

"H-Hey, that's cool and all..." Neptune started. "But I don't need any help, really. Let me just..."

"Nuh-uh!" Kairi stopped her. "You are in serious need of cheer right now, so let's get hopping!"

She then dragged Neptune out of the area before the girl in the parka could decide.

---

100 Acre Woods – Tigger's Bouncin' Spot

"C'mon, lil' Neptune!" Tigger shouted.

"Come bounce with us!" a little kangaroo, named Roo, invited.

Kairi giggled as she bounced along with the two. "It's fun, I promise!"

Neptune, however just looked on with a longing look.

"Aren't you going in after them?"

She then looked to see Sora and Pooh approaching her.

"I dunno, Sora" Neptune admitted. "I guess I'm...not in a mood to bounce"

"Why not?" Pooh asked.

The girl in the parka sighed. "I dunno. I'm just not...feeling it, I guess?"

Sora and Pooh looked at each other and nodded.

They then grabbed each of Neptune's hands...

"Ahhhhhh" Neptune sounded. "What are you two doing?"

"Helping you out, of course!" Sora cheered.

"A little bouncing may turn your frown upside down" Pooh said.

Neptune forced out a laugh. "Thanks, but uh, I'm good"

She tried to release their grasp, but their hold tightened. She is trapped!

"Come on, Neptune" Sora said with a bright cheer. "No one likes a debby-downer like that!"

"Let's bounce!"

The two then dragged Neptune onto the bouncing spot...

"W-Wait a sec! I need to be ready and stuff! Woah!"

...and began to bounce around the logs.

"There ya go! That's the spirit!"

"Isn't bouncing fun!?"

"Hahahaha! Wheeeeee!"

"Wa-hoo!"

"Ohohohohoho!"

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

They bounced and bounced and bounced...

Until...

"Hooo..." Sora breathed, exhausted. "That was...quite a workout, huh?"

Kairi inhaled and exhaled over and over. "Yeah! Haven't bounced that much since...ever, actually!"

"So, what..." Neptune said. "Was the point...of all that?"

Tigger hummed. "It appears the lady is still feelin' under the weather, wouldn't you say, Roo?"

Roo nodded. "Guess we have to pull out the big ones for this!"

"The big ones?" Neptune grimaced.

Tigger and Roo bounced off the area, entering what seems to be a giant pot sitting near the middle of the bouncing spot!

"That's the big one!?" the girl in the parka exclaimed.

"Catch!"

Suddenly, a giant chestnut was launched from the giant pot...

"Woah!"

...causing Neptune to scramble to grab it!

"Phew!"

"We're not done yet!" Tigger declared from within the pot.

"Huh?"

More chestnuts started coming out from the giant pot, forcing Neptune to run up to them and grab them, but...

"This is..." Neptune groaned as she is carrying too many chesnuts on her hands. "...way too many..."

"What are you doing!?"

She turned to see Sora, Kairi and Pooh shouting at her.

"Don't just grab them!" Sora shouted.

"You gotta throw them right back at 'em!" Kairi yelled.

"But, how?" Neptune yelled back.

"What, else?" Tigger said from within the pot. "You gotta bounce 'em back at us!"

"C'mon, Neptune!" Roo cheered from within the pot. "Bounce, like mama and me!"

Neptune whimpered. "Do I gotta?"

"Please, Neptune!" Pooh cheered from the sides. "We would be really happy if you could play with us."

"Happy..."

Just as she uttered the word, another chestnut was thrown out of the pot...

"I gotta make them happy..."

"Neptune!" Sora called out.

"It's coming right at you!" Kairi warned the girl.

"I have to...MAKE THEM HAPPY!"

Throwing all the chestnuts she gathered away, she made a great leap and spiked the incoming projectile to the giant pot like a volleyball!

"How's that!?"

Tigger laughed. "Not bad, little lady!"

"But we're not done yet!" Roo boasted. "We've got more where those came from!"

Neptune slapped her fist, ready for action. "Bring it!"

The bouncing duo threw another chestnut at the girl in the parka, causing Neptune to jump up and spike it back!

"There we go!" Kairi cheered.

"That's it!" Sora shouted.

"You're doing great!" Pooh said.

And so, Neptune kept spiking chestnut after chestnut after chestnut, each spike causing cracks on the giant pot.

"That's the way!" the islander boy exclaimed.

"Go, go! Neptune!" the islander girl cheered.

Neptune started hopping in place, ready for the next wave. "Come on! I can do this all day!"

"Oh dear..." Tigger murmured. "Looks like our little pot's goin' a crackin'"

"Well, we still have one last nut" Roo said, lifting the last chesnut. "What do we do?"

"The only thing we can do, my bouncy little friend!" Tigger exclaimed. "We throw it!"

With a mighty heave, the duo threw the chestnut out with all their might!

"Could this be it?" Pooh wondered.

"It's a really big one!" Sora noitced.

"You got this, Neptune!" Kairi cheered once more.

"It's big, but..."

As the chestnut drew closer...

"...I won't LOSE TO YOU!"

...Neptune made a great leap and...

"NEPTUNE...KICK!"

...KICKED the chestnut all the way back to the pot, shattering it with a loud crack!

"Haah...haah" Neptune took deep breaths as she landed back to the ground. "How's...that...?"

After a good three seconds of silence, she was greeted with claps and cheers from her friends.

"That was awesome!" Sora cheered.

"Amazing kick you got there!" Kairi exclaimed

"That was spectacular!" Pooh congratulated

"You were a hopping master out there!" Tigger complimented.

"Bouncing like me and Mama!" Roo chirped.

As she reveled in the cheers, she began to smile and laugh!

"Hahaha! Ahahahahaha~!"

Sora and Kairi looked at each other and nodded. This is a good sign, indeed.

---

100 Acre Wood – Starry Hill

"Whew!" Kairi breathed in as she enjoyed the view of the starry sky. "Today's been quite the adventure, huh?"

"Playing hide and seek at the muddy pond, huh?" Sora recalled as he nodded. "It was a lot of fun, I tell you!"

Neptune stayed silent, instead opting to enjoy the night view while lying down on the grass.

"I'm so glad we're all together again" Piglet said with a happy laugh. "I didn't know what to do when I was all alone."

"Aw, Piglet, you gotta be brave" Tigger said.

"You weren't lonely?"

"Lonely? Are you kiddin'?" the bouncing tiger hopped. "I'm a Tigger. The most wonderful thing about Tiggers is I'm the only one."

"So, you say" Kairi replied. "But admit it, it's much more fun when you're bouncing with friends, right?"

"Well, yes, there's that." TIgger quickly replied with nervous laughter.

"Think, think, think"

Sora turned to his side to see Pooh gathering his thoughts. "Hey Pooh, what are you thinking about now?"

"Oh well, I was just thinking about what to think about" Pooh admitted.

Sora and Kairi chuckled at that.

"This feels nice, you know?"

Everyone turned to Neptune, who finally spoke after being silent for a while.

"Unwinding. Having fun. Just...you know, not thinking about the heavy stuff for a while? It feels kinda nice."

Sora and Kairi shared knowing smiles.

"Well, we're glad to hear that" Kairi said.

"Are you feeling better now?" Sora asked.

"A little, yeah" Neptune answered. "But I'm still stumped."

"Stumped on what, if I may ask?" an owl named...Owl wished to know.

"Well, you see..." Neptune sighed. "There's this friend I have. A while ago, we were told that she and another friend were living in this place and had forgotten about it. When they remembered, they were feeling really sad about it. I tried to cheer them up like I always did, but then she got mad, told me that she would feel better if I, quote unquote, 'did my goddess-darned job'. But that's what I've been doing all this time!"

The girl sighed again. "And so, just like Pooh Bear here, I've been think, think, thinking about it all this time, but you know what I came up with?"

Three seconds of silence later...

"Nothing! No matter how much I rack my brain or even thought like another friend I know, I just...couldn't come up with anything, and knowing I couldn't find a way to make her happy again, it...really bothers me..."

She placed her arm against her eyes. "I don't know what I should tell her. I don't know if could keep anyone else happy if I can't do the same for her. Do I...even deserve to be happy after all this?"

Everyone looked at each other, wondering what to tell her after all this.

"Neptune..."

Kairi approached her, sitting down next to the girl.

"I think the question you should be asking yourself is, are you happy with how things are going?"

"Me?"

The islander girl nodded. "The way I see it, if I want to make others smile, I have to be able to smile as well. But not just curl my lips to look like I am. I want to be able to smile from my heart, so the happiness that I spread could also to reach other's hearts too."

"Smile..." Neptune repeated. "From my own heart..."

"So, let me ask you again" Kairi said. "What makes you happy? What thoughts let you feel that bubbly feeling inside your heart as your lips curl into a smile?"

Neptune gave it some thought, and as she did, she recalled all the times she spent with her friends...

Enjoying Compa's pudding...

Exchanging barbs with IF...

Messing with Donald...

Laughing with Goofy...

Chatting with Histy...

Just being around Noire...

And adventuring with Sora...

"There's..." Neptune said, her eyes beginning to water. "...a lot of that, you know?"

Kairi smiled at that. "Neptune, you deserve to be happy just as much as everyone else. You don't have to shoulder the burden yourself."

"But..." Neptune protested, dropping her arm as she raised herself up. "I'm a CPU. A goddess of a fallen world. I feel like I have to keep everyone happy. I feel like I must be the responsible one, and not be like the other CPU's who just...failed at everything."

"That's wrong!"

Sora stood up and approached his fellow Keyblade Wielder.

"Sora?"

"The reason we enjoyed your company is because of who you are, not WHAT you are. We didn't ask for a CPU or a fellow Keyblade Wielder or whatever. We just want to be able to smile and keep adventuring with our friend right here."

"Are you sure?" Neptune cried. "Are you really okay with just plain ol' Neptune here?"

"Sure, we're sure!"

The boy then looked around. "Isn't that right, guys?"

"Well, I don't disagree with that..." Rabbit admitted.

"Happiness is often the result of the best medicine, that is to say, laughter..." Owl answered.

"I prefer a happier Neptune myself..." Eeyore remarked.

"Did you see how happy you were when you were bouncin'? That's real happiness right there!" Tigger exclaimed.

"Yeah! You were great!" Roo followed.

"I'd like to see you smile more, too!" Piglet said.

"We would be happy if you are happy, too!" Pooh finished.

"You guys..."

Neptune couldn't hold her tears back, and let out a loud cry.

"Waaaaaaaaaahhhhh~! I'm so sorry, everyone! I didn't mean to make you worry about me! I just wanted to see you all smile! I just wanted to see my friends back there smile again too! I just...I just...!"

She then felt something warm hugging her from the side.

"Pooh?"

"I heard that, if someone is crying, you should give them a warm hug to comfort them and to tell them, that everything will be alright."

Neptune sniffed as she wiped the tears with her sleeve. "Thanks, Pooh Bear, you're the best"

The girl in the parka got up with a spring to her step.

"Okay, no more sad Nep! This time, if I'm gonna make others smile, I gotta make me happy too! Right from the bottom of my heart, right?"

She looked to the two islanders, who gave her an approving nod.

Neptune looked back and faced the moon.

"You hear that, moon!?" Neptune yelled. "I'm gonna be a better and happier person! Because Neptune equals happiness, and you better believe it!"

Sora laughed. "Why would you yell at the moon for that?"

Neptune shrugged. "I need to yell at something to get this heavy feeling out of my system somehow, you know?"

Kairi giggled. "Okay, we get it."

Neptune, still smiling, approached her two friends. "All this time, you've both been trying to cheer me up, huh? Sorry about that"

Sora shook his head. "Don't apologize."

"It's okay to be sad and angry sometimes, you know?" Kairi noted. "The important thing is, you shouldn't lose sight of who you are. Of what your heart really wants."

"Of what my heart really wants, huh?" Neptune noted. "You know, girl friend, you could make a killer business making fortune cookies with those kind of sayings!"

The islander girl chuckled. "Once I know how to, you'll be the first to taste one"

"Oooohhh~!" Neptune cooed. "Lookin' forward to that!"

"Hey!" Sora shouted. "What about me?"

"Nuh-uh" Kairi teased. "You gotta wait your turn!"

"Yeah, get in line and wait like a good boy, buck-o!" Neptune guffawed.

"Aw, come on!"

The girls then began to laugh as Sora got up in a stomp.

"Ah, alright, laugh it up!"

Once Kairi stopped laughing, she stood up as well.

"Okay, we should really get going"

"Wait, where are you all going?" Piglet asked.

"Well, we still got friends to look for" Neptune answered.

Sora nodded. "They're waiting for us out there"

"Bounce on back again!" Tigger declared.

"I hope you find your friends!" Piglet wished them luck.

The three of them hopped down the hill and headed for the bridge, but not before waving them goodbye on the way out.

"Sora, Kairi, Neptune, don't forget...We shall always be here. If you'd like to visit again, that is"

Traverse Town – Second District – Alleyway

"Now, who's a good boy?"

Compa laid out some treats for the few Dalmatians that they are walking with.

"That sure was an exhausting walk, huh?" Donald said, slumping down.

"No kidding" IF replied, wiping the sweat from her forehead. "That weird Heartless was no joke with their sniping abilities"

"Well, you know what they say" Goofy remarked. "You gotta run to live for another day!"

"I'll say" Compa said, approaching her friends. "Still, it is nice we got some time to ourselves..."

"Yeah, you can say that..." IF replied, her expression forlorn.

Suddenly, they heard something from the nearby waters.

"Who's there?" IF shouted, raising her qatars.

"Take it easy!"

"It's just us!"

From the nearby waterway emerged three familiar figures and one small figure accompanying them.

"Nep?" IF said.

"Sora!" Donald exclaimed

"Kairi!" Compa greeted.

"Histy's with them, too!" Goofy pointed out.

"Hey, guys!" Sora greeted the rest of the party.

"How'd you know we'd be here?" the royal captain asked them.

"Merlin told us you'd be here" Kairi answered.

"And you all swam to get here?" Donald wondered.

"Don't worry about me" Kairi reassured. "I'm good enough to swim through this kind of water. Islander, remember?"

"Okay, but what about Nep-Nep?" Compa wished to inquire about her friend.

"Aw, smokes..." Neptune complained. "My parka's all drenched now. This'll take a while to get rid off..."

"Hey, at least it's not whale saliva..." Sora joked.

"THAT WAS NO JOKING MATTER, BRO!" Neptune yelled. "A girl's hygiene is VERY important, especially if it's your soul-siblings!"

"H-Hey" IF tried to grab someone's attention. "Nep?"

"Hm?" Neptune turned to see her guild friend, and then remembered something important. "Oh, hey Iffy..."

No one else spoke for the next three seconds, the alleyway filled with naught but the occasional barks from the Dalmatians.

"So..."

"About what happened..."

And then the two bowed to each other!

"I'M SO SORRY!"

The two were taken aback when they said the same thing.

"Wait, why are you apologizing!?"

The two girls began to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

"Why don't you go first, Nep?" IF insisted.

"Ah, okay..." Neptune replied, clearing her throat. "So, I just want to say...I'm really sorry for being an insensitive jerk back there. I saw how much you and Compa are hurting from remembering everything about Gamindustri and all that. I should've given you two time to process all that before cheering you up. That was totally my bad, so...forgive me?"

"I would like to apologize as well" Histoire butted in, bowing in apology. "If I have not told you all my story, this friction would not have happened. I do not mean to cause a break in our ranks just before you all are prepared to seal the Final Keyhole, and for that, I am truly sorry"

"It's not your fault, Histy" Compa reassured. "To be fair, we kinda pushed you into telling us that story, so that's also on us, too"

"You are too kind, Compa..." Histy murmured.

"What she said" IF nodded, turning to Neptune. "And Nep..."

Neptune gulped, bracing herself for the worst.

"I...want to say sorry too"

"Why?"

"I was supposed to be the cool-headed one, remember? But then, I snapped at you and said something I shouldn't have said to you. I bet you were still trying to think of a way to get Gamindustri back, right?"

"Well..." Neptune stuttered. "Maybe..."

IF sighed. "Figures. You always go out of your way to keep us happy, right?"

"I mean...yeah?" the girl in the parka admitted. "I like it when we're happy, so I gotta keep it that way."

"I see." the guild agent replied. "Well, about what I said back then...you can forget it!"

This caught Neptune by surprise! "What?"

"It's true that I'm still processing over what really happened" the guild agent admitted. "I recall it all, you know? The job I worked at. The people I used to work with. The life I had. I remember it all now."

The guild agent placed a hand onto her heart. "And quite frankly, I miss them so much. I still feel guilty over being unable to save them, losing them to the Heartless. I was...really sad...and frustrated..."

"Iffy..." Compa said.

"And during all that, I ended up taking my anger out on you, on the sole goddess still standing with us. But it's not just you, Nep. I blamed the Heartless for taking everything from me. I blamed the CPU's for not doing their job in guiding us through such a hard time and instead just made things worse! But worst of all...I hated myself for being so powerless before!"

"IF..." Sora said this time.

"But...just because all that happened, that doesn't mean you should be at fault, Nep."

Neptune looked up, her eyes filled with hope.

"Sure, you screw up on occasion and often times, you'd rather nap and eat pudding over doing work, but you're really reliable when the moment strikes. You're fun to have around, Nep. Exchanging all those barbs with you felt so...natural that I just couldn't imagine my life without you or anyone here anymore..."

"Oh, Iffy..." Compa cried.

"So, as much as I missed my old life and a part of me do want to see them again, I'm not going to give up what we have here, what we built throughout our whole journey. This camaraderie we have here?"

IF approached Neptune, patting her on the shoulder.

"I would never trade it for anything in the worlds. You all mean so much to me now, you know?"

"You would really?" Neptune cried. "Even to a crummy CPU like me?"

IF shook her head. "It doesn't matter if you're a CPU or not. As far as I know, this girl in front of me, this Nep in front of me, she's my best friend and that's all that matters to me."

Neptune sniffed again. "Oh, why did you go and say all those cool things? It took me a while to come up with my speech and everything, and here you are, just flooring me in the feels department!"

IF chuckled. "I dunno. I just spoke with my heart, that's all"

"What matters is not how many words you used" Compa said, approaching the two. "It's how much what you mean with what you said matters."

"And we got your message loud and clear, Nep" IF reassured. "So, lean on us. You don't have to force yourself to smile for our sakes, you know?"

"Oh, you guys..."

Neptune began to cry again. "Gosh, this ol' Nep's been crying way too much today. I don't think my poor heart can take it!"

"Then" Kairi proposed. "Let's help her with that!"

Compa nodded. "Group hug, everyone!"

Neptune was taken by surprise when everyone started to hug her.

"This warmth...So, this is what home feels like..."

The female Keyblade wielder then began to glow abright.

"Oh!"

"This light..." Sora noticed.

"Could it be...?" IF wondered.

Everyone gained some distance, letting Neptune extend her right hand as she closed her eyes.

A loud shing was heard!

When Neptune opened her eyes, she felt something on her hand...

"Is that...?" Donald asked.

"It is!" Goofy answered.

"Incredible!" Histoire exclaimed.

"Look what came back" IF said.

...it was her own Keyblade!

"YES! NEP'S BACK IN ACTION, BABY!"

"Nep-Nep can use her Keyblade again!" Compa cheered.

Kairi giggled. "Better late than never, right?"

Neptune laughed. "Hm-hm-hm! A hero always comes at the eleventh hour! It's Hero Standard 101, right, my brother?"

Sora chuckled as the islander girl shrugged. "Whatever you say, my sister!"

As the group began to chatter some small talk, Histoire couldn't help but shed a tear.

"To have found such a warm and loving place out here, one that will no doubt fill you with strength and the sense of belonging...I'm really happy for you, Neptune"

Meanwhile, back in Merlin's house, the once-empty book, now filled with pages of a new story, laid on the nearby desk, its cover now showing that of a boy and two girls, walking hand in hand with a bear and his friends.

Chapter End Notes

And I am back, and with a relatively chill part of the chapter, too! Gotta release all that tension and mend bridges and all that! Gotta say, finding a way to portray Neptune at her low point is...challenging (so far I've only seen three (hehe) instances where that happened. In the original game (after IF and Compa beat her up from going all Leeroy Jenkins after her memories were restored), the anime (after finding out Peashy has gone missing and became Yellow Heart), and Victory-II's Normal Ending (where Uzume died). The one thing I noticed that she likes to do is make people smile, so I played into that and explore around it, both the positives and negatives. Hopefully this portrayal is alright, since I think Neptune having an introspective moment is quite rare in her series (most of that went into Nepgear, which...tracks, given her character).

Next up would be the return trip to Hollow Bastion, but...let's just say, our party's taking a hefty detour going back, and I've got something else cooking up that may (or may not) surprise you. See you then!

PS: In regards to what happened at the Fall of Gamindustri and what caused it to happen, I recommend looking up Kingdom Hearts: Dark Road (it used to be playable in mobile phones, but you can't even download or play it anymore. Better go find it on Youtube. Just be warned of KH spoilers past BBS, KH3 and even Union Cross if you decided to look into it)

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

With lingering tensions resolved, the party heads out to quell rising threats across the worlds. Meanwhile, a certain princess is approached with an opportunity unlike any other...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Traverse Town – Second District

In the darkness of Traverse Town, a lone pink monkey Heartless stood watch, her red eye scanning around for potential prey.

The **Sniperwilds**, elite variations of their Bouncywild brethren, have recently taken up residence in this Refuge World, seeking unguarded prey.

"..."

However, they would be unaware of the danger lurking in their midst.

"**STOP**!"

In a single instant, the Sniperwild has become still as a statue, unmoving and unaware.

"Did we get her?"

"I think so?"

"Okay, then."

"HAAAAAAHHH!"

In a single hit, the Sniperwild was eliminated from the field!

"There we go!" Sora boasted. "That takes care of that one!"

"Yeah" IF said. "But we still got trouble!"

Eventually, two more of them spawned in the district, ready to seek out their prey!

"They still haven't seen us!" Compa muttered.

"Then let's take 'em out before they do! It's time to **STOP**!"

Raising her Keyblade, the jersey-wearing Neptune casts a **Stopra** on the two Sniperwilds, leaving them still and stiff!

"Let's take 'em out!"

And with swift and strong attacks, they did!

"Keep your eyes peeled, people!" IF warned the party. "There's gonna be more of them out here!"

Sure enough, three of them spawned in this time!

"I got this! **STOP**!"

Donald stepped in this time, and with his own **Stopga** spell, the party was able to close in and defeat the Sniperwilds.

"Is that all of 'em?" Goofy asked.

IF furrowed her eyes and scanned around. "I don't think so..."

Compa caught something from the corner of her eye. A Sniperwild spawned on the nearby house ceiling!

"**STOP** RIGHT THERE!"

The nurse fired off a **Stop Aid**, halting the Sniperwild in place!

"I got her!"

Sora jumped up to the house ceiling and took it out with a fierce combo…

"**GRAVITY BREAK**"

…finishing the Heartless off with a burst of Gravity magic!

"Nice work, Compa!"

Compa cheered and gave her friend a thumbs up!

"Now to finish us off..."

The guild agent began chanting her spell as five more Sniperwilds appeared!

"O mighty spirit of time...grant my enemies the curse of eternal stillness! **TIME STOP**!"

Casting her own Stop magic, the Sniperwilds were rendered frozen stiff before they could spot any of the party members.

And worse for them? They happened to be right next to each other!

"Time to finish us up! **DELTA SLASH**!"

Neptune unleashed her electric technique against the monkey Heartless, wiping them out once and for all!

"Is that it?" Donald wondered

IF hummed. "Yep, that's it. That should be the last of them!"

"Aw-right!" Neptune cheered. "Are we awesome or ARE WE AWESOME?"

Sora laughed. "Totally awesome!"

The two did a high-five to celebrate their victory.

Traverse Town – First District

"Is everyone prepared?" Histoire asked the party.

"Oh yeah!" Neptune chirped. "We are SO ready!"

Only for her to deflate. "Uh, what are we doing again?"

Everyone comically dropped to the floor at her declaration.

"Geez, Nep" IF sighed. "Way to ruin the mood..."

Kairi giggled. "More like easing the mood. It's what she does best, after all!"

Neptune grinned, patting the island princess' shoulders in elation. "See? Our princess here gets it!"

Histoire cleared her throat. "Anyway, let's do a quick refresher before you all depart. IF?"

IF nodded. "Right. According to our contacts, powerful Heartless have emerged throughout the worlds. Ever since that final Keyhole opened up, more and more Heartless are causing damage out there. Our job is to quell any threats out there while we make our way back to Hollow Bastion."

"But, won't anything bad happen to Hollow Bastion while we're worlds off?" Compa asked with worry. "The final Keyhole is right there..."

"I don't think we have to worry about that."

The party turned to see a familiar red-haired woman wearing white and horns approaching them.

"Artisan!"

"Are you okay?"

The woman chuckled. "I'm sorry for worrying you all, but I'm doing fine now."

"That's a relief" Compa sighed in relief.

"Whaddaya mean we don't have to worry, though?" Goofy asked.

"The Princesses are still held up in the castle, right?" Artisan asked, earning nods from the party. "Then there's nothing to worry about. As long as they're there, the world won't fall to darkness just yet. They won't let it, not after what happened to some of theirs..."

"You think they are doing something about this?" Donald asked.

The horned woman hummed. "Possibly. When the Final Keyhole opened, there's a surge of darkness spilling into this Realm, right? But, for some odd reason, the worlds are still in good condition, despite the increase of Heartless everywhere."

"And you think the princesses are doing something about it?" Compa wished to know.

"I believe that is the case" Artisan nodded. "Though, having confirmation from the Fairy Godmother settled that case for good."

"So, we got some time, right?" Sora wondered.

"Yes, but not much" Artisan answered.

"All the more reason we gotta hustle!" Neptune chirped.

"How goes your preparations?" IF inquired.

"Almost done" the horned woman replied with a nod. "We just need to install the proper navi-gummies and we'll be on our way there first. We'll secure a pathway for you all so you can reach the final Keyhole much faster."

"That would be really helpful!" Donald commented.

"But, are you okay with this?" Sora asked. "I mean, Hollow Bastion isn't really your home, right?"

Artisan chuckled at that. "That may be. But even though Gamindustri is where I was born, most of my cherished memories were in whatever Hollow Bastion used to be. And I want to see it restored to it's former glory. Its pristine waterworks. Its beautiful flower gardens. That place is where my heart calls it home now."

She turned her head to face Kairi. "I'm sure you can understand that, right?"

The islander girl nodded at that.

"Well, we appreciate your support, regardless" Histoire said.

"Truly!" Compa chirped. "You and Leon and the others have done so much for us!"

Artisan chuckled as she winked. "Well, we Drifters gotta stick together, after all."

She then headed off. "I'll be meeting up with the others. You all be careful now."

"Yeah!" Sora and Neptune replied.

"You too!" IF said back.

"Stay safe!" Compa remarked.

As soon as Artisan was out of their sight, the guild agent cleared her throat. "Okay, back on topic. Our plan of attack should be to go through each of the worlds we've visited and take out the dangerous Heartless settling in there, like that pink monkey crew we defeated. Once they're taken out, we'll storm right into Hollow Bastion and meet up with Beast and Leon's group and advance on the final Keyhole together!"

"A straightforward assault to the finish line!" Neptune shouted. "I like it!"

"Then, are we good now?" Sora asked around, receiving nods from his party members. "Then let's get going!"

"Take care, everyone!" Kairi cheered the group on.

"Do your best out there" Histoire said. "Remember, the man called Ansem and the witch Arfoire are still out there, lurking in the shadows. Do be careful!"

Neptune rubbed her nose. "Don't worry!"

Sora grinned. "We got this!"

As the party left with determination in their hearts, Histoire turned to the islander girl.

"Now then, Kairi, regarding what we discussed earlier, are you sure about this? You can choose to back out."

The princess replied with a nod. "I'm sure. It may not be today or tomorrow, but one day, I want to fight alongside Sora and Neptune. I can't keep waiting forever."

"I see. Very well. Follow me then. We shall confirm if what I sensed in you is true..."

Wonderland – Bizarre Room

"WHY DO THESE THINGS HAVE TO BE SO BIG!?" Neptune complained.

"You sure these are not just the same regular ones, just jumbo sized!?" Compa wondered.

"No." Broccoli answered. "These ones have some unique properties, nyu!"

In the world of Wonderland, the party is currently being beset by a group of **Gigas Shadows**, gargantuan-sized Shadows that currently haunt the Bizarre Room.

"What kind of special properties are we talkin' about?" Goofy wondered as he and the rest of the party continued to run around.

"Basically, they touch you and then they disappear, nyu!" Broccoli explained simply.

Sure enough, one of the Gigas Shadows managed to touch Donald during their chase, causing the Shadow to vanish back into the shadows, never to be seen again.

"Huge and cowardly" IF said, clicking her teeth. "Name a worse combination"

"How do we deal with something like this!?" Compa demanded. "We can't keep running from them forever!"

Neptune's face lit up. "Guys, I have an idea!"

"Well, let's hear it!" Sora said.

The girl with the key snickered as she held a Summon Gem close. "Then keep up with me, buck-o, 'cuz you're part of the plan!"

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Grounds

"So, all I have to do is focus?" Kairi asked.

"Yes, dear" Merlin answered. "Channel the magic power onto your hands and unleash it."

Closing her eyes, she tries to focus the energies onto her hands.

One second passed...

Two seconds passed...

Three seconds passed...

Light then emerged from her hands!

"What is...!?" Histoire gasped.

"This energy!" Merlin nearly shouted.

However, the light from the princess' hands dissipated as it came, and then a small flame emerged from her hands.

When Kairi opened her eyes, she saw the small flame hovering from her hand and jumped in joy.

"I did it! Did you see this!?"

Histoire smiled at the joyful Kairi. "Yes, Kairi. You did great."

"More than great!" Merlin complimented. "You managed to manifest your magic on your first try. Few people have managed to do the same, you know!"

The princess giggled. "So, does that mean I have the talent for this?"

"Quite" Merlin nodded, stroking his beard. "Now then, let's have you learn the other spells for the time being, if that is alright with you?"

Kairi nodded. "Yes, please!"

As the two continued with their lesson, Histoire pondered on a single thought.

"That light...Could she really be...?"

Deep Jungle – Treehouse

"Gah!" Sora exclaimed as he fell back. "That was close..."

Currently, Sora, Donald, Compa and Jane are busy observing a strange Heartless that appeared in the old Treehouse.

A large Mushroom-type Heartless wearing light-green robes and a pink-ish hat that stood still as a statue. This tranquil Heartless is called a **Pink Agaricus**.

"So" Compa wondered. "Why are we here observing this Heartless again?"

Jane cleared her throat. "According to the gorillas, they spotted these strange creatures wandering around the Treehouse. Unlike the previous ones, these 'moving Mushrooms' appear to be docile and peaceful. We wished to investigate this, but Tarzan mentioned that there was trouble over by the Bamboo Thicket, so we decided to split up."

"But" Donald wondered. "How are we going to figure out what to do with this one?"

"The gorillas have a clue" the explorer answered. "When they went to interact with these 'mushrooms', that large one there supposedly started dancing, but after a while, the gorillas got tired and stopped, and then the mushroom seemingly got angry and vanished."

"Hmmmmmm" Sora thought for a moment. "Do you think this is one of those gimmick-type Heartless that Neptune talked about?"

"Like those giant Shadows from before?" the nurse recalled.

"More like the smaller mushrooms we ran across, like the white robed ones or the blue bouncy ones. Not the black ones though. They are aggressive..." the royal wizard guessed. "Still, what do you guys think? Should we leave it alone or we go for it?"

"I say we go for it" the boy exclaimed. "I even have an idea I want to try out."

"What is it?" Compa asked.

"This better be a better idea than what Neptune had..." Donald hoped. "Trying to keep up while she was riding Dumbo was not exactly thrilling..."

"Sora's got it pretty tough, too!" Compa remarked. "Jumping up and down, casting **Blizzagas** on them has got to be exhausting..."

"TELL THAT TO OUR ETHER STOCKS!" the duck yelled, causing Jane to shush him.

Sora laughed. "Don't worry. It's a good one! I got it while I was hearing what the gorillas did to it"

"Then let's hear it" Jane insisted. "Perhaps we can further learn their physiology this way"

"Uhhhhh, sure" Sora nodded along, not getting what 'physiology' means. "Anyway, here's the plan..."

As the boy laid out his plans, Compa's thoughts, however, laid elsewhere.

"Nep-Nep, Iffy, Goofy, I hope you guys are doing well..."

Deep Jungle – Bamboo Thicket

"Okay, we are NOT doing well here!"

Currently, Neptune, IF, Goofy and Tarzan are engaged in a battle against a group of five black-bell type Heartless called the **Black Ballade**.

Only that it isn't exactly a group of them...

"Seriously!" the girl in the jersey complained. "How do we deal with these guys!?"

"They sure act different from the usual ones..." Goofy noted as the Heartless began to move around the air.

"Always moving. Never stopping" Tarzan said. "Hit one, others attack"

IF hummed. "There must be some trick to this..."

She began to think back on when they first saw it. It was all alone, floating above the lone rock in the thicket. But when they approached it, it vanished and reappeared with four more of it's compatriots and began their routine in the air. When Neptune tried attacking one of them, her target vanished while the other four began to assault her, leading them to their current situation.

"Wait..." IF thought aloud. "Hit one..."

She observed the row of Heartless that begun to dance around the air again after a failed assault from Goofy. Before their routine began, one of the Ballades hopped before they began their dance.

If she can remember where that one in particular is among the group, then...

"Hold on!"

Everyone else turned to the guild agent.

"Stop whatever you're planning to do for now! I wanna try something!"

Once the Heartless stopped their dance, they stood afloat in a neat row.

"How's this!?" IF dashed forward and aimed for the one in the middle left! "**FLAME SOUL SLICE**!"

Wreathing her qatars in flames, the guild agent struck true...

"Watch out, Iffy!"

But the other Ballades vanished, leaving just the one that IF hit earlier.

"Huh?" Neptune sounded, her eyes widened in comical circles.

"What gives?" Goofy wondered.

"I knew it" IF cheered in victory. "Guys, the other Heartless are just clones. We just have to hit the real one after they stop dancing to deal damage!"

"Ohhhhhhh~" Neptune cooed. "So, he was just playing tricks on us, eh? Who'da thunk the Heartless can get THIS tricky..."

"But we know how to deal with them now thanks to you, Iffy!" Goofy cheered.

The guild agent nodded, turning to the ape-man. "Tarzan, can you help me keep an eye out for the real one? I have a feeling that thing's gonna up their tempo, or rather get faster as they go."

The ape-man nodded. "Instinct, overdrive"

IF smirked. "Nep, Goof. Follow our lead. We'll point you to the real one. Hit it hard and fast!"

"Right-o!/Gotcha!"

The Black Ballade then summoned it's clones again...

"Okay, Tarzan, help me watch it's movements..."

The Heartless began their routine once again, but as soon as it finished...

Tarzan pointed towards the target Heartless!

"There, the farthest to the right!" IF shouted.

Neptune grinned. "We got ya now! HIIIII-"

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Grounds

"-YAH!"

Kairi blasted one of the floating tables back with her **Blizzard** magic, causing part of the edge to become brittle with ice.

"Nice going!" Histoire clapped.

But then she got hit by a flying chair!

"Ouch..." Kairi groaned in annoyance. "Okay...How about this!?"

Not letting up, the princess raised her Wooden Sword (Merlin suggested using an object as a conduit for better casting and Neptune left this behind after getting her Keyblade back), casting **Thunder** magic against a set of chairs, electrocuting them and sending them down to the ground.

"Splendid, simply splendid!" Merlin cheered. "You seem to get the hang of these spells well!"

Kairi chuckled. "I mean, my father did tell me I'm a quick study..."

As Merlin continued to teach her more magic, Histoire still couldn't get what happened earlier out of her mind.

"That light she channeled moments ago...That was not her light as one of the Seven Hearts. If it is what I think it is, then..."

Histy gulped. "I may have to consult Merlin about this once her next lesson begins..."

Olympus Coliseum – Arena

"Everybody, hit the deck!"

Neptune ducked down as a rain of icicles were about to hit her.

"No, you don't!"

However, Rena came to her defense, deflecting the icicles back to their sender...

"RAAAAAAAGGHHHH!"

It was a giant being of power, one who has control over the icy cold. A being said to be the predecessors of the reigning gods that lost in a conflict for control over all of Greece.

This was the **Ice Titan Hydros**, awoken early from it's slumber to destroy everything Zeus and his fellow gods had built...

"It's down!" Rena shouted as the large Titan stumbled down. "Go for it, Sora!"

"I got this!"

As the boy with the key began to wail at the stunned Titan, the aspiring adventurer turned around and helped her fellow hero-to-be on her feet.

"Thanks for the save, Falcom Jr.!" Neptune thanked. "Still, we're really fighting Titans this time, huh?"

Rena nodded grimly. "From what Phil told me, these guys used to be really dangerous until Zeus sealed them away. Now, one of them showed up here to cause some damage."

Neptune groaned. "Three guesses to who woke them up from their beauty sleep..."

"Unfortunately so" Rena sighed. "But from what I heard, it's not just him..."

Mount Olympus – Downtown Thebes

"Everyone, get to safety!"

As Compa guided the townsfolk to safety, IF, Donald, Goofy and Hercules were left to deal with another of the enormous Titans, this time one made of rock and stone.

This is the **Rock Titan Lythos**.

"Since when did these giant monsters get loose around here!?" IF complained.

"Not just any monsters" Herc corrected. "They're Titans. Giant beings that once ruled over the world before Dad took care of them and sealed them away..."

"They were sealed away?" Goofy asked.

Donald facepalmed at that. "I can guess who broke the seal then..."

The local hero sighed. "Unfortunately..."

IF groaned. "That flame-haired lowlife...He'd really sink this low just to deal with you and your dad, huh?"

"Yeah, but..."

Hercules readied his stance as the Rock Titan began to encroach upon them.

"...this guy here won't hold a candle with the five of us here!"

"Yeah!" Donald cheered, raising his staff. "We're heroes now! We can take him!"

"Junior heroes, Donald" Goofy happily corrected, his shield at the ready.

"He's quite tough, you know?" Herc reminded the party.

"That may be" Compa said, bringing our her syringe. "But we're not gonna let Mr. Titan stomp all over us!"

IF smirked, readying her qatars. "Yeah. We still got things we have to do! We can't lose here or to Nep and the others back at the Coliseum!"

"YEAH!"

Herc cracked his knuckles as he threw his punch.

"Alright then! Let's get him!"

Olympus Coliseum – Arena

The Ice Titan attempted to get up, not willing to give up, but then noticed something wrong.

Not only is it feeling weaker, it's feeling...smaller?

It looked up when it noticed a large shadow hovering over it...

"Uh-oh..."

Seeing an oversized boot about to stomp on it, Hydros scurried away, its shrunken size giving it a dramatic boost of speed for a quick getaway.

"Phew..." Neptune sighed in relief. "Glad that was over..."

"That thing was pretty tough, huh?" Rena said, using her sword as a foothold to keep her tired self standing. "No wonder Zeus had them sealed..."

"Well" Sora said, approaching the two girls. "That takes care of that. Should we go rest up?"

Neptune gasped for breath. "I'm all for that. I need pudding..."

Rena laughed. "Be sure to eat quick. We still need to catch up to the others."

"Speaking of others" the boy wondered. "Have you seen Cloud? Aerith and the others have been asking for him"

"Well..."

Before Rena could answer, they could hear footsteps rushing into the Coliseum.

"Hey!"

It was Phil, and he's looking exhausted, like he ran an Olympic Runner's Course.

"Can you call for that nurse of yours? We got a man down here!"

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Grounds

"Phew...That was...exhilarating..."

Kairi laid down on the ground, exhausted from the magic lessons she has been taking as of late.

"You've been moving out there like a kid on a sugar rush!" Yuffie, who stopped by to watch Kairi train, commented.

"I know!" the princess exclaimed. "It's just exciting, you know? I've always watched the others play-fight on the Island. I could only imagine what it was like fighting alongside them."

"And if you keep this up, you'd catch up to them in no time, right?"

The two turned to see Aerith, who came in wtih a tray of tea and cookies.

"Yeah. Exactly that!" Kairi responded, taking a sip from one of the cups.

Aerith giggled. "I know that feeling all too well! It took quite a while for me to learn my magic."

"Hey, didn't you have a friend who learned martial arts by herself?" Yuffie asked.

The flower girl nodded. "She got some manuals from a wandering master, and taught herself the martial arts with those as reference. Last I heard, she's well on her way onto the master rank"

"Wow!" Kairi said in amazement

As the girls conversed during their break time, Merlin and Histoire are busy in their own discussion.

"Are you certain about this?" Merlin asked.

"I am not sure" Histoire lamented. "My knowledge in this type of matter is limited. That is why I am here to seek advice regarding that."

Merlin strokes his beard in thought. "While I personally handled the sword before, a Keyblade is a whole different beast to master. Why, I know of a colleague who not only aced his magic exams to become a Great Wizard, but even obtained the Mark of Mastery from his Keyblade studies."

"Do you know him?" Histy's asked, her eyes widening. "Can we seek his help in this matter?"

"We could, but..." the great wizard stuttered.

"But what?" the tome fairy asked.

"You see, the man is quite a trickster." the former adviser admitted. "He would often change the location of his tower at random intervals. Not to mention it would be very difficult to track his location as is. There's no telling where he may place his abode next..."

Histoire sighed. "And we're pressed for time, on top of that..."

"Personally, I could create a more controlled environment to help draw and hone her potential powers that you spoke of" Merlin suggested. "But that would take more time to prepare than she would like..."

"Then it's either we stick to her magic training..." Histoire said, weighing her options. "...or find a way to force the power out..."

Merlin hummed. "Those are some dangerous words there, Histoire."

"Yes, I'm aware" the tome lady replied. "But, if this is what she wants...if she is willing to go wherever for her desires, then..."

Agrabah – Palace Gates

"C'mon, Goof-ster!" Neptune cheered. "Keep those defenses up!"

"I'm doin' my best!" Goofy exclaimed, maintaining his defense against a very tricky opponent.

"Be sure to watch your head!" Compa warned. "This one can just launch poison everywhere!"

Currently, Neptune, Compa, Goofy and Aladdin are pursuing a transformed pot filled with scorpion stingers and claws, in addition to it's ability to launch poison from it's pot-covered body. This is the **Pot Scorpion**, a deadlier and poisonous variant of the Pot Spiders.

"This thing just can't stay still!" Aladdin complained. "As long as it keeps moving around like that, the whole area's gonna become a poison marsh!"

"Then how do we beat it!?" Compa shouted.

"Easy! Goofy!"

After calling for the royal captain, Neptune then charged against the pot, causing it to stop moving and readied it's claws.

"Hehe!"

Just as the Scorpion was about to pierce Neptune, she immediately stopped to a halt and flipped backwards, causing the Heartless' attacks to land on...

"Hah!"

...Goofy's shield. The blocked attack sent the Heartless reeling, it's body flipped on the floor as it flailed helplessly!

"I see!" Aladdin understood. "We lure it to hit us in close range and parry them to flip them on their tails!"

"Nice going, Nep-Nep!" Compa cheered.

"Al-righty!" Neptune cheered as her Keyblade was filled with wind magic! "It's wide open! All-Out Attack!"

"HERE I COME!" The street rat charges!

"**GOOFY TREATMENT**!" The nurse and the royal captain rammed the Heartless with a giant syringe!

"**WIND SLICER**!" And an Aeroga-charged attack to end things up! "Easy-peasy!"

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Grounds

"Y-You're tough!"

"You're not doing half-bad yourself!"

Jumping back, Kairi braced herself with her Wooden Sword as she sparred with the ninja MarvelousAQL, equipped with a wooden katana to help her train.

"So" Yuffie started. "Why did we decided to switch things up with a physical spar in the middle of her magical training lessons?"

Merlin and Histoire looked at each other nervously.

"Basically" the tome lady said. "We wanted to test something out."

"Test what out?" Aerith asked this time.

"You see" Merlin cleared his throat. "When we were initially testing Kairi's aptitude for magic, we noticed that she was exuding a different kind of energy."

"Different how?" the Great Ninja asked.

"Well" the tome lady started. "She was exerting a sort of light energy before she ever casted her first Fire."

"Isn't that just her energy as a Princess of Heart?" the flower girl wondered.

Histoire shook her head. "No. This energy she released matches the ones Neptune and Sora exuded."

"Neptune and Sora...?" Yuffie thought aloud.

Aerith, however, gasped. "Could it be...!?"

"No freakin' way..." the Great Ninja connected the dots, shouting in protest. "Do they just hand these freakin' keys around!?"

"We're not sure of that yet..." Merlin answered. "That is why we're going with this method."

"GAH!"

During the duel, Kairi was knocked down as her opponent held her wooden katana straight to her face, her face and eyes exuding a dangerous aura.

"Ready to give up?" Marvy demanded in a deep tone, one she rarely exudes.

"Wha..." Kairi stuttered, feeling cold sweat running down her forehead. "Why do I feel so..."

"Afraid?" Marvy finished. "You're feeling my killing intent. In the battlefield, anything can happen. Out there, all it takes is one clean hit to your weak spot in order to end you. If you cannot muster the strength to withstand even my glare, then I suggest you call quits on this foolish errand."

Part of her body screamed to just run and hide, to forget this desire to fight.

But the rest of her, especially her own heart, refused to back down!

"NO!"

Gathering strength, Kairi deflected the katana from Marvy and began to launch heavy strikes against her.

"Look at her go!" Yuffie cheered. "Seems like Kairi's found her second wind."

"Seems like it, but..." Aerith murmured. "Her moves are easily telegraphed, and Marvy's just blocking each and every hit with ease."

Merlin hummed as he stroked his beard. "She has little in the way of combat experience. Young Sora, at least, had some in the form of play-fights on his island."

"And Kairi here has none" Histoire lamented. "The best she could is likely mimic moves she has seen Sora and Riku do from memory."

As the clash continued, Marvy took a glance to her side, seeing Histoire looking her way.

The ninja furrowed her eyebrows, as if asking for approval. Sensing this, the tome lady gave a hesitant, if grim nod.

"Okay then..."

Agrabah – Desert

Meanwhile, Sora, CC2, IF and Donald are fighting off a large Heartless floating across the sandy arena in a large magical barrier. It consists of a cobra head sitcking out of it's large armor that is equipped with six arms, both of it's middle arms equipped with two large sharp silver crescents.

This is the **Kurt Zisa**, a recently summoned Heartless that made it's presence known as the Terror of the Desert, hunting weary travelers in this sandy world.

"TIME TO SHOW OFF MY STUFF!"

Genie, who was summoned forth to aid our heroes, channeled forth lightning magic into his hands, summoning forth a powerful lightning storm against his target floating across the sandy arena.

"The weather for today is cloudy with a chance of THUNDER!"

The storm unleashed several lightning bolts across the arena. Thankfully, Genie's mastery of magic assures that his allies are unharmed by the storm.

His enemy? Not so much.

"Okay, it's shield is cracking!" IF shouted, readying her stance. "Donald, with me!"

"RIght!"

With her qatars charged by the court wizard's magic, the duo made their move!

"**ELEMENTAL FURY**!"

Their combined attack hit true, and the Heartless' shield is broken, leaving it slumped on the floor while it's cobra head angrily snapped at anything that dares come near it!

"We got our opening!" CC2 shouted, charging forth. "Come on, Sora!"

"Right behind you! **HURRICANE PERIOD**!"

"Come here, you tenacious snake! **TWIN VOID STRIKE**!"

"I'll keep you all safe!" Donald yelled as he prepared his spell. "WIND!"

IF smirked as she felt the **Aeroza** shield swirling around her and her companions.

"Thanks, ducky! Now eat this, **LA DELPHINUS**!"

"I've got more firepower where that came from!"

With IF's light magic and Genie's two bazooka launchers, the group managed to deal a ton of damage against the Kurt Zisa, but...

"He's getting back up!"

...it managed to recover and spawned two orbs on it's middle arms, sealing away the group's access to magic (yes, even the Genie).

Sora groaned as he landed. "This thing's tough..."

"You tell me!" CC2 shouted. "Why in the worlds would a Heartless like this come out in the desert!?"

"Well, it clearly fits the sand bandit theme, that's for sure" IF said, clicking her tongue. "Still, its attacks are fierce and deadly. Not to mention those weird orbs around it."

"You tell me!" Donald complained. "Thanks to those, I can't even cast any magic! I'm a sitting duck here!"

"Make that two of us!" Genie said as he landed back on his legs, still holding on to the two bazookas he had conjured up. "I've only got these babies with me right now, though!"

Not giving its prey a chance to regroup, the giant Heartless jumped towards them and charged through, forcing them to scramble.

"Everyone, take cover!" IF yelled.

The cobra Heartless spun around, striking against them with continuous spinning charges!

"Gah!"

Sora was knocked back by Kurt Zisa's charge attack, sending him keeling back onto the sand!

"Man down!" Genie shouted.

"Sora!" Donald cried.

"Shoot!" IF cursed. "C'mon, CC2! We gotta pick up the pace!"

The cat-girl growled, her eyes turning red. "It will pay for this!"

As the girls tried to catch up, Sora tried getting up, only for the giant Heartless' form to encroach upon him.

"Uh-oh!"

And as it approached him, the Kurt Zisa raised one of it's blades...

"NO!"

"SORA!"

...and meets Sora's blade with it's own!

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Grounds

"It's over..."

The ninja raised her blade against her downed opponent, her killing intent exuded clearly for said opponent to feel.

"Fall..."

"KAIRI!" Aerith yelled.

Yuffie covered her eyes. "I can't look!"

Marvy sent her blade down against Kairi, who responded by raising her Wooden Sword up to block the hit...

"Wha...!?" the Great Ninja noticed.

"What's this glow!?" the flower girl wondered.

...only for the sword to glow into a bright light.

"This is...!" Merlin exclaimed.

Histoire sighed. "I knew it."

...and as Marvy's katana landed, the glow dissipated...

"HAAAAAAAHHHH!"

Sensing a chance, Kairi immediately deflected the katana, tossing it to the side...

"...!"

...and came inches close to slicing her opponent's neck off...

"..."

...only to find the ninja doing the same, having brought out a dagger that inched close to her own neck as well!

"Alright!" Merlin shouted. "That's enough!"

Hearing that, Kairi slumped down to the floor, lying down exhausted. "That was...really tough..."

"That was incredible!" Marvy cheered, back to speaking in her usual tone. "I didn't know you could wield one of those too!"

"One of those?"

The islander looked to her right hand, and sure enough, instead of a Wooden Sword, she was holding a weapon adorned with flowers. But not just any weapon...

"Wait! Since when did I get a Keyblade!?"

Atlantica – Underwater Gorge

"Ooooohhhh! How do we take this guy down!?"

This time, Sora, Compa and Goofy are leading the charge against a ghastly Heartless, one that has haunted the seas of Atlantica since the opening of the Final Keyhole.

It is a **Grand Ghost**, a larger, scarier variant of the Search Ghost, rumored to once resided in a great whale that swam in the Ocean Between.

"Nothin' we do is workin!" Goofy bemoaned.

Sure enough, any attack thrown at it just ends up deflected, and the Heartless took every opening it sensed to attack the party.

"We're gonna lose at this rate!"

Scrambling his fin for an item, he found a Mega-Potion and used it, spreading it's healing light for all in the area.

"Ahhhhhh~!" Compa moaned as she took in the healing effects.

"That's better!" Goofy cheered.

But as the party recovered their health, the Heartless began to screech in pain!

"Huh?" Compa noticed. "Why is the Heartless screaming just now?"

"Do ya think...? "Goofy wondered, turning to Sora.

"Healing..." Sora mumbled. "That's it!"

He turned to his fellow party members with a revelation. "This thing hates healing!"

"A Heartless that is immune to pain, but gets hurt from healing?" Goofy said, feeling confused.

"Oh!" Compa figured out. "It's like a Zombie!"

Sora nodded. "Zombies hate healing, so we just gotta treat it to beat it!"

"Well, in that case...!"

Goofy then scrambled to grab two **MP Gifts** from under his shell.

"Here!"

"Thanks! Ready, Compa?" Sora asked.

The nurse nodded. "Yeah! Let's do it!"

Once the two drank the MP Gifts, the Keyblade wielder and the nurse proceeded to channel their healing energies into a single attack!

"**LIGHT'S MIRACLE**!"

The blinding, healing light exuded from the duo sent the Ghost screeching in pain, causing it to disintegrate as the light engulfed it in it's soothing glow.

"Well, that was easy!" Sora boasted.

"It took quite a while to figure out how to beat it though..." Compa pointed out.

Goofy hummed. "I wonder how Nep-Nep and the others are doin'"

Atlantica – Sunken Ship

Neptune groaned. "Hold still, you!"

"This thing's quite fast, isn't it?" Ariel asked.

Neptune, IF, Donald and Ariel are currently engaged in a battle against the faster yet cowardly cousin of the Aquatank, the **Jet Balloon**, carrying their own versions of the Screwdivers, the **Missile Divers**.

"We got more incoming!" IF warned as the Heartless more of the Divers right at them. "Keep those defenses up, Donald!"

"I'm trying!" Donald shouted back as he raised more Aeroza shields. "But I only have so much energy to keep us protected!"

"Then I'll distract it!" Ariel declared. "Neptune, IF, take it down while it's attention is away!"

"Oki-doki!/Got it!"

With their trust behind her, the red-haired sea princess swam against the Heartless and unleashed a powerful spinning attack against it.

"There!" Ariel shouted. "Now let's see if the shark takes the bait..."

Sure enough, the Heartless became furious with the mermaid's assault and diverted its attention against her.

"Okay, looks like she's keeping it busy!" IF noted, turning to Neptune. "Nep, wanna do this?"

The Keyblade wielder grinned. "Been a long time since we last did this!"

"I'll get us started then!" the court wizard exclaimed, channeling his magic. "STOPGA!"

Once the Heartless was stopped in it's tracks, the duo proceeded to charge straight at it!

"**HEAVEN COMBINATION**!"

Traverse Town – Third District

"HAH!"

Kairi slammed down her new Keyblade against a Soldier Heartless. Maintaining her vigil, she proceeded to fight off another Soldier in the distance.

"She's doing pretty good out there!" Yuffie cheered.

"I'll say!" Aerith said. "She's kicking serious butt!"

As the islander defeated the next Soldier, a group of Red Nocturnes spawned in front of her.

"A group of them, huh?" Kairi muttered. "In that case!"

She hopped back and charged her Keyblade with magic.

"**FREEZE**!"

"Incredible!" Artisan gasped in awe as the Red Nocturnes disintegrated by the princess' **Blizzara** attack. "She responded to the threats quickly and reacted accordingly."

"Indeed" Merlin said, stroking his beard. "All those days training back there had paid off!"

Meanwhile, two Large Bodies appeared behind Kairi, causing her to jump back and start blasting them with **Fira** magic!

The flower girl chuckled. "Even though most of those days is just her being hit by a flying table or chair she didn't see..."

"She is a hardy one, I say" Yuffie said, shaking her head. "Maybe islanders like her and Sora are just built different."

Histoire nodded. "Her potential seems boundless. Perhaps I made the right call to tap into it after all..."

As soon as the Large Bodies were eliminated, an entire swarm of Darkballs emerged into the square.

"Ah, smokes!" Yuffie cursed, bringing out her shuriken. "This is a little too much for our princess to handle!"

"Then let's back her up!" Aerith exclaimed, her guard staff at the ready.

Artisan chuckled, bringing out her own staff. "Well, I needed the exercise anyway..."

Kairi, seeing the danger around her, took a deep breath and readied her stance once more.

"I can do this! I can fight!"

Halloween Town – Manor Ruins

"We got it down!"

At the large area that once housed Oogie Boogie's manor, the party, joined by Jack Skellington and MAGES. engaged in combat with an unusual Heartless, a metallic creature armed with a pincer for its right arm, three small heads in a jar that made its head and even small jars for feet!

"This Heartless truly is peculiar" the Mad Magician noted. "An amalgamation of numerous parts stitched together to form an abomination. A **Chimera** would best suit it's name"

"That's great, but..." Donald started. "Please get your butt down here and help us!"

With the Chimera's body knocked down, the three heads stored within it's large jar scrambled about, all the while Gargoyles danced around the skies and blasted the party with their unholy flames.

"Their heads are dancing around the floor!" Jack exclaimed. "Such an exciting number they must be having!"

"Now's not the time to get impressed!" IF scolded. "Deflect those heads back!"

"Way ahead of ya!" Neptune responded, batting one of the heads back.

Heeding IF's advice, the party proceeded to whack the bouncing heads back to it's main body, damaging it's still form as cracks formed around it.

However, between the barrage of fires from the Gargoyles and the sturdy armor of the Chimera, the bouncing heads were absorbed back to the main host, reviving it's functions.

"It's gettin' back up!" Goofy yelled.

"We didn't do enough damage!" Compa bemoaned.

"It's gonna be tough to crack that shell..." Sora muttered.

"In that case..." MAGES. said, stepping forth. "I may have a solution to your problem"

"Ooooohhhh~" Neptune cooed. "Magey to the rescue!"

"It better be good" Donald mumbled, crossing his arms.

The Mad Magician chuckled. "Oh, it will, fellow wizard."

Her lips curled into a grin as the Chimera closed in on her. "It will"

Posing, she entraps the Chimera in a large glyph of magic and unleashes a plethora of Gravity magic that pressurizes the mechanical Heartless!

"Now behold! This is the fruit of my research! My **Blasphemous Theoretical**!"

Once the wave of Gravity magic ended, she released the magical glyph and then spawned five orbs around the Chimera, releasing a torrent of flame against the Heartless.

"O mechanized monstrosity! Vanquish into the unknown!"

The orbs stopped their casting and then converged onto the Chimera, unleashing a massive explosion that enveloped the Chimera...

"The heads are coming out again!" Sora noticed.

"Okay! Let's get them!"

WIth IF's command, the party continued their attack against the mechanical monstrosity, deflecting the dancing heads against their metal body...

"Well, that didn't take care of it..." Donald bemoaned.

But the Mad Magician, true to her moniker, just chuckled.

"What are you up to?" the royal wizard demanded.

"Just watch"

As the party continued their attack, the heads gathered into the Chimera once more...

"Agh! Not again!" the boy with the key complained.

"How much more do we have to do this!?" the girl with the key followed.

...but then, the mechanical Heartless began to shake, its jar containing the three heads beginning to fizzle out.

"What's goin' on?" Goofy wondered.

"IT'S GONNA BLOW!"

Hearing Donald's warning caused the party to panic.

"EVERYONE, MOVE AWAY!"

The party did so, just as the Heartless exploded, it's three heads launched up into the sky as they exploded in a show of fireworks!

"Wow..." Compa cooed at the sight. "They're so pretty..."

"Bravo!" Jack cheered, clapping his hands.

Donald looked at the Mad Magician once again, who smirked in satisfaction.

"And that" MAGES. turned around and bowed, tipping her hat. "is my performance for the night"

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Grounds

"So, you are my final test, huh?"

As Kairi, the newly christened Keyblade wielder, enters the grounds, she comes face to face with her final trial.

"So, I am."

In front of her is a familiar man, wearing mostly black and wielding a gun-shaped sword on his hand. This is Squall Leonhart, or simply Leon, the leader of the Drifters that presided over Traverse Town.

"Wow" Yuffie exclaimed. "You guys sure are pulling all the stops on this one, huh?"

"Indeed" Merlin replied. "Normally, we'd continue her training here as normal, but Leon requested this for a reason"

"And what's that?" the Great Ninja asked.

"It's simple" Artisan answered. "If she does well, we're planning to bring her with us to help reclaim Hollow Bastion"

"Really?" Aerith asked. "Are you sure this isn't going a bit too fast?"

"So, it seems" Histoire said, not denying her point. "But that is why we deem this test a necessary step. We have to see if she needs more training, or she can start getting a feel of the fields outside this world"

"I won't mince words, Kairi" Leon said, ignoring the conversation on the peanut gallery. "The worlds out there are dangerous, especially with the Heartless around. One wrong move and

you will be in danger. Are you okay with that?"

Kairi closed her eyes. "I can't say. I admit, part of me is still afraid of what's to come."

She opened her eyes, each lit with a flame of determination. "But, when I think of how Sora and Neptune fought on through despite the odds, I can't help but want to part of their strength."

The island princess conjured her Keyblade, the Destiny's Embrace, ready to fight. "I know I'm still a novice at this. I know that I could end up holding others back, but I can't just sit around and twiddle my thumbs while I know I have the power to change things. That's why I'm going to do this. I'm going out there to fight with what strength I have. That is what my heart is telling me!"

"Kairi..." Histoire whispered, tears about to leak from her eyes.

"Dang..." Yuffie said, staring in amazement at the girl.

Artisan chuckled. "It seems like she's found her reason to fight."

Aerith nodded. "That she did"

Merlin hummed in agreement.

"I see"

Leon got into a fighting stance, ready for the last trial.

"Then show me that you aren't just mincing words. Prove to me your heart's strength!"

Kairi readied her stance. This will be her toughest fight yet, but she won't back down.

The people she cared for are still out there, after all.

"HAAAAAAAAAA-"

Neverland – London – Big Ben Tower

"-AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!"

Neptune's attack missed her target as she goes to check the area around her.

Currently, the party, accompanied by Peter Pan, Tinker Bell and Sting, are fighting against the ghastly horror that haunts London's Clock Tower.

This is the **Phantom**, a haunting terror that implements the curse of death onto it's prey...

"Grandpa...I'll be...seeing you soon..."

And right now, Compa has been afflicted with it. As soon as the clock stroke 12, a process sped up by the Phantom's power, the target will be inflicted by the curse, putting them in a state of death.

"No way..." Sora gasped in horror as he noticed the bodies of four of his friends floating up like dead fishes. "They already got Peter, Donald and Goofy..."

"No..." IF said in disbelief, cradling the cursed nurse. "This can't be...Not you...Why do you feel so cold?"

"DON'T GIVE UP!"

The remaining party members looked to the only other party member still alive, that being Sting.

"If we don't move fast, it'll claim us next!"

Readying her sword, she charged straight against the Phantom's weak spot, the glowing white heart floating near the edges of it's cloak.

"HAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

Striking the glowing heart twice caused it to change color to red!

"That's it..." IF growled. "NOW YOU DIE!"

"Iffy, no!"

But it was too late! She charged straight against the Phantom with her flame-imbued qatars, causing the glowing heart to change to yellow!

"Want some more!?" Sting declared, charging electricity onto her blade. "**STING ELECTRIC BREAK!**"

The attack was fierce and the Phantom's heart changed to glow blue!

"YOU WILL PAY!" the guild agent shouted in rage, channeling ice magic. "**BLISTERING COLD**!"

As their assault continued, the Phantom managed to inflict the curse onto the two of them, and the clock was nearing 12!

"Oh no..." Sora gasped, fearing the worst.

"We gotta stop that clock!"

Neptune tried to stop the clock's minute hand from moving...

"Grrrrrrkkk! Stop moving, you!"

...but the minute hand reached 12 and the curse of death has now reached the two Drifters.

"I...messed up..." Sting bemoaned as she went limp in the air.

"Nep...Sora...run..." IF warned right as she breathed her last.

"NO!" Sora yelled.

"IFFY! STING!" Neptune screamed.

With the two Drifters now trapped in a state of death, the Phantom now inflicts the curse of death onto the Keyblade Wielders as the clock hands began to move.

"What do we do, Neptune?" Sora asked as he flew to his fellow Keyblade Wielder. "Neptune?"

But she wasn't responding...

"No..."

Rather, she was fuming!

"Not like this..."

She was practically glowing...

"Not like this!"

...quite literally at that, too!

"I WON"T LET YOU TAKE ANYMORE FROM ME!"

With furious rage, Neptune charged straight at the Heartless and attacked!

"**THUNDER BLITZ**!"

The heart, once glowing yellow, has switched to red!

"**BLAZE BREAK**!"

And now it switched to blue-

"**FROST CRUSHER**!"

-And then to white-

"**VARIABLE EDGE**!"

"She's not stopping..." the boy muttered, clutching his own chest in pain. "And she's getting...angrier with every moment. I feel her pain...through our Link..."

As Sora looked back at the clock, he noticed that the clock hands are still moving!

"I can't let this continue! I gotta stop this thing! **STOP**!"

Channeling his **Stopra** magic, the clock hands froze in place!

"Okay, now to help Neptu-"

"YOU WON'T ESCAPE! **NEPTUNE BREAK**!"

Wasting no time, Neptune immediately went for her greatest technique and unleashed a plethora of aerial dash attacks against the Heartless!

"HAAAAAAAAA-"

Traverse Town – Merlin's House – Training Grounds

"-AAAAAAAHHHHH!"

Kairi went in and lunged straight at Leon, who responded by blocking her attack head on.

"Is this all you have?"

Deflecting her Keyblade, the gunblade-wielder charged up a fireball against her, who barely managed to block it.

"Hmph. Now then..."

Squall raised his Gunblade and channeled energy onto it, causing it to emanate a bluish glow.

"**Lionheart**." Yuffie muttered.

"That means the kid gloves are off now" Artisan commented.

"Will she be able to get through this, I wonder?" Merlin wondered.

Aerith clasped her hands in prayer. "She will. We just gotta have faith…"

Histoire couldn't say a word, feeling nothing but worry for the nascent Keyblade wielder.

"YAH!"

Leon swung his blade quickly against the girl, pushing her back as she tanked a few hits.

"He's tough. No wonder Sora had a hard time against him"

"Get this!"

Leon then heaved his charged Gunblade in a circle, knocking Kairi against the wall!

"AH!"

"Oh no!"

"This is bad..."

Getting up, Kairi switched her tactics, charging her Keyblade with magic.

"**BLIZZARD**!"

Launching **Blizzaras** at him, the princess strafes to the side to avoid her opponent's charged blade.

"Hmph"

Deftly dodging the Blizzaras aimed at him, he prepared an assault against Kairi.

"It's over!"

He jumped up and slammed his blade down against his target. Fortunately, she slid to the side, dodging the blow.

"Gotcha!"

Seeing an opening, Kairi unleashed a combo against him!

"She's wailing on him!"

Not letting up, the princess charged up with energy...

"Just like Sora!"

...and proceeded to launch a series of dash attacks against the gunblade-wielder.

This is Kairi's personalized Sonic Blade, **Seven Hearts**!

"Woah, hold up!" Yuffie complained. "Isn't that supposed to be Cloud's move!?"

"It is" Artisan noticed. "From what I heard, Cloud gave Sora an orb imbedded with the technique, which is how he was able to use it. We've already seen him use it back in the Coliseum."

"And now, she's using a similar technique she learned from pure memory..." the flower girl gasped in awe.

Once her attack was finished, Kairi stopped to catch her breath. "Hah. Had enough?"

"Not quite"

She looked and noticed that Leon had his Gunblade raised. Where there was once a bluish glow, now it glowed a bright red.

"Oh no!" Yuffie gasped in fear.

"If this hits her, it's over" Merlin commentated.

"Okay" Aerith huffed. "This is way overkill…"

"Shouldn't we stop this?" Artisan asked with clear worry. "I think Kairi's proven herself enough"

"Perhaps so" Histoire said. "Kairi! Leon! Sto-"

"NO!"

The tome lady stopped in her tracks at the princess' shout.

"Don't stop us, please"

Kairi, regulating her breathing, slowly readied her Keyblade.

"Let us see this through to the end. Whatever happens, I'll accept the results..."

She then faced her opponent once more.

"Bring it!"

Leon huffed. "You asked for it."

The energy in his Gunblade hummed louder.

"**BLASTING! ZONE!**"

He then slammed his weapon down in a loud blast, leaving only a smoking crater line in his wake.

"Is it over?"

However, he then felt something near his neck!

"..."

Daring to look down, he saw his opponent, pointing her Keyblade near his neck as she glared at him, keeping her breathing regulated all the while.

"H-How did she?" Yuffie wondered with eyes agape.

"She teleported" Artisan explained. "Once she saw the attack was coming, she slid a bit to the side to avoid the brunt of the attack. But then, in a daring move, she threw her Keyblade forward and just before she was hit in the blast, Kairi teleported herself to her Keybalde and closed in on Leon. Once that happened, the match was over."

"Teleport?" the Great Ninja wondered, scratching her head. "But how did she learn to…?"

She then gasped and turned to Aerith, whose head was turned, trying to suppress a chuckle.

"You're kidding me…"

The flower girl giggled as she turned to her friend a finger close to her mouth. "Our little secret."

"How's...that...?"

However, the battle took a toll on the princess, and thus, like her fellow Keyblade wielders before her, passed out like a light, her Keyblade dropping to the floor in a loud clang.

Ocean Between – Gummi Ship Highwind

"...-Nep?"

"...wake up!"

Neptune slowly opened her eyes, noticing familiar faces looking at her.

"Nep-Nep?" Compa asked.

"You ok?" Donald also asked.

"Is this..." the girl in the parka started as she yawned. "...heaven?"

"Nope" Sora said, shaking his head.

"You're in the Gummi Ship!" Donald replied.

"We're still alive, thankfully" IF reported.

"Alive?"

Neptune then jolted. "That's right! That creepy ghost Heartless! What happened? How's everyone!?"

"Well, we're still alive and kickin'" Goofy answered.

"No thanks to you" Sora answered. "You took care of that ghost!"

"And thanks to that" IF continued. "The curse of death that was placed on us was lifted, Peter Pan and Sting included."

Compa nodded. "We're all okay now, thanks to you Nep-Nep!"

Hearing all this and seeing her friends safe and sound, Neptune began to cry.

Seeing this caused everyone to gasp.

"H-Hey..." Donald started.

"Are ya ok?" Goofy asked, worried.

"I was scared..." Neptune confessed through her tears. "I...thought I was gonna lose you guys. I thought...I was gonna be all alone again...Just the thought of that...makes this Nep sad..."

IF sighed. "I admit, that last fight was a really close scrape. But we couldn't have made it through that ordeal if not for you and Sora."

"You think so?" Sora wondered, scratching his cheek.

"That's right!" Compa exclaimed. "You pulled through for us, time and time again. We wouldn't be here again if not for you two"

"I didn't get to do much though." Sora said. "If anything, Neptune did the lion's share of the work, blasting the Heartless silly."

"So, what?" Donald replied. "You were the one who managed to stop that clock. The matter of fact is, you both saved us."

Goofy nodded. "Still, we gotta take care of ourselves better next time. We don't want you two to keep worryin' about us!"

Neptune sniffed. "Thanks, guys. You're all the best buddies I could ever ask for!"

The party shared a heartful cheer after the ordeal, happy that they could still be together.

"*Still, what was that feeling*?" Sora thought for a moment, looking back at when Neptune went stir-crazy. "*It felt like she was trying to force me to do something...Could this be one of the effects of our Share Link?*"

However, a buzzing sound was heard, interrupting the boy's thoughts.

"Oh"

The party turned to the large screen in the cockpit, showing two familiar squirrels.

"Heya, fellas!" Chip called.

"We got news for ya!" Dale exclaimed.

"From Leon and the others?" IF replied.

The two squirrels nodded.

"They've already made landfall in Hollow Bastion!" Chip replied.

"Cid said he's even got the route secured for ya on the way back!" Dale reported. "That means you guys can head right back in now!"

"Gotcha!" The guild agent exclaimed. "Tell them we're on our way ASAP!"

"You got it!" Dale replied.

"Take care of yourselves now!" Chip said. "We're all counting on you!"

As the screen died out, IF turned to the rest of the party.

"You all heard that?"

Compa nodded. "This is it, huh?"

"About time!" Donald exclaimed.

"Our pals are waitin' for us!" Goofy shouted.

"So, what are we waiting for!?" Sora exclaimed as he and the party got to their seats.

"Yeah!" Neptune chirped, pointing her finger to the stars ahead. "Let's go go go!"

"YEAH!"

The party then sailed the Gummi Ship forth at full speed, blasting through the precious stars in the Ocean Between towards their destination, the ruined world of Hollow Bastion.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, first off, when I said detour, I mean, world visit for the post-game optional content (only one person in the reviews here got it right). Adding another world right before the end of this story would feel as weird as an anime filler arc. Nothing much would be added to the context of this story (at least, as far as I can think of, right now). So, for those expecting something different, I apologize for misleading you.

Second, Kairi. We know her story. We know how she's treated as far as canon writing goes. We know what the fanbase wants from her. What we don't know is where her character is going moving forward in canon, seeing as Melody of Memory laid the groundwork for her character arc. So, for this story, I decided to have her be combat-capable as early as now. There are three plausible reasons in this context. First, seeing Neptune fighting alongside Sora and the other basically inspired her to be more pro-active in wanting to help them. Second, Histoire, sensing her potential, on top of being a bit more willing to take risks (especially after what happened to Gamindustri in this story), advises her to seek out help for training. Third, having more training partners like Marvy and Leon helps improve her combat capabilities. This, on top of her quick learning (she has a teleport attack, access to 3rd-4th tier magic, a large AOE shotlock AND an aerial Sonic Blade-like move in KH3), helps her keep up with the party later, but still lacks actual live combat experience, something that is emphasized in her brief stint in Melody of Memory, knowing only the basics to stay in the fight but WILL fold against more experienced foes.

Third, ummm..., Hollow Bastion is coming up, for real this time! After that, Nepstation is coming back up too! Stay tuned!

PS. Don't forget to thank your Histy's!

Chapter 22: Chapter 14.8: Destiny's Force (Promise)

Chapter Summary

> The party returns to Hollow Bastion to seal it's Keyhole, but they are not fighting this battle alone...

Hollow Bastion – Grand Hall

In front of the final Keyhole, now fully glowing with darkness, there stood two figures...

"Looks dangerous..." one figure, a female shinobi wearing her school uniform improperly, noted. She then turned her head to her companion. "Are you scared?"

Her companion, an islander girl with red hair wearing a white shirt and purple skirt, breathed in. "A little, yeah. But..."

She gripped her weapon, a medium-sized Keyblade adorned in flowers, tightly.

"...If what I can do here helps alleviate his burden, I'm going for it..."

The shinobi giggled. "You are so devoted. As a ninja, I can understand that completely."

She then faced the final Keyhole, her face serious. "Shall we go?"

The islander nodded as the two stepped forth into the final Keyhole, determined to end this fight.

Hollow Bastion – Entrance Hall

"Soooo...How do you think we can handle this?"

Currently, Yuffie and Aerith are standing back to back, surrounded by a horde of Heartless, consisting of Soldiers, Wizards and Darkballs.

"This will be rough" Aerith surmised.

"Couldn't you just blast them with your magic?" the Great Ninja asked. "C'mon, we all saw how you and Arty fought. Big badda boom magic and all that!"

"Yeaaaaahhhhh..." the flower girl said. "See, those kind of spells...They take time to charge up"

"Seriously?" Yuffie exclaimed.

"Once I get more training done, I can get them set up a little faster with my preparations" Aerith said, tapping her staff down to set up an **Energy Ward** around them. "Like this one, for example!"

"Uh-huh" the Great Ninja nodded. "I get it."

She then looked around, noticing that the Wizards are readying their spells. "Well, since I'm getting all fired up in this field, I may as well make the most of it!"

She then made quick symbols with her hands as she prepared her technique.

"**Ninja Art! Multiple Clones!**"

A puff of smoke emerged around the area the two girls were in, and then, surrounding the two...

"Go forth, my clone army!"

Yuffie led the charge, keeping the Heartless busy with her numerous clones and her ninja skills.

"Thanks, Yuff!" Aerith then took a deep breath. "Okay! Here goes something!"

With the Heartless distracted, Aerith began to charge up her spell...

"O great guardian...Smite all who dare to harm us..."

Energy began to hum across the edges of her guard stick, filling it with powerful light energies.

"**RAY OF JUDGEMENT!**"

Aerith then aims her staff straight against the Heartless as she guides it towards her targets, wiping out any enemy, including the magic-adept Wizards, that happened to be in it's unfortunate path.

"...And done!" Aerith cheered.

Yuffie whistled in amazement as she dispelled her clones. "Now that was awesome! We kicked butt, huh?"

Aerith nodded and high-fived the peppy ninja on a job well done.

"Looks like you guys don't need the help, huh?"

The duo turned to see a group of familiar heroes approaching them.

"There you guys are!" Yuffie greeted the party. "What kept ya?"

"Oh, you know?" Sora replied, putting his hands on his back. "Just a couple of Heartless to handle, friends to help out. The usual"

Neptune guffawed. "We ARE heroes, after all!"

"Junior heroes, Nep-Nep!" Goofy reminded.

"Do you have to keep reminding us that?" Donald complained.

Aerith chuckled. "Well, junior or senior, we're glad you all came back"

"Have you guys seen Mr. Beast?" Compa asked.

"Oh, Mr. Big, Mean and Furry?" Yuffie described, pointing up to the library. "He went up in there. Apparently, the beauty he's searching for went there for some research."

"D'awwww, don't be so grumpy, Yuff." Aerith cooed. "Just because he shooed you away for calling Ms. Belle a nerd doesn't mean..."

"He tried to maul me back there!" the ninja protested. "Even Cloud wouldn't be this mean!"

"We're going to go see him" Sora noted. "Where're the others?"

"Just up ahead" Aerith said simply. "Be careful though. The Heartless are getting restless around here"

"Yeah!" Yuffie shouted. "They might be just around the corner before you know it!"

Just as she said so, another group of Heartless spawned behind the party!

"Like that!"

"Get going!"

Wasting no time, the party heeded Yuffie's advice and fled to the library while the Drifter duo fends off the Heartless.

"Yuff, we should really teach you about jinxes..."

The Great Ninja deflated upon hearing that. "Oh, foofie..."

Hollow Bastion – Great Crest

"That should take care of the last of them..."

Meanwhile, Artisan is busy patrolling the large, circular area for any sign of the Heartless.

"Still, it's nice to have someone tough like you covering my back"

Her attention turned to a certain swordsman, draped in red wielding a bandaged sword.

"Right, Cloud?"

The soldier huffed. "I don't come cheap, you know."

Artisan chuckled. "I'm quite aware of that. Still, should you really be moving around? Those injuries you got were no joke. If Compa wasn't there when she was, you would've..."

Cloud looked away. "I'll be fine. I'm just..."

He then clutched his head, reeling in pain as a memory resurfaced.

"You can't defeat me, Cloud. As long as you cling to the weak links you called 'bonds'. Free yourself from them, and only then, can you truly find raw power in the darkness..."

He scowled, slamming his fist on the nearby wall. "Curse him..."

Artisan frowned. Whatever was troubling him, he wouldn't share with anyone, not even to Aerith. Whatever it was, he was insistent on dealing with it by himself, lest it wouldn't hold any meaning, or so he said.

"Cloud, listen"

He didn't turn, but he wasn't moving. That's a plus.

"I cannot claim to understand what you're going through right now, nor can I give you proper advice on how to help deal with it. But..."

Artisan stopped for a moment to see if Cloud's still there. It's fine if he doesn't listen. She needed to get this out of the way, anyway.

"...just know, Aerith has been worried sick about you and the other two you have been friends with. Knowing you, you'd probably go off on your own again. Just...make sure to pay her and the others a visit from time to time, ok?"

Cloud huffed. "Who went and made you her caretaker?"

Artisan shrugged. "My homeworld, basically. Recalling what really happened is...not a pleasant experience. So is losing everything that mattered to you..."

The soldier closed his eyes in sympathy. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Hm?"

"The paying visits thing"

Artisan hummed. "As long as you listened..."

The two then heard sounds around them as they ended up surrounded by Defenders.

"Looks like we got our work cut out for us" the horned woman said.

"Feeling tired?" the soldier asked.

Artisan smirked. "Far from it. I can keep going."

Cloud shrugged. "Just pull back when you're feeling woozy. I'll take care of the rest."

The horned woman chuckled. "Ever so reliable you've become..."

Two Defenders attempted to gang up on Cloud, who met their attacks with his bandaged Buster Sword.

"Ready for this!?" His sword thrummed with energy as the soldier launched his fierce attack. "**CROSS SLASH!**"

And down goes the Defenders...

"I got them!"

Channeling **Thunder Wards** around the area, Artisan vanquished the enemies attacking her comrade.

"Thanks"

However...

"Watch out!"

One of the newly-spawned Defenders attempted to lunge at the now defenseless-horned woman...

"Ah shoot!"

"**STEP ASIDE!**"

...only to be lunged at by a powerful force exerted by a beast!

"Way to go, Mr. Beast!" a cheery voice…well, cheered!

"Reminds me of the last minute save he did for Nep and Noire" a reliable voice spoke.

The two Drifters looked up to see a familiar party approaching them, backed up by the Beast himself.

"Look who arrived" Cloud snarked.

"Just in time!" Artisan exclaimed. "Help us out, will you?"

Neptune snickered. "We've been itching for some action out here!"

"Then get to it!" Cloud shouted, spinning his sword up in the air. "**STARS! RAIN DOWN!**"

A shower of meteors rained down on the area, taking out most of the Heartless in the area. This is the soldier's **Meteor Rain**.

"Heyheyhey!" the girl with the key complained, raising her Keyblade as her comrades readied to fight. "Leave some for us, Spiky! **GRAVITY SLAM!**"

Hollow Bastion – Chapel

"So, you had a Fairy Godmother to assist you, huh?"

While the party continued to make their way upward, the remaining Princesses of Heart elected to remain behind in the castle's chapel, gathering their power to hold back the great surge of darkness that emerged from the Final Keyhole. Belle, on the other hand, opted to head down to the Library to research on other possible methods.

"Yes" Cinderella nodded. "It was thanks to her that I met dear Prince Charming and got to dance at the ball"

"And I assume she's the source of your advice for using our powers, correct?" Jasmine asked, to which Cinderella nodded.

"You have one like that too, right?" Alice asked Aurora.

"Well, not just one" Aurora answered. "But Three Good Fairies. They have been my caretakers for years."

"Oh?" Alice said, tilting her head. "Why not your parents?"

"It must be that dreadful witch, right?" Snow White guessed.

"Unfortunately" Aurora admitted. "Maleficent has set her sights on me to spite the king by cursing me to eternal sleep should I ever prick my finger on a spindle. Though the fairies had done a good job to keep me hidden, I chose one day to explore the outside. It was there that I met Prince Philip, who ended up rescuing me from the evil fairy's spell."

"How?" Alice questioned.

"Is it by true love's kiss?" Snow White asked.

"Yes" Aurora nodded with a slight flush. "How do you know?"

Snow White giggled. "I understand the feeling. I too was awoken by the kiss of a fine prince myself."

"So that means you fell asleep as well?" Cinderella asked.

Snow White nodded. "An old lady approached me and offered me a fine apple to eat. Once I did, my body fell into slumber, but I swear I could hear the old lady cackle at the top of her lungs. In my supposed slumber, I heard only the sobs and cries of my good dwarven friends,

but then I felt something warm on my lips and I found the Prince I met who managed to find me and carried me away to our happily ever after."

The other princesses cooed in awe.

"A happily ever after, huh?" Jasmine said, sighing dreamily.

Cinderella giggled. "You'll find yours someday"

"Oh, I...already did" the Arabian princess replied. "It's just..."

"Is he not into you?" Snow White asked innocently.

"No! It's..." Jasmine groaned. "He's having trouble realizing that I like him as he is. He doesn't need to be anyone else for my sake."

"Oooohhhh..." the princesses sounded.

"I'm sure he will turn around in time" Aurora reassured. "You both just need the right time and place to talk it out."

"Will he listen, though?" Jasmine wondered.

"If the feelings you both share ring true, then I'm sure he will listen."

"It must feel nice, being able to speak regarding your true loves..." Alice bemoaned.

"Do you not have one waiting for you back home?" Snow White asked.

The little girl shook her head. "I was wandering around a curious land, far from my home, for so long. All the people I met there were whimsical, yet were of no help at all. But thanks to two young folks bearing Keyblades, I felt that genuine kindness still existed outside my own world."

"Are you referring to Sora and Neptune?" Jasmine asked, to which Alice nodded. "I feel the same. They, along with Aladdin and their friends all did their best to stop Jafar from achieving his wicked schemes. Agrabah is saved because of them."

"Keyblades, huh?" Cinderella mused. "That reminds of three people I knew who wielded such weapons."

"Oh?" Snow White wondered. "Were they two young men and a beautiful woman with blue hair?"

"Indeed" Cinderella nodded as she recalled her meeting with these young wielders. "One helped in making my dress for the ball, another told me to remain strong through hard times, and the last helped me reunite with the Prince I danced with that fateful night. I wanted to thank them all for helping me out in my life, but I never got to see them again in a decade..."

"The same goes for me" Snow White declared. "A kind young boy escorted me out of that dreadful forest, and another young man fended off a horde of monsters, though we might have had a misunderstanding on that, and from what I heard from the Prince, a kind woman told him where to find me, so I wanted to give them my thanks as well."

"I may not have met them myself." Aurora stated. "But from what I heard from the faeries, two of them have aided in my awakening from Maleficent's spell. I'm not sure about the third one, but if they're friends with the other two, I'm sure they are just as kind as they are."

Jasmine giggled. "You all met some great people yourselves, huh?"

"Indeed"

Cinderella and the princesses then gazed upon the open passageway.

"And now, the last of us has charged forth to aid them in her own way."

"It was quite surprising" Alice admitted. "While I can understand Miss Belle's desire to research the library, to think that she would instead opt to fight alongside those who once lived here against the Heartless..."

"No doubt she wishes to ease the burden of the one she cares for the most" Cinderella believed. "That's why we should do the same with what little we can do."

"That's right" Aurora nodded in agreement. "Even if this act would cost us our shine as the Seven Pure Hearts, we will make sure the worlds will not suffer the same fate as ours"

Snow White agreed. "Agreed."

"Our own worlds haven't fallen yet" Jasmine declared. "But I won't allow it and the others to fall to the darkness. There's still so much I want to see out there!"

"And there's still people for us to return to!" Alice shouted. "That's why we can't throw in the towel now! Everyone's counting on us and the Keyblade wielders!"

The princesses all nodded, their determination set, and their goals clear.

Suddenly, the door slammed open!

"Phew..." a familiar voice of an energetic girl rang out. "Made it...Does anyone have water here?"

As the two parties met up, a Dark Corridor slowly emerged behind the Princesses...

Hollow Bastion – Grand Hall

"Sheesh! That Heartless' one tricky guy, eh?"

In the middle of the circular area near the Final Keyhole, Leon and Cid stood back-to-back, their weapons (a customized spear in Cid's case) in hand, their faces wary for danger as a group of Soldiers and Defenders surround them.

"An invisible enemy..." Leon mumbled as he scanned around for the target. "It will be difficult to keep this up while these ones swarm at us"

Two Soldiers attempt to converge at Leon, who simply took them out with a swipe of his gunblade. As he did, he felt a presence closing in on him and jumped back.

"I got 'em!"

Cid turned around and thrust his spear against the air, only to be blocked by one of the Defenders.

"Ah, smokes!" Cid cursed. "Thought I got 'im there!"

"They're getting smarter..." Leon murmured. "Could it be because of the Final Keyhole?"

The engineer groaned. "At this rate, we're not goin' to be able to help out that young lady out with all these guys around!"

"Then let us take them off your hands for you!"

The duo perked their ears up at the familiar voice.

"**THUNDAZA!**"

"**FURIOUS LIGHTNING!**"

Thunder magic rained down upon the hordes of Heartless, disintegrating the Soldiers while severely damaging the Defenders.

"There's still three more of them!" Leon warned the group

"We've got this!" Donald said confidently. "Let's get 'em!"

"Right-o! **GOOFY CHARGE!**"

A mad dash from the royal captain took down a nearby Defender!

"**CRITICAL EDGE!**"

The purple CPU wipes out another Defender with her powerful attack!

"**ARS ARCANUM!**"

Sora's 13-hit ability disintegrates the remaining Defender!

Once the Heartless are eliminated, the party breathed a sigh of relief...

"Keep your guards up!" Cid warned the party. "There's still an invisible one out there!"

"Where!?" Compa panicked as the party scrambled to search for their invisible enemy...

…And then she gasped and raised her syringe! "Goofy, duck!"

The royal captain did as he was told, and felt a shot breezed through him!

"What was that!?"

Upon hearing Donald's shout, Goofy looked up to see a frozen **Stealth Soldier** that was about to lunge at him!

"Compa's hit it with her **Stop Aid!**" IF shouted. "Take it out before it moves again!"

"We got this!"

Neptune and Sora leapt up against the Heartless...

"**FROST CRUSHER!**"

...and took it out with a coordinated Blizzard attack, ending the current threat.

"Total victory!"

"We nep'ed them up good, right?"

The two Keyblade wielders high-fived to celebrate their victory, disengaging their Share Link as they did so.

"Nice to see y'all made it!" Cid cheered. "What took ya, though? We've been holding the fort for a good while here!"

"Hey!" Neptune complained. "Trekking up this castle takes time. Even moreso backtracking since our warp points went all ker-scuffled!"

"And then there's that weirdo in the black coat who was blocking our way with those weird vines..." Sora murmured, letting out a heavy sigh. "Geez, that guy was way too tough..."

"Still" Compa said. "We should be glad we made it here in one piece"

"Yup" Donald followed. "I'd like to take a break, but..."

"But there's no time" Leon warned with a sense of urgency. "You guys need to get into the Final Keyhole right away"

"Why's that?" Sora asked.

Squall looked at the Final Keyhole grimly.

"The last of our group went in there. Right now, she needs your help"

"She?"

IF hummed. "You know, from the way the princesses were acting a while ago, you don't suppose..."

"GAH!"

The party stood up once they heard a girl's scream from within the Final Keyhole.

"No way..." Sora gasped in horror, recognizing the voice.

"Wasn't that...?" Goofy said, biting his nails.

"That can't be..." Compa cried.

"Well!" Neptune declared. "We can't just stand here gawking! Let's get a'goin'! Our final destination's within reach!"

As soon as Neptune finished, more Heartless, consisting of Large Bodies and Wizards surrounded the group!

"We don't have time for this!" Donald complained.

"Darn right you don't!" Cid shouted as he threw his spear against a Wizard. "Y'all better get going!"

"But..."

"Don't worry about us!" Leon yelled as he sliced down a Large Body. "The Final Keyhole's your top priority! We'll keep these ones busy!"

Sensing their resolve, Sora and his party decided to head straight within the Final Keyhole, leading them into...

Hollow Bastion – Dark Depths

"This...may be above our paygrade..."

As Marvy helped Kairi up to her feet, they gaze upon the large Heartless in front of them that has caused them so much trouble. It is a massive giant purple creature, with it's two tusks and single, black horn protruding above it's head being it's most notable features.

This is a Behemoth, one of the many dangerous Heartless released out of the Final Keyhole. This one seems set on defending this passageway for it's brethren.

"That may be, but..."

Kairi steadied her ground, maintaining hold over her Keyblade.

"I'm not giving up here. Even if we fall here, Sora and Neptune and the others will come. I know they will!"

Marvy sighed. "You can be quite stubborn, you know that?"

Kairi giggled. "It's an islander's favored trait, I'll have you know"

The ninja chuckled, only for her face to turn grim. "Watch it! It's going to attack again!"

Sure enough, the Behemoth charged up its horn, ready to unleash its attack against its prey!

"I'll stop it! Back me up, Kairi!"

"Right!"

Marvy charged forth, hopping up to the Behemoth's back with ease!

"**Releasing Ninja Technique! Multiple Clones!**"

Using the appropriate hand signals, the ninja girl created four clones of herself, all ready to strike

"Defend her! **WIND**!"

Kairi provided the ninja and her clones with **Aerora** shields as they get to work.

"Time to sleep! **BATTOU**!"

Marvy and her clones unleashed their technique against the Behemoth's horn, causing it to shake furiously!

"It's charging up! KAIRI!"

Kairi braced herself for the worst...

"No, you don't!"

...only for it to never come!

"Huh?"

Instead, she found herself being lifted and carried like a princess in someone's arms. The islander looked up to see her savior...

"Sora?"

There he was, with his toothy grin that she oh-so adored from him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I'm here now, Kairi"

Kairi chuckled, flipping her hair. "You silly bum. I always knew you'd come for me. Thank you"

"We're here to save the da-KAIRI!" Neptune suddenly shouted, pointing a finger at her. "What the Nep are you doing here, girl friend!? And since when did you get a fancy Keyblade like we do!?"

"Keyblade?"

Sora looked to his friend's right hand, and sure enough, she appears to be holding a Keyblade that is adorned in flowers.

"Woah!" Sora gasped in amazement. "Since when did you get one!?"

"Uh..." Kairi admitted sheepishly. "A few days ago"

"I didn't know you could wield one!" the boy exclaimed. "Since when did you know you had one?"

"Same time, actually" the islander girl shrugged. "In fact, I only found out about this with some help."

"Help?" Neptune wondered, then her eyes widened. "Wait a sec. Don't tell me you've been secretly training or something?"

Kairi giggled, playfully sticking her tongue out. "Surprise!"

Their conversation was, however, interrupted when the Behemoth started slamming it's hooves onto the ground as it arched back, ready for a jump!

"We can worry about that later!" Sora shouted as he set Kairi down. "Right now, we gotta take care of that thing first!"

"Right!" IF agreed. "Kairi, get out of here and go somewhere sa-"

"No!"

Kairi readied her stance and charged magic onto her Keyblade.

"I can fight this time! This may be my first time out in the open, but I'll do my part! I can't just sit still while I know there's something I can do!"

"But..."

"It's okay, IF" Sora reassured. "I'll be right here with her!"

"Yeah!" Goofy cheered. "And we'll be right there with them!"

Donald nodded.

"She's just as tough as Belle" the Beast commented.

"Just let them have this, Iffy" Compa said. "It's not everyday we get to fight together like this"

Neptune nodded furiously.

The guild agent sighed. "You dunces...Alright, but first things first, MOVE!"

The party scrambled to the sides as the Behemoth made it's jump. Thankfully, everyone have managed to move away, leaving Sora, Neptune, Kairi and the Beast on one side while IF, Compa, Donald and Goofy are on the other. Marvy, who had lost her clones in the meanwhile, leapt down to rejoin IF's half of the party.

"This thing's tough..." the ninja remarked.

"What do you know about it?" IF asked.

"This creature has tough skin all around" the ninja noted. "Attacking the body is not advised."

"So that leaves only the horn on it's head then?"

Marvy nodded. "We figured that out when Kairi started blasting **Firas** at it. It keeled over once some of them started hitting the horn."

"Well, whatever works" IF sighed. "Okay. We'll take turns attacking it. Thankfully, it seems slow, so we move carefully and we'll win the day!"

Her fellow party members nodded.

The guild agent turned to the other half of their party. "Hey! You guys hear me there!?"

"Yup! Go ahead, Iffy!"

"Go lead an attack on the horn!" IF shouted back. "We'll keep it distracted!"

"Roger-doger! Now then..."

Neptune then procured a summon gem.

"Time to call a friend!"

She channeled magic energy into the orb, causing it to shine and sparkle!

And in front of her, came in a familiar lion!

"Alright, **Simba**!" Neptune cheered. "Let's teach this thing a lesson!"

Charging up her Keyblade, she aided Simba in his charge against the Behemoth, unleashing a mighty **Proud Roar** against it!

"Let's follow her lead, Sora!"

The boy nodded at his fellow islander's suggestion. "You coming, Beast?"

The Beast grunted. "Let's finish this."

The trio clmbed up the Behemoth's behind and began to attack the horn with impunity!

"Ready, Kairi?"

"Always!"

"**FORCE**!" The two unleashed their **Gravity** magic against the horn!

"**ROAR**!" Not to be outdone, the Beast followed up with an up-close and personal Roar!

"Okay" IF noted as she saw the party getting to work. "Let's get ready to switch once they've done enough damage!"

"Right!" Donald turned to his fellow party member. "Goofy?"

The captain nodded. "Light me up, Donald!"

As Donald began to enhance his friend's shield with **Fire** magic, IF turned to her fellow Gamindustrians.

"Marvy, let's follow up with them once their done"

"Right!"

"Compa, you got that move ready?"

The nurse nodded fiercely. "I'm ready, Iffy!"

"Good, now let's wait for them to finish..."

"It's charging up!" Kairi cried as the Behemoth's horn is protected by some sort of hardening.

"Let's move!" Sora yelled. "Guys, he's all yours!"

"Nice work!" IF said, readying her qatars. "Ready, guys?"

The rest of the party nodded.

"Then let's go!"

The rest of the party charged forth, dodging past the lightning conjured by the Behemoth as they closed in.

"Now, Goofy!"

"Eat this! **GOOFY ELEMENTS!**" An element-imbued charge!

"**HEAVEN DEMON!**" Ten deadly hits to the horn!

"**BATTOU RANBU!**" Five more hits to the horn!

Their attacks hit true, causing the Behemoth to keel down again.

"Time for the finisher!"

Compa then primed a powerful magical blast.

"**BREAD CRUMBS, FIRE!**"

The blast fired through, unleashing light magic against the Behemoth's horn. In fact, the blast ended up taking the shape of a heart with a C inside of it!

"Now for the finishing touch!"

She then gave out a smooch, which sent out a magic-infused heart projectile straight at the creature's weak spot, crippling it down.

"It's almost down!" the Beast shouted.

Kairi furrowed her eyes at the creature. "I'll finish it!"

The princess dashed forth, lunging straight at the Behemoth's horn...

"IT'S GETTING UP!"

...only for the creature to begin standing up, unleashing a lightning storm around the area!

"NO!"

Just as Kairi braced herself for the worst, she felt nothing hitting her...

"Huh?"

...she looked up and saw a familiar boy, shielding her from the lightning strike.

"Sora!"

The boy knelt down, breathing heavily as he was charred from the sudden lightning attack.

Neptune, having reverted back to normal size, rushed to her soul-brother's side. "You okay there!?"

"Don't worry..." Sora tried to say. "...about me. Go on and finish it!"

Gripping her Keyblade tightly, the islander girl nodded and began her charge again!

"HAAAAAAAAHHHH!"

...and slammed her Keyblade down against it, breaking the horn and eliminating the giant Heartless once and for all.

"Wow..." Sora, who was being treated by their nurse, gasped in amazement.

"Kairi, you were great!" Donald complimented.

"You did swell for your first real fight!" Goofy cheered.

"Your heart is strong as well" Beast noted.

"We were cutting it close there, though..." Marvy remarked.

"But you all managed to make it through!" Compa pointed out.

"And thanks to that, we managed to finish up here" IF continued.

"Yuppers!" Neptune chirped, grinning as she put her hands behind her back. "You did great, girl friend!"

Kairi giggled loudly at all the compliments, flipping her hair as she did so. "Thanks, guys...But I..."

A bright shine glowed behind the party, revealing the Final Keyhole.

"Only one thing left to do" IF noted.

Sora nodded as he stood, turning to his fellow Keyblade wielders. "You two with me?"

"Duh!" Neptune cheered as she summoned her Keyblade.

"Always, Sora" Kairi answered as she did the same.

And together, the three sealed off the Final Keyhole, stopping the tide of darkness that would have swallowed the worlds whole...

Hollow Bastion – Library

"Walking around here feels really nostalgic..."

With the threat to Hollow Bastion halted and the Final Keyhole sealed, the party opted to take a break within the hallowed castle before departing for one last world. Currently, Kairi and Sora are walking around the castle library, taking in the view around them.

"You like reading books?" Sora asked.

Kairi hummed. "Eh, so-so. I do read in my spare time, but I prefer moving around and about."

"Really?"

A giggle. "You would know. How long have we known each other and played around in the islands?"

Sora chuckled, raising his hands. "You got me there"

"Say" Kairi started, looking around the room. "Where did Neptune and the others go? I thought they'd like to take a break here, at least."

"She went with the others to go look for Noire" the boy with the key answered. "Now that the Keyhole's sealed, the castle should be free enough for everyone else to explore and look around"

Kairi nodded. "I see. I hope she and Riku are doing alright"

Sora sighed. If what he had heard from the others is right, this Ansem guy is no joke in terms of strength. "Yeah. Me too"

As the two descended the stairs, the two then saw a wooden desk and chair standing near the window located below the staircase.

"Hey, this is..." Sora said with a hint of familiarity.

"I remember my grandmother sitting here" Kairi recalled. "She would be here, reading by while I ran off to gather flowers outside the castle. Anytime I go see her, I would always tell her to read a favorite story of mine."

"The one about the light and the children?"

Kairi nodded. "Believe in the light, and darkness will never defeat you. You must always have faith, and you will never falter."

"A light..." Sora wondered as his eyes widened. "I get it!"

"Hm?"

"When I was turned into a Heartless, I felt like I was sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness." the boy recalled. "While Neptune's Share Energy kept me sane and safe, I couldn't find a way out, but then I heard a voice. Your voice."

He then turned to Kairi with a grateful smile. "You guided my way back, Kairi. Thanks."

Kairi chuckled, playing with her hair. "I just believed you would come back to me. That's all I did, really."

"Still, your faith never wavered. That faith is what brought me back to you and everyone here. Otherwise, I might've ended up stuck as a Heartless for who knows how long..."

"That's..." the princess noted bitterly. "A scary thought..."

But she shook her head. "No. I can't dwell on that. What's important is that you're here now, and that's all that matters to me."

Sora scratched the back of his head in embarrassment. "Yeah. Now, all that's left is to find Riku, Noire and King Mickey. They're still out there, somewhere."

"But you're still hurt..." Kairi pointed out. "You should rest a little more"

"Nah, this?" Sora tried to reassure the girl. "This is nothing. I've been through worse. Besides, I can't afford to wait, not while they're still in danger."

He looked to his fellow islander, who looked out to the window, showing the setting sun admist the twilight sky.

The boy chuckled. "We just gotta have faith, right?"

Kairi nodded.

Sora hung his head down again, deep in thought.

"Still troubled with what Leon and the others said to you?"

Sora gasped in shock and then sighed. "Saw right through me, huh?"

"Once the door to all worlds has been sealed, the worlds themselves will go back to what they were, separated and closed off. This may be the last time we get to talk to each other like this..." Artisan noted bitterly

"Stand strong, Sora. You and Neptune are the only ones who can do this." Cloud encouraged.

"You've proven yourselves to be pretty hardy. You got this!" Cid said.

"We may never meet again, but we'll never forget each other." Leon stated.

"Even if we drifted apart, our hearts will bring us together again. I just know it." Aerith believed.

"Well, I couldn't forget any of you, even if I wanted to!" Yuffie said cheekily.

"If we go through this..." Sora started. "If we go and seal away the last door, will we...I mean, should we..."

He was interrupted when Kairi placed a finger on his mouth.

"I won't go anywhere" the island princess said. "I know you're worried about me, and, as much as we both want to go for the last stretch together, I can't. I still have a lot to do before I can catch up to you and Riku. Struggling against that monster, even with Marvy's help taught me that."

Sora couldn't utter a word, his thoughts mixed between keeping Kairi away for her safety or asking her to come with them.

"Not to mention, what happened to you just now..." Kairi said, cradling the bandage on Sora's face.

"But, Kairi..."

"I know, Sora." the girl responded, retracting her hand. "You're tough. Tougher than me, but the fact that you still got hurt because of my carelessness means I still have a long way to go! I went and trained myself with this" She then summoned her Keyblade. "so I can protect you too!"

Sora stammered. His tongue was completely tied. He doesn't know what to say.

"I…"

"Don't worry, Sora." Kairi reassured him, unsummoning her Keyblade. "I'll just keep training for now. One day, I'll catch up to you and Riku, and only then, will the three of us fight together."

Sora chuckled. "I look forward to it!"

Kairi giggled in response. "One last thing."

She walked up to the boy, taking his right hand and placing an object on it.

When the boy looked to his right hand, he saw a star-shaped charm, one made of seashells on his hand.

"It's my good luck charm I've been making" Kairi said. "Be sure to hold onto it. I want it back when I come running to you, got it?"

Sora chuckled. "Don't worry, I will."

"Promise?"

"Promise"

"Hey, bro!"

The two looked behind to see Neptune calling out to them.

"Time to go! Cid's got our ship prepped and whatever! Save the Romance CG for the ending, will ya!?"

The duo laughed at her remark. Good to know some things never change.

"Well, time to go"

Kairi nodded. "Take care, okay?"

Sora nodded back. "You too"

He then walked off to rejoin his party, determined to finish this fight.

And as he got farther and farther from her view, Kairi closed her eyes, placing a hand onto her heart.

"Sora, don't ever forget. Wherever you go, I'm always with you..."

NEPSTATION

Neptune: And we are back in Nepstation! Sorry for the leave of absence last time, but don’t worry! This Nep’s back in tip-top shape to give you all the latest buzz!

Kairi: And we’re very glad to see you back, Neptune!

Neptune: Oh-ho-ho, are you now? I heard from the crew that you just spent your time flirting with my usual co-host during the last broadcast? What do you say to that, Miss Island Princess?

Kairi: *blushes* Er...well, I...

Neptune: *chuckles* Take it easy! It’s all water under the lake in my book! Just...keep the kissy stuff behind closed windows, you know what I’m sayin...

Kairi: C-Crystal clear...

Neptune: Ok! So, without further ado, my current co-host, let’s get this show on the road!

---

an image of a clear Hollow Bastion is shown onscreen

Neptune: So, remember those Heartless attacks that have been increasing since the past few days? Welp, recent hearings have stated that thanks to a group of travelers accompanying the local fighters, the number of Heartless attacks have been decreasing over time! How wonderful!

Kairi: That’s great news! I’d like to give those travelers my thanks for saving everyone.

Neptune: Oh? Does that include giving a certain boy a big fat mu-wah on the lips, if you catch my drift?

Kairi: *blushes* M-Maybe I will, if I see him...

Neptune: Wow, you’re quite the fighter! Welp, keep that spirit up, girl-friend! Anywho, let’s get to the next segment...

an image of a group of people, their eyes crossed out grabbing books from the local library is shown onscreen

Neptune: With the recent Heartless attacks simmering down, people from a recently-freed world have been putting their focus into researching how to stop the flow of darkness. Their recent findings state that to stop the flow is to go right to the source itself.

---

an image of a swirling vortex of darkness appears onscreen

Kairi: According to the findings, they have dubbed this place the ‘End of the World’, the last remains of worlds that have long fallen into the Realm of Darkness.

Neptune: Hm-hm! Let’s take a closer look and see what we can find.

a blurred image of ruined patches of ground and a huge dark portal appears onscreen

Neptune: As you can see, the scanners are barely picking up any images. However, what little we can see here shows the remains of whatever worlds used to lie there.

Kairi: It must be sad. Finding out what’s left of your home, reduced to this while the rest lies submerged in the Realm of Darkness...

Neptune: Yeah, real sad. But not to worry, pretty soon, a certain group of travelers will get on the case and pretty soon, all the worlds will be spick and span again!

Kairi: I sure hope so! Mind telling them that I’ll be cheering them on with all my heart?

Neptune: He-he! Oh, I definitely will! Especially a certain boy among them...

Kairi: *blushes* P-Please do...

Neptune: He-he! You got it! And now, for our last real segment of news!

---

an image of Gummi Ships is shown onscreen

Kairi: With the relative success of the new Gummi Ship models, Scrooge International Trading Enterprises CEO, Scrooge McDuck, has released a statement, stating that ‘with the success of the commercial models, we can expect to further our collaboration and start selling new Gummi Ships in the far future.’ In the meantime, he’s gone to say on record that his company will continue to provide supply shipments with the models currently made.

Neptune: Now, some of you may be wondering ‘How do I sign up for a new ship?’ and ‘How do I even drive the darn thing?’ Well, Nepstation is here to sponsor this!

---

the words Gummi Driving Lessons appear onscreen

Neptune: That’s right! For a pricey fee, you can sign up for new Gummi Driving Lessons that are planned to be released in the future! Get a good grade and you may end up with your own Gummi Ship once you passed your final exam! Lesson venues and such are TBD, but once we get this started, we will let everyone know!

Kairi: This message has been brought to you by Scrooge International Trading Enterprises! To survive in this world, you gotta be tougher than the toughies and be smarter than the smarties! Keep your eyes peeled, everyone!

Neptune: And that’s all for the news today! Thanks for keeping me company today too, Kairi!

Kairi: *giggles* Sure thing! Although, I feel like I was just coasting along with you on this one...

Neptune: Eh, no worries! If this story is gonna keep going, you’re gonna be a regular in this show along with the rest of our party!

Kairi: Really? Well, I...guess I got a lot to prepare for, then!

Neptune: Just take it easy and say what’s on your mind! Sora was definitely nervous on his first go, but look at him now! He’s come a long way since we restarted this gig!

Kairi: *giggles* I’ll keep that in mind, then! Hey, Sora, mind taking over for me?

Sora: Okay, so what’s our topic for today?

Neptune: Hold up, before we start, lemme just say something here first. So, regarding the lack of Mr. Unknown over there? Mr. Author…decided to save most of what happened in the fight for a future story. Now, why would do so, you ask? Well, according to him, he just thought it’d be a good idea to write both that fight and another fight together in an upcoming story instead, so he’s saving that for then. I know a lot of you may not be satisfied with this outcome and for that, we all apologize. *bows in apology*

Sora: Okay then, so, what are we gonna talk about today?

Neptune: Well, we’re running out of topics lately, but here’s one I managed to dig up.

---

*the word **Realms** appears onscreen*

Neptune: In this story, there are two Realms that exist. First, there’s the Realm of Darkness.

*the words **Realm of Darkness** appear onscreen*

Sora: So, what is this realm, exactly?

Neptune: Well...it’s the place where all the darkness in our universe resides. Here, there’s not much of civilization or society or anything that sparks life in there. It’s just a primal place

where everything the darkness swallows ends up in. Countless Heartless are born and live there, living the place like a dark safari.

Sora: *shudders* That sounds like a scary place to be in...

Neptune: Yup-yup. Word from the grapevine is, you don’t wanna get sucked into this realm. If the haunting atmosphere doesn’t freak your guts out, the haunting voices and mocking reminders of your failures made manifest certainly will!

Sora: Man, who’d be able to last in a place like that?

Neptune: Maybe someone as stubborn as we are or someone without any regrets, maybe?

Sora: I guess. What about the other realm?

Neptune: That’s right! The Realm of Light!

*the words **Realm of Light** appear onscreen*

Neptune: Contrasting the Realm of Darkness (or Dark World or whatever), the Realm of Light is where all the light in our universe goes. Unlike the dark safaris over there, the Realm of Light has worlds and civilizations that dot the vast reaches of the Ocean Between. It’s said that there as many worlds out there as there are stars in the night sky.

Sora: Wow, and we were travelling through a lot of them already...

Neptune: And I’ve no doubt we’d be travelling to many more in the future! I can just smell it!

Sora: What kind of worlds would you like to see?

Neptune: I dunno...maybe a world filled with superheroes and the like, I guess?

Sora: Wow!

Neptune: Oh! Oh! How about an entire section of planets watched over by an evil space station? It will be a total space drama there!

Sora: O...kay?

Neptune: C’mon, soul-bro! You gotta be a bit more adventurous than that. Pretty soon, we’d be walking across several properties that people could only DREAM of experiencing!

Sora: Well, we ARE living that dream right now, are we? We just haven’t gone to a lot of other places yet.

Neptune: True. Still, with the darkness closing in, we gotta make sure we still got worlds to see! I’d rather not let them bite the dust like what happened to Gamindustri and those other worlds!

Sora: You bet! We so got this!

an alarm bell rang

Neptune: Right on time! Welp, that's all we got today! Coming up, we're diving right into the last world, the final dungeon, the end of this story! What dangers await Nep Team Epic at the end of their journey? Find out soon...

Sora: And so, from all of us here at Nepstation...*paper plane flies in* Another message from Mr. Author?

Neptune: Oooooohhhh! Is it another sudden game announcement!?

Sora: No, it's a schedule announcement. *clears throat* "The next chapter will be released in a week after this part comes out, just like before. Afterwards, the chapter after that will be out in three days and the succeeding one in another three days. And then, one more will come out the day afterwards, which should be around April 30th, so please stay tuned until the end!" Wow, he's really committed to finishing this story up this month, huh?

Neptune: You know it! Anywho, from all of us here…

Neptune and Sora: See you next time!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!