

# HEARTS INTERWIND



UNOFFICIAL VAN VENN ZINE



# Acknowledgments

When I had the impulsive thought to create a vanven zine at 4AM 7 months ago, I couldn't have imagined how big this project would become. I couldn't have dreamed of how much amazing support we'd get, how many absolutely wonderful contributors we'd get to work with, and how much time, tears, and love would be poured into this book.

Thank you to our contributors who truly put their whole heart full of passion and excitement into their works, their unique styles and endless imagination making each page a masterpiece. This wouldn't have been nearly as fun to create without their motivation and inspiration!

And thank you to my fellow moderator and best friend, Juliet, who went above and beyond in using her unbeatable graphic design skills to breathe life into this zine. Without her this wouldn't have been possible, and I can't praise her helpful heart and creativity enough.

I will cherish this experience and this zine forever, and I can only hope that you will do the same!

Please enjoy!

Cass



It is my greatest desire that as you flip through the pages of this book that you will find yourself transported to other worlds filled with fantasies and dreams, of adventure and companionship, love and rivalry, all reflecting our beloved Ventus and Vanitas! As I worked on the design of this book I wanted to treat each illustration as the amazing work of art they truly are, and to give the same level of love and respect to our author's wonderful works!

There could be no greater joy than to work with this astoundingly gifted group of artists and authors. It has been a true and deep honor to have been given the privilege to work on the presentation of your works, and I thank you for entrusting this task to me.

To my dear second half, Cass, my tsiking sound when I need it, the one who makes me sleep and forces me to shut down the computer, my absolute partner-in-crime, the one who has dealt with my ongoing happiness, joy, fear, concerns, worries, and mostly all of these at once resulting in more meltdowns than imaginable...just **THANK YOU**. I can never deserve you, never thank you, and never, ever deserve the patience, love, acceptance, and forgiveness you give me. Thank you for being you and letting me be here on this crazy adventure with you! WE DID IT!

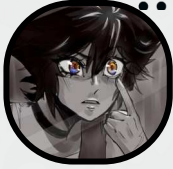
WITH LOVE,  
Juliet

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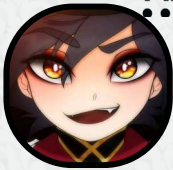
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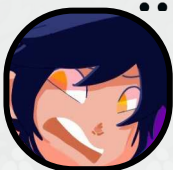
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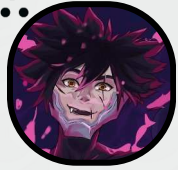
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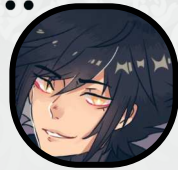
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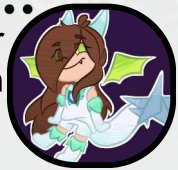
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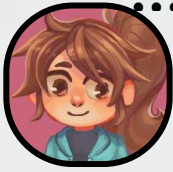
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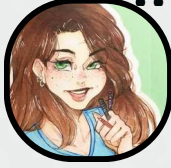


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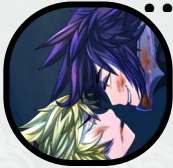
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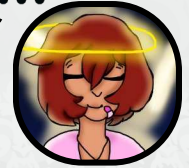
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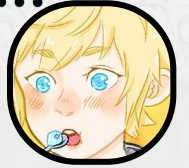
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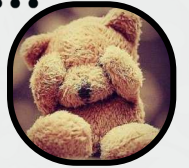
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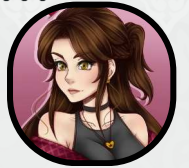
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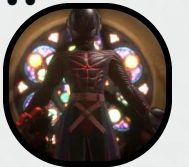
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Akai-Kuma





Anomymoose



Captain

# *In the Silence*

by

Al

"I want to talk to you."

Darkness craves light,  
but is the favor returned?

Vanitas waits impatiently. It's been...it's been...? Oh, just how long now? At least years. Who measures time, anyway?

It's just another reason to be angry with him; the easier that is, the easier it is to live on.

He can't get too close to where his other half sleeps. But he sees him, gets as close as he can like moth drawn to flame. Golden eyes try their damndest to pierce through the barrier that protects the light, to free Ventus so that he's all for the taking.

But Vanitas knows that would not wake him. That would not join them.

"Ventus," comes his lowly voice, like the pained growl of an animal that's wounded and left to bleed. A gloved hand reaches out, blocked from touching further. There's the slightest recoil of his fingers before he stretches them out, palm pressing over what separates them. "Even asleep, you have to keep me at arms length, don't you?"

He scoffs, keeping his hand in place; if this is as close as he can get to touching him, then he'll take it.

"...That's so like you," the bitter words are spat, a grimace forming beneath Vanitas' mask.

Beneath the barrier, Ventus doesn't stir. Does his heart ache out there, wherever it may be?

"...It's like talking to the dead," Vanitas continues, brows furrowed as he grows annoyed with Ventus. How like him. To sleep, ignore him, not want to join. "Are you cold like them?"

Cold like the dead... Even Vanitas knows that can't be; even twelve years into a sleep, Ventus is still as warm and radiant as the sun. The heat of the barrier tells him that.

It's him...

"Lay your hand on me...at least one last time, Ventus." In battle, in comfort, in whatever manner he chooses.

But Ventus doesn't move; he never moves.

The stillness angers Vanitas. In a quick motion, he rams a fist to the glass. Not one shard breaks or shatters. The silence that follows could be cut in half with his keyblade. The air is stagnant. Neither boy moves.

A hollow, disappointed laugh falls from Vanitas' lips finally. "So, that's how it's going to be, Ventus..."

Ventus is quiet as he's ever been these last twelve years. Far away as his heart may be, it yearns, craves what's missing. It knows that what its missing piece feels ails it, too. But in this state, there's no conveying that to Vanitas, who is left to write this off as a failure, as he does everyday.



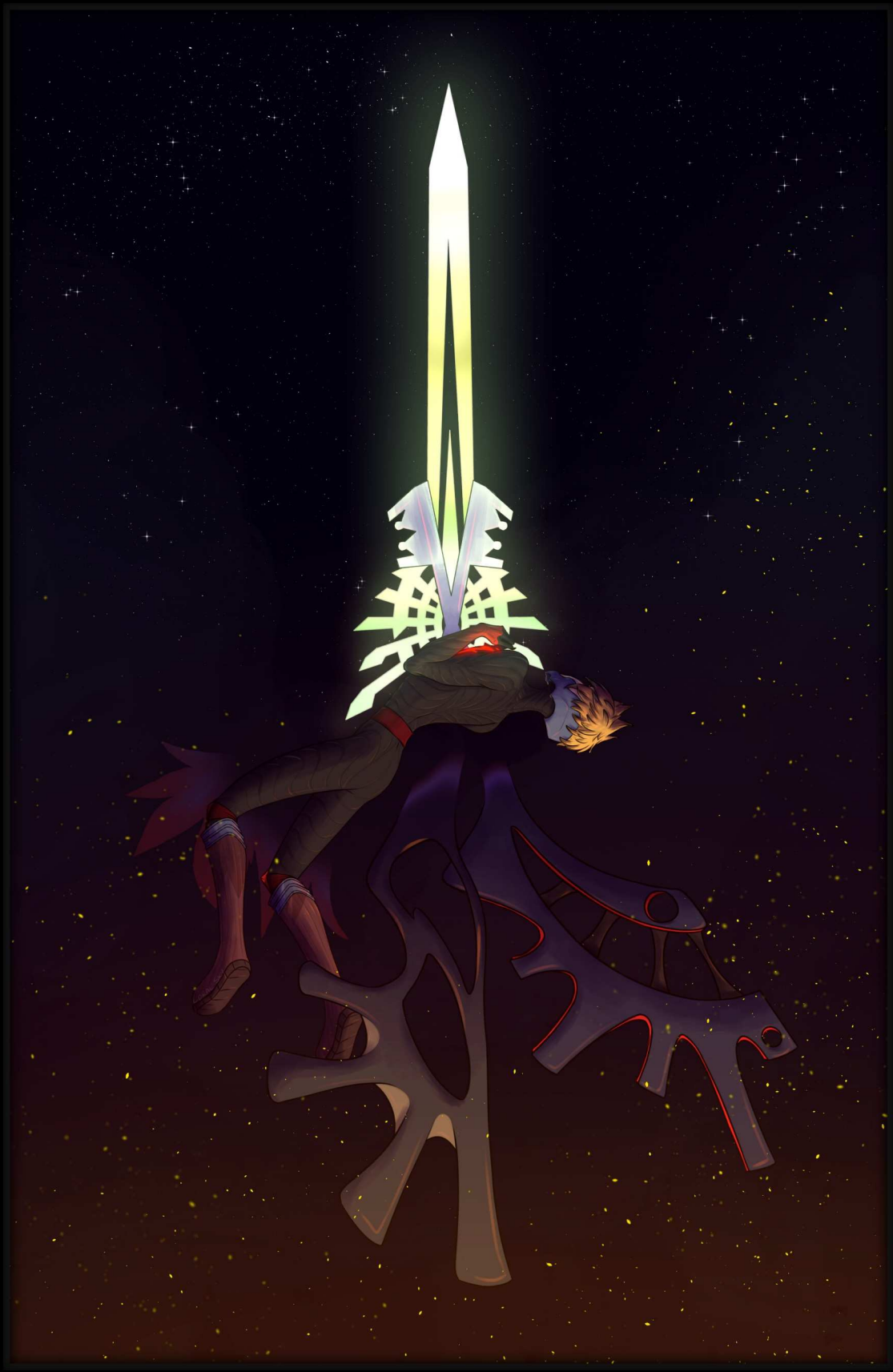
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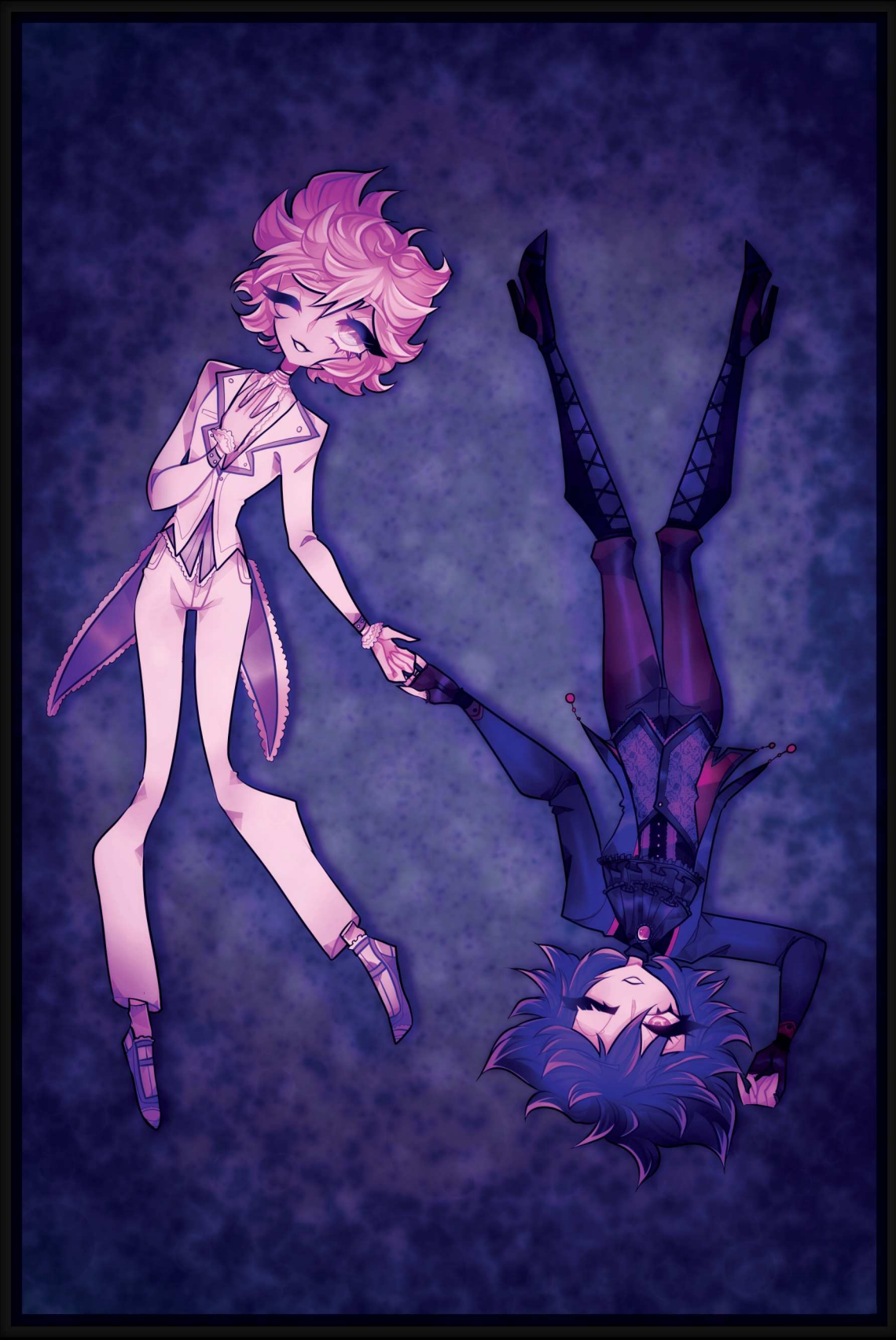


Goral Sky



Grea





Dolly

# Halfway to Anywhere

by

Angel

If he were honest, which was not always a guarantee, then Vanitas might be able to admit to himself that this journey in self reclamation was far from easy. Some days were better than others. Some days had sparring matches and comfortable banter, and a tiny circle of company that (almost) felt like home. Other days came with monsters and scared silence, and a lingering fear that maybe that old bastard was right, maybe he did only have one purpose, and he had failed at it.

Some days, neither option was appealing. On these days, Vanitas would often find himself wandering, alone.

He takes a dark corridor to a world at the corners of his memory, a tiny speck of land and sea insignificant to many but important to the ones who mattered. Vanitas didn't want to take a chance on the still-fresh unfamiliarity of his keyblade armor, but throughout the journey, he can't help but think about what the others would say if they knew he still preferred this method of travel. Perhaps they wouldn't say anything at all. Terra would smile, sadly and knowingly, and Aqua wouldn't scold him, but she would fix him with that reprimanding stare that told him everything he needed to know. Sometimes, he was appreciative of the way they could communicate without words.

Ventus was a different story. Whether he'd see it as a detriment to Vanitas' development, or as a harmless reliance upon something familiar, it didn't matter. Whatever his thoughts were,

he'd shout them loud and clear.

Ventus was never quiet when it came to Vanitas. His light made him loud, a perfect counterweight to Vanitas' preference of silence.

They fit together in more ways than two halves of a heart ever should.

Vanitas settles himself into the sand, letting thoughts pass through his mind like water through his fingertips. If nothing stuck around for too long, then it wouldn't get the opportunity to tip today's scales in any specific direction before Vanitas could decide if he even wanted it to. Solitude had its perks, sometimes.

"So, here's where you ran off to." A familiar voice cuts through the tranquil silence, and Vanitas turns his head to follow the sound. His eyes fall on Ventus as he makes a beeline across the beach, coming to a stop next to Vanitas. The last remnants of his own armor recede into wisps of light around him.

Vanitas shrugs. "I don't think running's the right word."

Ventus huffs, settling himself down in the sand next to Vanitas. "Well, whatever you wanna call it," he says, folding his legs together. He plucks a half-buried stick from the loose sand, giving it a few light tosses before throwing it forward with little vigor and watching as it sails airborne for a few meters before falling, just short of the waves' reach.

Vanitas watches his motions with a tilt of his head. "How did you find me so quickly?"

"How d'ya think?" Ventus responds in kind, palm splayed open across his chest. Above his heart. *Right.* Ventus continues. "You come here for any reason in particular?"

"Not really," Vanitas muses, turning away from Ventus to catch a glimpse of the fading sun. Its' rays stretch like arms across the sky, painting even the tiniest cloud fragments a soft shade of pink. "Don't really have a whole lot of connections to other places, you know?"

Ventus hums in acknowledgement of his words, letting a comfortable silence take shape between the two of them. Vanitas lets his eyes drift from the horizon line to the ebb and flow of the waves. The tide is low, and despite the constant cycle of pushing and pulling, the water seems to come up short of the discarded stick every single time.

The stillness of the scene takes Vanitas aback. The waves of these waters weren't all that dissimilar to the darkness, with its twisting torrents and crashing currents. In that same vein, this island itself wasn't all that different than the bodies it claimed to its depths, wearing skin and bone down to dust.

That's all sand was, really. Dust. Tiny fragments left in the wake of waves and the sinking of stones, a wordless battle with casualties far greater than anyone could comprehend. The beach beneath him probably came into existence long before the world itself ever did. Vanitas sinks both his hands beneath the grains, letting the diminutive fragments consume his skin with gluttonous motion. They were hungry little things, but their bite hardly had enough teeth to draw blood.

Perhaps that's why the waves continued to kiss them with such softness.

Beside him, Ventus traces his index finger through the sand. The patterns he makes are all soft curves and sweeping spirals. Not lines, never any lines. If there was ever another wedge between the two of them, it would not be drawn by their own volition. Vanitas pulls his hands free, and lets the soft fragments slip slowly through clenched fingertips. He thinks they've had their fill.

"Y'know," Ventus says suddenly. "We could just go. See the worlds. You and me."

Vanitas snorts softly. "Not a chance." He reaches out between them, linking two of Ventus' doodles together with a single looped line. A moment passes before he finally glances up again, meeting Ventus' hopeful gaze.

"Aww, come on!" Ventus pushes off the ground, moving to sit on his knees and face Vanitas more directly. His words are playful, but his eyes shimmer in earnest, and Vanitas can't tell which emotion is winning out in his mind. "It'd be a while before anyone would catch up to us. We'd be able to go to so many places!"

"You think time and space is a strong enough force to stop Terra and Aqua from dragging you back here for your exam?" Vanitas asks pointedly.

"Maybe." Ventus purses his lips, matching Vanitas' tone.

"You're ridiculous." Vanitas' words are blunt. "You can't just drop everything because you want to go on some grand adventure."

"Says who?"

"Says me," Vanitas says. "And hopefully anyone else with enough sense to understand that taking

*Not with me*  
*Not with you*  
**Not with me**  
**you**  
**haven't.**



off on a whim is a horrible idea.”

“It’s not like we’d disappear forever,” Ventus counters. His voice is softer, pure enthusiasm replaced with a serene contemplation. He moves forward, taking Vanitas’ hand in his own, and Vanitas swears that even the heart of the world had gone still. He remains quiet as Ventus winds their fingers together, calluses and curves and scars and softness fitting together like puzzle pieces. Like every other part of them. “I just... we’ve gone without this for so long. If we’re gonna be apart again in the near future, I wanna make sure I share a part of my path with you.”

“I’ve been to the same worlds as you,” Vanitas says, almost breathless.

Still holding onto his hand, Ventus lifts his other hand and moves to cradle the curve of Vanitas’ jaw. His fingertips trace the tiny scars that line the skin, remnants of a mask that had come down long ago. “Not with me, you haven’t.”

Vanitas wonders if Ventus knows what he’s doing, if he’s seen the way Vanitas orbits him like a planet around its star. The gravity is

gradual, but Vanitas knows how fast he has the potential to crash, and in moments like these, it’s almost palpable enough to taste. He wonders if Ventus feels it, too.

If that’s the case, Vanitas knows he can’t truly be mad at him. He also knows that, if it were up to him, he would chase Ventus through adventure after adventure until the worlds met their end once more. Selfishness is not a stranger to him, despite his efforts to curb its conversations with him.

“Please,” Ventus tries again, his voice practically a whisper. He leans forward, and Vanitas lets his eyes flutter shut as their foreheads brush together, Ventus’ words filling the rest of the space between them. “Come with me.”

It takes every ounce of strength Vanitas has for him to pry his eyes open again. When he does, he meets Ventus’ gaze, just as earnest as it was at the start of their conversation. There’s something else there too, something hopeful and longing that swims just beneath the surface, waiting with bated breath to break for air. Vanitas thinks he sees himself in the reflection of those waves, too.

It was fitting, he thought.

After all, he never really did mind drowning.

Vanitas blinks away as he laughs, quiet and breathy.

“You’re really something, Ven.”

If Ventus knew the right cards to play in order to goad Vanitas into compliance, then Vanitas was no different. The familiar nickname was something he used sparingly enough to catch Ventus off guard whenever he spoke it. Ventus’ surprise is concentrated in an airy chuckle, and Vanitas can feel the flush in his skin where their foreheads meet. “Wha—?”

“You got me,” Vanitas continues, softer. He pulls back just a little in order to mirror Ventus’s movements, hand moving to cradle the side of his face, too. “Let’s go.”

The smile that Ventus gives him absolves Vanitas of nearly every doubt he ever harbored about this proposition. When he leans forward again to fling his arms around Vanitas’ shoulders, he wonders how he could have entertained the notion of anything else. “Your friends are gonna have my head,” he murmurs after a moment, returning the gesture gratefully.

Ventus laughs behind his ear, and it sounds like music. “I’ll be sure to keep them off your back if they catch up to us.”

*If they catch up.* What a novel concept, Vanitas thinks. Of course they’re gonna catch up. Even if Ventus wasn’t on the cusp of his Mark, there were other factors to consider. Like time. What Ventus had gained with Aqua and Terra still couldn’t make up for what they all had lost to those carnivorous sands. It’d take more than winning a war against the waves to rebuild those beaches.

Somewhere beneath his skin, Vanitas feels his heart churn with something akin to guilt. But then Ventus buries his chin in the space between his shoulder and his neck, and murmurs a quiet *thank you* into the shadows of his skin, and Vanitas thinks that maybe, once more, he can allow himself to be selfish.



DragDraus



That's the first time you've called me "Ven"!

Go ahead! You can ask me anything!

Ven..?

Shut up...I'm trying to ask you something...

Love..?

What is...

ENMA  
DRAWS

DREAMIN  
DOLLS

Enma



EXEKYL

# Exekyl



# Kiss of Light

by

Angelseythe

He was lonely. So lonely.  
Lonely?

Really, though, he wasn't that lonely.  
Rather, sitting on the cold floor with his arms wrapped around his knees he had nothing to do but to stare at the someone next to him. Someone who had fallen in a deep slumber. Eleven years of slumber. That was so much. So long...

But lately, something had changed.  
Something strange...

His Heart... his half-Heart had resonated to something. It was like... if something had called his name. And since that day, he felt so cramped there.

He was so used to this small place with nothing but a body to look for. Sometimes, he would see a colorful steam swirling around himself with images dancing. He could see adventures that made him feel even lonelier... He had never had the chance to experience this. This was probably a beautiful dream for this dear person next to him but for him... it was just an awful nightmare.

He was so used to being trapped there, not knowing what he had to do. Sometimes, he would move, seek a better position, a better place... But he had no reason to stay away from this body next to him. Sometimes, his fingers would brush a round cheek. But, most of the time, he was just waiting like a lost soul.

He was so used to having nothing to do. The only thing he could really do was walk and retrace, with his feet, the design on the floor. He had done it so often; he could close his eyes and just redo it again. And again.

And just there...

He saw a Light. A powerful Light coming from the outline of this stained glass. He moved his hand to the person, not with a caress to his cheek, but instead, shaking his shoulder.

"Is that you?" he asked.

No reply.

Obviously.

But... The Light was approaching.

S l o w l y.

What was this? He moved toward it.

There was only one Light in his life, and it was just a blessing... He moved toward it, because the only Light he knew this bright was the one belonging to his so tender one...

Though, doing this, he was letting the Light brush his skin. The more he let it surround him, the more the sensation grew.

Not a pleasant one. Not the pleasure of his Light touching him, caressing him like it usually did. No... It was burning him...

And the Light was still sliding toward them, licking his skins inch by inch, bringing excruciating pain. Yet, this wasn't enough for this hungry beam.

Maybe it was the reason why people would always tell him not to go toward the Light? Why Xehanort told him again and again to run away from the Light... Why he had hated the Light for so long...

Hated but never feared.

"Wake up and stop this!" he commanded to the body lying at his feet.

Nothing. Not a blink, not a moan.



He let out a roar before lifting the person, pressing him against his body. Each step he took forward the shadows to flee from the pain ended in failure; the Light was eating the stained glass...

*He couldn't protect him.*  
*He was losing.*  
**He couldn't protect him.**  
*He was losing.*  
**protect him.**  
*He couldn't protect him.*

He turned away, shielding him with his own form, the Light licking his back as he curled inward to shelter him, pain radiating from each touch. A black liquid slid from his lips as he prevented any shriek. Even if this body in his arms seemed never hear him, he couldn't show a parcel of pain, doubt or fear to him...

It wasn't his Final Word. His Darkness spread from his body, fighting against the Light. Vainly.

At the second his Darkness tried to win, it vanished, consuming him.

He threw a look over the body that still didn't move.

"Be ready for it.

It's the end, Ventus."

He smirked and let his true self explode.



That was how Vanitas had been thrown out of his dear Light...

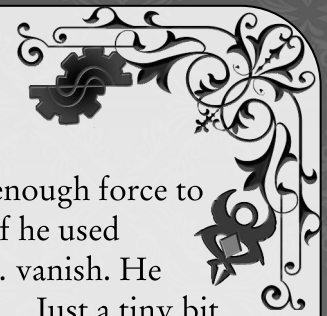
He only wished one thing from that moment: find him again. Being with him... in every way...

He had tried to reach him through Sora because he could feel Ventus there but he had been pushed away. He had to find another solution. He had to find *him*. It was the only thing he craved for. If he had been thrown away by his Light, he wanted to find it back. The worst was that he had to attach himself to an insignificant being to

bring Ventus back. No matter how hard he was searching, he couldn't reach his Light and the pain was excruciating...

He had to follow Aqua through the veils of Darkness. Until she brought him where he craved to be.

As he entered the room where he saw him for the very first time, the sound of his heavy soles echoed. Nothing mattered to him except for the one sitting still upon the seat across the room, his eyes trained on the form that has been waiting for someone to wake him up.



Vanitas walked toward him, letting his Darkness flee away from him. Even if Ventus didn't have a Heart anymore, he still was a pure Light, so they appealed each other and soon...

Soon...

Soon, nothing.

Contrary of what he expected, Ventus' body didn't reply to his Darkness.

What could he do now? If their half-part refused to call each other? If an invisible barrier was growing between them...

What could he do?

Wander without any goal? His life had no other meaning if he couldn't just feel the Light caress him anymore. Wander until his Darkness would vanish was an option. Maybe.

Maybe he still could wake him up?

He let Darkness surround him, spreading over the room. They closed over Ventus and he knelt in front of his Light.

"Come with me," he muttered.

His energy spread, trying to melt with Ventus', to save him. To reach the only goal of his life. Perhaps... to create a goal to their life intertwined? The  $\chi$ -Blade never was his true goal. The only thing he wished more than anything in the Worlds was that Ventus would grant him with everything he hadn't.

The time had told him he hadn't understood what he really expected from Ventus. Or, perhaps, Xehanort just tricked him about this? Because what he really wished was to embrace Ventus. He wanted to have the feeling he was truly *living* through the softness of his green eyes.

But... but his Light refused to reply to him.

No.

No!

"NOOOOOOOO!!!"

Vanitas didn't have enough force to bring Ventus back to him. If he used more force, he would just... vanish. He needed just a bit more. Just... Just a tiny bit more.

A Flood jumped from Vanitas' body and, immediately, scratched his face, sending so many emotions in him, begging him not to do *this*.

"Just a bit..." he countered, offering his strength to Ventus.

The Flood threw more Darkness to his Creator, badgering him to stop this madness.

"Come with me..." Vanitas pleaded at Ventus. "Wake up."

In a burst of foolish weakness, his lips approached Ventus', pressing a kiss to his soft lips, his Darkness melding with his Light, caressing it, appealing it, his fingers brushing Ventus' cheek tenderly.

He could remember each thing Ventus saw when they were one, each World he visited after him because he was busy to destroy every chance Terra and Aqua might get for saving them, saving the Worlds. So much of them bathed you with True Love Kiss.

Could it be possible?

Ventus didn't move.

No matter how much he was calling him, engulfing his Darkness to his emptied body. No Light wished to grab him.

No Light wished to embrace him in return.

No one ever wished to save him. Of course, this True Love's Kiss couldn't work for him. He had been so dumb to believe it was even possible...

Perhaps he loved Ventus too much but Ventus didn't love him back.

Who would love him?

Vanitas got up and swirled on his heels, facing the only fate allowed to him.

His Unversed?

They were parts of himself; they were feelings, just like him; they were seeing him as the Emotion-in-chief, of course, they were loving him but at this level... wasn't it just him desperately trying to love himself?

The Flood dashed to him and started to scratch his ankle.

"Muscaris!" he groaned.

And he hated himself even more because this name... this was the name Ventus gave to this tiny Flood because he loved him so much.

Why would he use it?

Why cling to such absurd feelings?

Especially when they were all trying to reach someone who didn't share it? He just had to crush the hope simmering in

some 'maybe it's because your heart is not full' or other vain wishes.

He was nothing.

Even for Ventus.

And that was all.

As Muscaris climbed on him to scratch his face, the little talons hurting him, hurting them, Vanitas grabbed him and threw him away.

He closed his eyes, waiting for the slight pain to hit him.

He deserved it.

But nothing.

In contrary, he felt bliss coming from Muscaris.

With stupor, and shivers, he turned toward the Flood. The first thing he saw was a smile.

*A smile as bright as Light.*  
*A smile as bright as Light.*  
*A smile as bright as Light.*  
*A smile as bright as Light.*  
*A smile as bright as Light.*  
**A smile  
as bright as  
light.**

A smile that could make every Darkness in the World vanish. After all... this smile did tame him...

"Ventus?" he asked, his voice turning a bit husky.

"Vanitas! You were about to leave?"

He didn't reply to this.

"Without me?" Ventus smiled softly.

Vanitas moved his hand, calling an Unversed. A big horse appeared, purple stream surrounding him, his red eyes were looking all around while his mane seemed like flames. With nimble movements, Vanitas climbed on his emotion.

"Without you?"

"Of course not," he said, holding out his hand to him.

Ventus approached him, taking the offered hand, smiling as Vanitas pressed a

kiss upon the knuckles before Ventus was lifted to take his place in front of him. Vanitas' arm wrapped around his chest, pulling him back as Ventus passed his hand along the nape of his neck, fingers lightly brushing against skin as he kissed him tenderly.

"Thank you for having awakened me."

Vanitas could feel the Light slight in his half-Darkness heart. It wasn't unpleasant, at all. He was welcoming it as he always wished for. As he kissed him back, his Unversed raised on his back legs and, with a powerful whine, ran away through the Darkness for offering them... Who knew what this could hold? As long as they were caring for each other, no matter the path before them, this would only be a pleasant surprise.



Fire Star



Firecore Art

YOU CANNOT RESIST, VENTUS.



Gotherows



Hachwolfin



# Our Second Chance

by

Bookwormally

“Why does the sun set here?”

It’s not real. None of this is real.” Vanitas gestures sharply at the view, the sun sinking slowly into the ocean.

Ventus hums beside him. “Maybe, because it is real.”

Vanitas frowns at him. “Ventus, I just said-.”

“And maybe you’re wrong.” Ventus looks at him and sticks his tongue out. “Maybe it’s real, maybe it’s not. But we’re real and we’re here, so something about this place is real. Dreams and hearts might not be physical, but they’re *real*, right?”

Looking back at the sun, Vanitas scowls, eyebrows drawing together sharply. “It’s not the same.”

“Well obviously not.” Ventus laughs. “But they’re real, we’re real, and maybe the sun sets because we expect it to. Even dreams have to follow some rules. I like it, so that’s what matters.”

“Hmph, your wants don’t define the universe, Ventus.”

“Maybe not the whole universe, but for this part of it, I think whatever we want goes.” Ventus elbows him in the side. “Watch the sunset with me.”

Vanitas elbows him back. “Fine.”

*Real or not real, I want to be here with you.*

~~

His master offers him a second chance to be a part of something that will remake the world. He offers him a second chance to be *more*. Everything in Vanitas’s head is unsettled and buzzing, the pieces not lining up right, but he knows that his master no longer has anything to offer. Vanitas takes the coat from his gnarled hands anyway and plays the part of a pawn yet again.

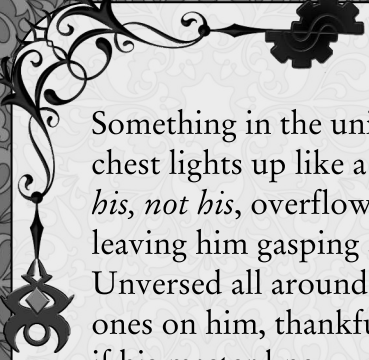
“Go, get stronger so that you are ready.”

It’s exactly what he needs. Vanitas goes to a place full of monsters. It echoes with laughter during the day, but he finds evidence that it used to be full of screams. *Close enough*. Mindlessly, he sends the Unversed crawling through the doors. Swipe a card, send a piece of himself through, grow stronger, and then get another door. It’s simple, mindless.

It gives him time to sort out the buzzing in his head. *A sundrenched beach, a moonlit ocean, and someone beside him. He had always longed for it and somehow...*

Dream or reality, Vanitas wants to believe.

~~



Something in the universe shifts and his chest lights up like a star. The emotions, *not his, not his*, overflow from his broken piece leaving him gasping and shaking with the Unversed all around. Their eyes are the only ones on him, thankfully. If anyone else saw, if his master knew...

No. This is *his chance*. This is what he's been planning for.

He forces the emotions back under his skin, ignoring the shake in his hands, in his arms. Months and months and *finally*-. He opens the portal, following the chain wrapped around his bit of darkness that might be called a heart.

He's surprised when it opens up on a place long destroyed. Surprised and then not. He shakes his head as he looks up at the restored spires, eyes drawn to one window in particular. "You were worried about where you'd be, about your home..." Vanitas strides forward, thrusting the doors open to a place he never would have been welcomed. He's only been here once before, but the bond is burning and he knows that he's close.

Voices echo from the hall above and Vanitas grins under his mask. Perfect, all the pieces are here. His steps are silent as he moves up to the hall. He can see them, Sora and his friends and even Master Aqua. Emotions struggle to make themselves known, but he tamps them down and focuses on the now, on what they expect.

"That was a *neat trick*. No wonder no one could find him." *No wonder I couldn't find him*. Vanitas strides across the floor toward them. Sora and his friends turn, drop into ready poses.

"Vanitas!" Sora is ready for him this time, but Vanitas isn't here for him. *Not entirely*. He'll need something from him soon, but the boy must have figured it out by now.

Aqua runs forward, her face set into a grimace at the sight of him. "Why are you here?" *Freak, monster*. The insults burn in her eyes, but they're darker than they used to be.

There are many things they need to say to one another. Now is not the time. He still has a part to play to his master. Vanitas pauses a few feet from Sora and spreads his hands. "Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt your touching reunion, but surely you won't begrudge me a moment with my other?"

Lights, magic, brighten the sunlight filled room. Sora's keyblade is a heavy thing in his hands, but he spins it like it's made of air. Sora charges at him, his friends at his sides, and Vanitas can only *sigh*. He doesn't have time for this. The figure in the chair is waiting, has been waiting, and Vanitas cannot wait any longer.

Dark shadows are everywhere and he long ago learned to manipulate his very space among them. The space distorts around him and he darts past Sora and his friends. His chest is throbbing and he *needs*-. He pulls himself past all of them, as close as he can bear.

Seated on top of a throne that would not be a comfortable place for a decade long nap, Vanitas watches Aqua gasp and look around. She's out of practice. Where has she been for these many years? Vanitas leans forward, places his chin in the palm of his hand.

All of them turn, Aqua gasping in disbelief, "What?" As if she never learned it herself. He saw her, fought her as she turned such a move back against him. Well, it's not like they're

fighting now. *Not yet. They won't let him take because they don't know. And it's not like he can run off with the shell without the heart within.*

“So, Venty-Wenty wants to keep sleeping.” He can't keep the smile off his face. Oh, the things he'll hear about *that*. “What am I ever going to do with you?”

“Shut up!” Aqua's voice snaps louder than the summoning of her keyblade. She leaps at him, above him, and comes down hard.

He swings his arm up, catches her keyblade against his. She struggles to break past him and he has to wonder if he's gotten that much stronger or if she's fallen that far.

Vanitas can't help but sink a bit further into his master's role, to get under her skin after she beat him so soundly. “You better settle down there, Master.” He shoves her back, sends her to the floor where her boots squeal over the stones. He leaps down after her, landing lightly between her and the chair.

## Motivation.

It has always been a matter of motivation.

Vanitas has been trained in it, to press the right buttons until everything explodes. He glances between them: Aqua and Sora. He needs to keep her from beating him and to motivate Sora to do what he's supposed to. *Don't focus on me, idiot. Free his heart!*

They're talking to one another, debating who gets to fight him, and Vanitas is glad when Aqua uses her damn head and keeps her place in front of him. Her barrier spell shimmers to life, locking the both of them in a dome that will take too much effort to break out of. Vanitas swings Void Gear to his shoulder and waits. Sora and Ventus are both outside and that is all that matters.

Aqua lifts her keyblade and Vanitas swings his arm back down. He spares one more glance at Sora, one hand pressed to the barrier, and grinds his teeth. *Go!* Then Aqua lunges forward and it's like no time has passed at all.

They dance around each other, trading blows and spells. She's not as strong as she

was, but Vanitas can't easily knock her down either. The longer the fight goes, the more aggressive she becomes, pursuing him relentlessly. She knocks him back to the ground and *still* Sora stands there and gapes. Fine. *Fine*. He'll do all the damn work.

Vanitas looks toward the throne, the barrier shimmering between them, distorting the features on the other side. Frustration and anger bubble over and fire turns the end of his keyblade molten. He flings the fire, bubbling with dark energy, right at the barrier. The spell hits and the barrier cracks. *Come on. Do something!*

He prepares another, launching it at the same spot, and then suddenly Aqua is

there. Like an *idiot* she leaps in front of the spell completely undefended. It strikes her, slams her into her own barrier, and then she collapses on the ground, struggling for breath. Still, Sora stays where he is, only shouting for Aqua like it'll actually change a goddamn thing.

“Stupid,” he hisses to himself. “How many openings do you need?” Vanitas walks over to Aqua who’s stunned from the blow. He sighs through his nose and then lifts his keyblade with both hands. *Perhaps, all they need is a memory.* He can hear the howl of the winds streaming through the stone spires of a desperate, lonely place. He hefts his keyblade a bit higher and looks directly at the slumped over form in the chair.  
*Ventus!*

Vanitas won’t stab her. They need her and he’d like to think he’s a bit better than striking her while she’s unable to stop him. Still, he does an excellent job of acting it out. He lifts the keyblade a bit higher, totally ready and about to do it, and counts out a very long five seconds.

*If this doesn’t work, I’m grabbing Sora by the ear and dragging him up to Ventus. Maybe if I smack him bodily into Ventus, he’ll get the fucking picture.*

Light explodes from the throne, wrapped around a form that rockets forward. Vanitas looks up and can feel the grin that splits his face as he swings his arm up and around.

“Aqua!”

Their keyblades collide, sparks flying, and light and darkness erupt from them both.

The barrier shatters from Ventus’s force, raining down around them like falling stars and all Vanitas wants to do is *laugh*.



Ventus is gritting his teeth, but this close Vanitas can see the confusion in his eyes. They disengage, Ventus landing in front of Aqua, still ready for an attack. He's waiting to see who the person in front of him is even as his heart tells him two different stories.

Vanitas feels it *all*. He tosses his keyblade to the side, uncaring of where it lands. Sora and his friends will charge forward in a moment to support Ventus, but all Vanitas cares about, all he's wanted for months...

He reaches up, rips his mask off, and tosses it the same direction as his keyblade. Ventus is staring at him in confusion, but Vanitas laughs loud enough to fill the hall and comes forward, empty hands held out. "*Ventus.*"

"Vanitas?" Ven straightens up, lowers his keyblade. "What are you-." He presses a hand to his head, looks at Vanitas between his fingers. His keyblade vanishes from his left hand and it reaches out, reaches toward him.

Vanitas takes it with both of his and squeezes. "It's me," he says softly.

"It's me. This is real."

Ven stares at him and then his lips twitch up. He lowers the hand from his face and then yanks Vanitas forward. Ven wraps his arms around Vanitas's back and squeezes him close. Vanitas buries his face in Ventus's shoulder and clings to him. *Finally, finally, finally.*

"Ven?"

The two voices ask almost simultaneously and Vanitas wants them all to go the fuck away, but...conversations must be had. He extracts himself enough that he and Ventus can look each other in the face again. Ven cups his face

in both hands, Vanitas holding them together still, and Vanitas doesn't need their bond to understand the feeling spelled out in Ven's eyes. He huffs at him. "Not with an audience, you don't."

Ven frowns at him, kisses the tip of his nose before Vanitas can lean back, and then turns to Aqua.

Someone else clears their throat and Vanitas looks at Sora. Sora, for his part, looks like he just took a smash to the head and isn't sure what's going on anymore. Vanitas smirks a little. "What?"

"I-." Sora shakes his head sharply. "Okay, I have a million questions, but first...couldn't you have just *said* you were on our side?" Sora pouts at him, arms crossing over his chest.

Vanitas rolls his eyes. "You're an idiot." But, with one of Ventus's hands wrapped tight in his, Vanitas might begrudgingly admit that good-natured idiots aren't so terribly bad. With the war still ahead, they'll need the bright-eyed hope and optimism that fills Sora. Vanitas sighs at him. "I'm a darkness, that's what you need to know."

"For now," Ventus says, turning to look back at him. "But I already changed your mind."

Lips twitching up into a smile, Vanitas says, "Maybe, if you think it matters."

Ventus's answering smile  
is brighter than the  
burning stars.



IZZIELEGO

Izzielego



Finsei



Hoeri





Kaji



Коровну

# As Restless as the Tides

by

Dew

He rolled over in his sleep, and was awakened by how cold and empty the other side of the bed was. Ven rubbed his eyes, sitting up as his blurry vision adjusted to the dim lighting in the room. Everything looked the same as it did when he went to bed that night— except there was the lack of a certain someone who had his arms wrapped around Ven as they fell asleep together last night. Ven looked to the door, catching no sight of the familiar jacket that was supposed to be hanging off the doorknob.

Ven had gotten him that jacket a week after they moved to the island together. Vanitas never left anywhere without it, so he must have gone somewhere.

*‘But where?’* he wondered, his cloudy mind trying to remember Vanitas’ favorite spots. Yawning, Ven picked himself off the bed and felt around the room for something warm to wear. After fumbling around, he found a hoodie and pulled it on, his hair resembling a bird’s nest once his head managed to find the neck hole. After finding some shoes and grabbing a flashlight, he made his way to the front door and walked out, shivering as the cold morning air greeted him.

Vanitas— as Ven discovered at the start of their relationship— was a morning person. Somehow Vanitas managed to get up at the most ungodly hours and be done with whatever he had planned to do that day. Training, his share of chores, bickering with Sora and the others

whenever they visited the island; all would be done before noon. It amazed Ven that he had so much energy to perform such a feat, since the two of them always went to bed pretty late.

Because of that, Vanitas being up this early wasn’t what had Ven feeling worried. It wasn’t because Ven woke up without Vanitas at his side.

It was because Vanitas hadn’t awakened Ven to tell him he was going somewhere.

The crown of the sun was barely peeking over the ocean that morning. Stars still lingered in the grey-blue sky and the tide was slowly retreating back into the ocean, the draw the moon bought out of it slowly fading.

Ven quickly swept his gaze across the shore, sighing when he didn’t spot Vanitas immediately. Usually he’d be a little close to the house, if not farther away to train and avoid waking Ven with all the noise he made.

Sometimes Vanitas would train farther down the shoreline. Knowing this and hoping to find him, Ven walked along the wet sand left by the tide, foam clinging to his skin and vanishing just as fast as it washed upon his ankles. His shoes were now soaked, squishing with every step he took. But Ven hardly paid it any mind.

This was a nice place. It was near Destiny Islands, yet far enough where Ven and Vanitas could have their peace and quiet. Terra had found it for them while Vanitas was recovering from his wounds, around a week or two after the finale battle with Xehanort. Though Vanitas hadn't fully recovered, he told Ven he wanted to go there straight away and get settled down. Ven agreed, though it was only to stop Vanitas from diving into the ocean and swimming to the island himself.

Everything fell into place once they arrived. With the help of the others, Ven and Vanitas had their own little cabin along the beach. It had enough room for the two of them to sleep and a whole lot of extra room for the others to come and barge in whenever they wanted to visit. Vanitas could complain all he wanted about how noisy it was when they visited, but Ven knew Vanitas enjoyed their friends' visits just as much as he did. No matter how much of a grump he could be afterwards.

Ven shivered, tugging on the draw strings of his hoodie as the morning air pinched his nose and cheeks. Knowing that Vanitas had taken his jacket at least reassured him that he would be fine in this kind of weather. Only for a while though. Vanitas could only stand being cold for so long. When it became too much for him back home, he'd dive under their blankets and call for Ven to come and warm him up.

Little memories like that warmed Ven's heart, pushing him to keep walking and look for his lover.

The cold winds were beginning to settle down as the minutes passed. By now they were gentle and only left a freezing graze along Ven's bare ankles. In a way, Ven took that as a good sign. At least now he wouldn't have to worry about Vanitas getting cold in this kind of weather. The jacket he took with him could only provide so much warmth.

*'He's never traveled out this far, though,' Ven thought, stopping at one point to see if he could find Vanitas near the water or through the thick trees behind him. 'I think we both saw everything on this island dozens of times. So there wouldn't really be a reason for him to go out this far.'* He strained his ears to listen for anything, only to get the roar of the ocean in return. Ven sighed. *'I'm worrying too much, but I know I'm not being stupid for thinking this is weird. He tells me when he's going out because he knows I worry when he doesn't...'*

Ven didn't want to leash Vanitas or make him feel trapped. That was the one thing he assured he'd never do when they first got into a relationship. Ven wanted Vanitas to experience what it was like to have someone who cared about him, something that Xehanot had never given him when he was under his thumb. He only asked for one thing; communication. Something they both had a fair share on. If there was something wrong or if they had a problem they couldn't solve on their own, they'd go to the other for help. At first, this was a hard rule for Vanitas to follow. He was so used to keeping his own issues to himself and not asking for help. But eventually, Ven would have Vanitas finding him, sitting next to him and soon talking about what was on his mind. What lingering fears and feelings he still possessed. How the thought of being separated from Ven and finding himself back at Xehanort's side scared him out of his mind.

On the day he confessed those feelings to him, Ven held Vanitas tight. He held the former masked boy so, so tight, promising him that he wasn't going anywhere. He promised him he'd never feel those kinds of feelings ever again.

Communication was key to them. It was something Ven held in high importance. If it were just Vanitas leaving the cabin that

Little memories like that  
warmed Ven's heart, pushing  
him to keep walking and look  
for his lover.

morning with a quick, 'morning,' then Ven would have paid it no mind. He would have gone about his day and waited for Vanitas to come back. But in actuality, it was Vanitas' behavior from the past few days that had him up and searching like this.

Lately, Vanitas has been distant. It would have been hard to notice at first, since the two of them were usually glued at the hip. But like the way Vanitas liked a few extra pillows in bed and how he preferred spices over sweets, it was the subtle things that gave him away. Maybe an embrace in the morning would last shorter than Ven liked, or he would pull his hand away whenever Ven reached out to hold it, or sometimes Vanitas would space out every now and then, but the one change Ven had noticed was Vanitas staring off towards the ocean. He'd catch Vanitas gazing at it through the windows, while he rested on the porch steps, and sometimes after training along the beach. Vanitas would stare far off into the waters, as if searching for something. Ven shrugged it off as spacing out the first few times he saw it, but now Vanitas was doing it more often than usual. Ven started to wonder if something was wrong.

Ven remembered the story about Xehanort in his youth. He couldn't remember if he heard this from Sora, or Aqua, or whoever. What he could remember was the beginning, when Xehanort would stare off towards the oceans that surrounded Destiny Islands. A youth who longed to travel to other worlds and leave behind his home, being pulled in by his desires and walking down a path undoubtedly shrouded in darkness.

Xehanort always stared at the ocean...

Ven began to walk faster.

The sand was kicked up below his feet as his walk turned into a jog, the cold no longer a problem for him as he began to look in all directions, looking for something, anything that could have told him where Vanitas had gone.

It didn't take him long to find his shoes and jacket.

They laid upon the sandy bank, tossed and kicked aside, like Vanitas had been in a hurry to get them off. Ven picked up the jacket, his hands starting to tremble as he looked around the area. He glanced over to the ocean, eyes widening as he saw Vanitas trudging toward the water. His back was to him and arms cutting through the water as he tried to make his way through it. With every step he took, the ocean swallowed him up more. The dark waters reminded Ventus of the dark; rippling, never-ending shadows that tugged and drew Vanitas in until he was becoming harder to see.

"Vanitas!"

Ven shouted his name, began to scream it as he charged straight into the water, yanking and chucking his shoes off and tossing them over his shoulder unceremoniously. The tides had tickled him when they brushed against him during his walk but as he bolted into the water, they were swiping at his ankles, trying to knock him off his feet, trying to push him away from Vanitas. Ven didn't let them stop him, though. He kept pushing. He kept swimming. He kept screaming his name.

*‘Don’t take him away from me,’ he thought, sea water stinging his eyes that were already filled with tears. ‘Please, please, please don’t take him away from me!’*

## “Vanitas!”

Vanitas reared his head up, turning around with a confused expression as he saw a familiar head of blonde hair bobbing through the water. “Ven-?”

A giant wave came out of nowhere, crashing straight into his back and sending him and Ven tumbling back to the shore. Though the currents and bits of broken shell and seaweed, Vanitas had grabbed Ven and pulled him towards him, holding onto him as they were taken straight to the wet sand.

“What... What are you doing here?” Vanitas coughed, looking down at Ven. “It’s too early for you...” Ven was shaking. At first, Vanitas thought it was because he was cold and it would make sense since the both of them had just been slapped by the ocean. But Ven was gripping too tightly to his shirt for it to be that. It was something else. “Ven?”

“You scared me,” Ven wrapped his arms around his neck, his breath hitched with worry even as he held Vanitas closer to him. “You didn’t tell me where you were going, and you’ve been so distant lately. I thought something was going on and you weren’t telling me anything.” His words were coming out in a rush and god he was probably sounding absurd, but they just poured out of him, pushed out by his heart as it tried to jump out of his throat. “I thought I was going to lose you...” he murmured at last, shutting his

eyes.

“Lose me? You think you’re going to get rid of me that easily?” The words were meant to tease him, but Ven could hear the sincerity in them. This was Vanitas being the way he was. And Ven loved him for it. “I guess I have been breaking the rule we made about talking, huh?”

Ven nodded, still clinging to him.

“Not gonna let me go unless you’re sure I’m staying, huh?”

Another nod. The hug was long. The arms around his neck were starting to feel like a vise.

“Will you if I explain myself?”

The grip loosened a little. “That would be nice.”

When Ven gave him enough room, Vanitas grabbed his waist and scooted the both of them until they were back to dry sand and their shoes. Ven was now shivering from the cold by the time they got back. “Sheesh,” Vanitas reached around and pulled over his jacket. “Your clothes are soaked, sunshine.” he said, wrapping his jacket around Ven like a blanket

“Yours are, too.” Ven still clung to him, trembling with chattering teeth and now red in the face.

*To promise you I'll  
To promise you  
always  
To promise you  
be by your side.*

“I was doing it on purpose.”

“What?” asked Ven, confused. “Why?”

“I was looking for these,” From his jacket pocket, Vanitas revealed a handful of sea shells. Some of them were whole and intact while the others were cracked or brittle, already breaking apart in Vanitas’ palm. They were all white with a hue of green along the edges. “They wash up on shore during the morning, when the sun’s just about to come up. I had to find them before the tide washed them away or cracked them.”

A person would really have to get up early in the morning to find these, Ven observed. So early that they would only have time for a quick hug goodbye.

Vanitas huffed at the collection he had in his hand. “This haul bites, though. The good ones I just found in the water were crushed when that wave hit us.

Now that Ven was taking a closer look, he could see a few scratches on Vanitas’ palms. Some were recent and others looked a few

days old. Maybe his hands would hurt if Ven reached out to hold them. And the scratches would lead to questions that Vanitas couldn’t answer just yet. Like why he was looking out to the ocean.

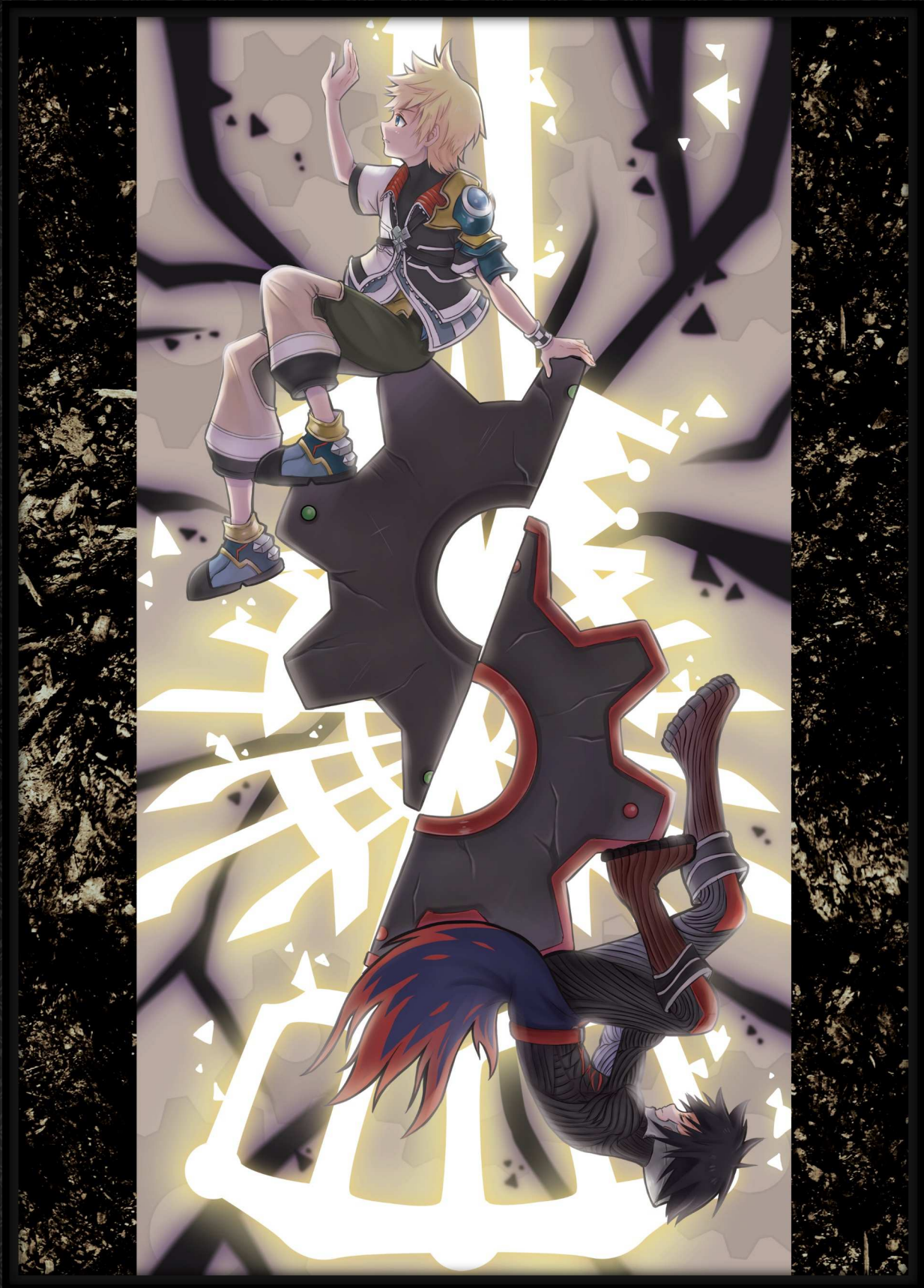
“But why?” he asked again, still lost. “Why did you need shells?”

“To make you a wayfinder,” Now Vanitas was blushing and Ven’s heart was set to bursting. “To promise you I’ll always be by your side.” Vanitas curled his arms around his waist, pressing their foreheads together as his eyes glimmered under the rising sun. “Even if you don’t hear me say it often, you’ll have something to remember that.” A smile ghosted his lips. “Got that, sunshine?”

The tides were crashing beside them, pulling away Ven’s fears and worries with them while they pushed him straight towards Vanitas and his embrace. He sighed, breaking that last bit of distance between them with a soft kiss.

“Got it.”

*The tides were calm.*



Kuro Tsubasa





Leaf



Trina

# I'm Almost Here

by

Eskandar Rohani

Ven tugs the edge of his shirt up, and twists to inspect the darkening smear of a bruise creeping across his back. The tiny bathroom in the caravan is little more than a tiled closet with a toilet, sink, and the suggestion of a mirror affixed to the wall. Barely the size of a dinner plate and coated in an oily film that Ven refuses to touch, the mirror offers little insight into his injury.

He had cast a healing spell when they were fleeing—just *Cure*, because his magic reserves were nearly depleted—but with a bruise this extensive, that hit must've been way harder than he'd realized. An experimental prod at the bruise sends a heady rush of pain tearing through Ven's nervous system. So. Definitely still injured. His shirt falls back into place.

Ven finds Vanitas out in the kitchenette, looking remarkably fidgety for someone standing completely motionless. Only his eyes move when Ven shuts the bathroom door behind him.

Vanitas asks, unexpectedly, "How bad is it?" and Ven makes a noncommittal sound. It must not be a satisfactory answer, because Vanitas' lips press into a thin line.

"How's your head?" Ven deflects. He may have a massive bruise colonizing his body, but Vanitas is the one covered in gore.

They'd learned the hard way that this world's nocturnal fauna pack a serious punch. A hulking titan of a creature had smashed Vanitas in the skull, destroying his helmet in an explosion of black glass and shrieking metal.

He had leapt back to his feet, *laughing*. With teeth bared in an ecstatic grin and his golden eyes glowing bright amid the plumes of a *Dark Firaga*,

## Vanitas was another feral monster in the darkness.

It's hard to reconcile *that* Vanitas with the one now standing in the caravan, brusquely inquiring about Ven's injury. The blood clinging to him isn't even dry.

"It would've been fine, even without your interference," Vanitas says.

Ven rolls his eyes. "You're welcome." He joins Vanitas in front of the grimy stove and peers out the window, trying to catch a glimpse of the beasts beyond the safety of the campsite. Instead, all he can see is his and Vanitas' reflections in the glass.

Vanitas snorts, "What, already hungry for more?" The lopsided grin pulling at his mouth seems less sinister without the metal jaw of his mask bracketing his face. It almost looks playful.

"Nah," Ven says, mouth dry. "Maybe later."

Shrugging, Vanitas says, "Just as well. Your friends are already going to give me hell for the condition you're in. They'd be so annoying if you up and died on me."

"That's true, but shouldn't it work both ways?" When Vanitas blinks at him, Ven explains: "If you're gonna go out of your way to make sure I come home in one piece, shouldn't I do the same for you?"

“What.”

The look of confusion on Vanitas’ face is so novel that Ven can’t help but turn to him and grin. “What? I care about what happens to you.”

“*Gross.*”

“Maybe, but it’s nowhere near as gross as your reflection,” Ven says, wrinkling his nose and gesturing at the blood matted in Vanitas’ tangle of dark hair. “You gonna do something about that?”

Vanitas’ eyebrows furrow as he squints at his reflection. He rakes his fingers across his scalp, blood smearing on his glove. “You already healed me. What else is there to do?” He wipes the blood away on his thigh. The stain is barely visible against the black of his suit.

He’s completely serious, and Ven suspects that if he were on his own, he’d manifest a new helmet to cover the mess and call it a night.

Shaking his head, Ven scoffs, “How are you so difficult without even trying?”

“You bring out the best in me,” Vanitas replies without missing a beat.

“Har, har.” Ven jabs Vanitas twice in the arm, eyebrows raising when he actually grimaces. “Shut up and wash your hair.”

Vanitas repeats the order, mockingly, but he flips the tap on the kitchen sink regardless. A horrible groan echoes out from deep in the pipes, but water eventually sputters out. It’s even hot.

A quick foraging expedition in the cabinets yields a single clean towel and an assortment of half empty containers of shampoo and conditioner. When Ven returns to the kitchenette, Vanitas is still standing in front of the sink, his left hand idly rubbing the muscle of his right bicep. His hair is dry. “You do know that your hair needs to be wet to wash it, right?” Ven asks, only half joking.

Vanitas casts him a withering look. “So, like. Get to it.”

Ven dumps the bottles of hair product on the tiny counter and inspects their labels. “Do you wanna smell like seabreeze, passion fruit, or...” He frowns at the third bottle, unscrews the cap, and sniffs. “Soap.”

When Vanitas doesn’t respond, Ven glances at him. He still hasn’t moved to wet his hair. He gazes at the steam curling up from the sink, eyes distant and unreadable as he continues to knead his fingers into his right arm.

Watching him now, flashes of their hasty retreat return to Ven, easier to parse through without the tunnelvision of an adrenaline rush. He remembers: a crack across his back that ripped the air right out of his lungs, the dirt and grass beneath his hands as he wheezed for purchase, Vanitas barking *get the fuck up!* and Void Gear spitting sparks as Vanitas held off another attack, his arms shaking from the effort. His face had been pale, exposed.

Ven bites his lip.

“Your arm is hurt.”

Vanitas’ eyes snap to Ven’s face, expression going slack with surprise. He’s disarmed for only the space between two breaths before he clenches his jaw and digs his fingers into his arm like he’s punishing it. Vanitas admits, voice low, “I strained it doing that last block. Moving it is...” He flexes his right arm, his nostrils flaring as he forces the movement. “Difficult.” His arm falls limp at his side.

Instinctively, Ven reaches into the well of his soul, where the magic collects and waits to be shaped, only to find a meagre trickle—nowhere near enough for even the most rudimentary healing spell. Guilt seizes in his chest. “I can’t heal you yet.”

“Not a big deal,” Vanitas says, with a matter-of-fact indifference that reflects years of living as an afterthought. He turns the water off.

Ven turns the water back on and Vanitas stares at him like he's grown a second head. "My dominant arm is messed up," he says, enunciating slowly and clearly. "I can't do this right now." He reaches forward to turn the water off again, but Ven catches his hand and squeezes it.

"I can't heal you yet," Ven says, "but please let me take care of you."

Vanitas wrenches his hand out of Ven's grip, lips curling downward. "*Gross.*"

"Maybe." Ven offers a small smile. "But I'm still gonna do it. If it's okay with you."

There's a look in Vanitas' eyes like distress, but then he blinks it away, glares at the sink, and mutters a resigned, "Whatever."

Ven releases the air going stale in his lungs. "Okay," he says. "Whenever you're ready."

Vanitas hesitates, then slowly ducks his head beneath the stream of hot water. The water running through his hair into the drain is streaked with blood. "Let's get this over with."

For all that this is Ven's idea, the actual mechanics of it don't click until the exact second he notices the tips of Vanitas' ears. He's never seen his ears before. They're flushed a delicate pink, and Ven can't help the giddy sensation of bubbles popping in his chest.

"You gonna start or what?"

Ven runs his hands through the water, stray droplets speckling the downy hair on his forearms like dew. "You in some kind of hurry?"

Vanitas sucks his teeth. "In a hurry to get this over with." Ven watches with delight as his ears turn a furious shade of red. "As if I even—"

Whatever he was going to say gets choked off the second Ven's fingers ghost over the crown of his head. Ven considers being shitty and poking fun at the abrupt silence, but Vanitas is tense like a coiled spring, and Ven can't bring himself to antagonize him when he's clearly uncomfortable. He scratches at a

patch of crystallized blood on Vanitas' scalp, working water into the matted hair. "You doing okay?"

"*Die.*" A tiny amount of the tension gripping his shoulders eases and Ven smiles.

Once Vanitas' hair is sopping wet and the water is mostly running clear, Ven shuts off the water and grabs the passion fruit shampoo. The pink gel slides easily across his palms and lathers up along the roots of Vanitas' hair. He takes his time, massaging the shampoo in and coaxing it into a voluminous white foam.

The smell is less potent than Ven expected, but the fruity, tropical scent is a welcome replacement to the combination of sweat and grime and old blood that Vanitas has adopted as his own personal fragrance. It separates him from the battlefield.

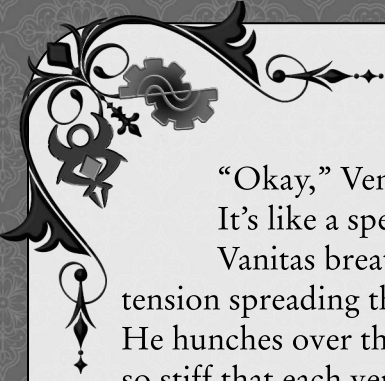
Beneath Ven's touch, Vanitas softens like orichalcum when gradually exposed to heat. He's not quite relaxed, but there's a deeper bow of his head and a sluggishness to his breath. Ven wonders what kind of expression he's making, if his eyes are closed, or simply half-lidded and drowsy.

When Ven turns the water on and rinses the suds out, it's a little bit reluctantly.

"We done?" Vanitas asks. Ven's not sure if that's disappointment in his voice, but he likes to think it is.

"Almost." It takes a couple aggressive shakes of the bottle, but conditioner eventually squirts out thick and custard-like, spreading slippery through Vanitas' hair and detangling the remaining snarls. Ven adds some extra at the ends. It's probably unnecessary, but who knows if they'll ever do this again. He wants to drag it out, even if it's only by a little.

Ven turns the water on a final time and washes the conditioner away. He turns the faucet off. Vanitas doesn't recoil, so Ven draws the towel up over his hair, tousling it lightly and feeling weird in his chest. Like he's empty, but also bursting at the seams.



“Okay,” Ven whispers.  
It’s like a spell breaks.

Vanitas breathes through his mouth, tension spreading through his limbs like ice. He hunches over the sink, his spine growing so stiff that each vertebra seems welded to the next.

Ven murmurs, “Vanitas?” and Vanitas lets out a labored exhale and brushes Ven’s hands off.

He straightens, towel hanging over his head and obscuring half his face like the hood of an Organization coat. “Thanks,” Vanitas says, barely audible. Then he pulls the towel off and silently exits the caravan to sit outside on the step. Ven watches him leave, hands still wet and smelling of passion fruit, his insides cold.

Xion keeps telling him to give Vanitas space to think, feel, and process. Vanitas doesn’t need to expel his emotions anymore, he needs opportunities to experience and accept them. He needs the space. He doesn’t need to be a weapon anymore; he’s learning to be a person, and personhood involves dealing with feelings and thoughts that can be uncomfortable. This stuff is new to Vanitas, and Ven needs to be patient with him as he works to understand himself.

But isn’t it easier to deal with bad feelings when you know you’re not alone?

Vanitas doesn’t acknowledge Ven in any way when he joins him outside and plops down beside him on the step, thighs pressing so they can fit. “You sure this is safe?” Ven asks, straining his eyes at the fuzzy line where the lamplight fades and night reigns.

“Monsters fear the light.”

“Tell that to the one that hit me.” It’s meant as a joke, but it comes out a little rueful. Ven digs his fingers into the edge of his bruise and is rewarded with a fresh rip of pain that makes his vision go white.

Vanitas snatches his wrist. He’s got that look again: like he’s standing between Ven and certain death. “What is wrong with you?”

Ven’s face grows hot. He yanks on his wrist, but Vanitas’ grip is iron. “What’s wrong with *you*?”

Ven can see the fine threads of blood vessels in Vanitas’ narrowed eyes, can feel Vanitas’ breath on his skin. He’s staring at Ven with fury, fear, *need*. Ven’s heart beats wildly against his ribcage.

He’s aching for something that he knows the silhouette of but not the name.

He looks away.

Vanitas grabs his chin and forces Ven to meet his gaze. He dips in and Ven’s eyes slide shut.

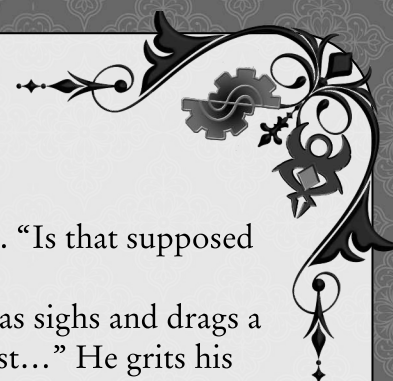
They don’t kiss. Yearning hangs thick in the air between them. Vanitas inhales sharply and withdraws, but Ven leans forward and presses their lips together.

Vanitas gasps quietly into his mouth, breath still cool and minty from the ether they shared mid-battle. His lips are surprisingly soft while Ven’s have ragged edges from being worried at until they split. Vanitas’ hold on Ven goes slack and Ven cards his fingers through Vanitas’ hair, tangling them in the wet strands.

Kissing Vanitas exorcises all the pent up anxiety and frustration that’s grown heavy as a stone in Ven’s heart. It’s warm, like coming home.

When Ven finally pulls away, he’s smiling and pliant. But then he sees Vanitas’ face and immediately breaks into a cold sweat.

Vanitas looks far away; a wrinkle sits between his brows and his mouth twists unhappily. Ven jerks his hands away from



him like he's been burnt. "Are you..." He swallows, forces aside the feelings of having the ground vanish beneath his feet. "Are you okay?"

Vanitas blinks, as if just waking up. He struggles with the question. "I—" He stops himself. His frown deepens. "Are you crying?"

"What?" Ven brushes at his eyelashes and his fingers come away wet. He feels stupid. "It's nothing, I just—" He curls into himself, hands coming up to cover his mouth. Ven stares down at his feet, trying to will away the memory of the vacancy in Vanitas' eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispers, "I didn't mean to upset you."

He clammers to his feet and turns to go back inside the caravan, but Vanitas rises up and stops him with a single hand in the center of his chest. He looks Ven in the eyes. "You didn't upset me. I was already upset."

Ven stares at him. "Is that supposed to be comforting?"

"No. Yes." Vanitas sighs and drags a hand over his face. "I just..." He grits his teeth and glares up at the night sky, glittering with unfamiliar stars and constellations. "I'm not some kind of charity case. You don't need to do stuff for me."

"Stuff," Ven repeats slowly. "What do you mean, *stuff*?"

Vanitas turns that annoyed expression on Ven. "You know what I mean." His fingers fist in the fabric of Ven's shirt. "You don't need to do that nice stuff."

"*Nice stuff* like worrying about you and taking care of you when you're hurt?" Ven asks, and now he's getting irritated too. "*Nice stuff* like kissing you?"

"I don't want your pity. You're not obligated to do stuff like that for me."

"*Obligated?*" Ven lets out a bark of outraged laughter and grabs Vanitas by the hair. "You stupid idiot." He drags him in until their noses are almost touching. Vanitas' wide, unblinking eyes stay fixed on Ven's face. He's hardly breathing. "I'm not doing stuff out of obligation. I'm doing it because I want to. I don't pity you, I *like* you."

Then to be sure there's no misunderstanding, Ven asks,

*Do you want me to stop?*

*Do you want me*

***Do you want me to stop?***

*want me want me want me to stop?*

Vanitas flushes that same sweet pink as earlier. He averts his gaze, mortification drawn into every line of his scowl. Ven laughs again, grinning so hard his cheeks ache, and leans in to whisper against Vanitas' lips, "Then I won't."



Lolakins





Mamotatz



Marie Jaeger



Melon



Michi Cocopop

# Spotlight

by

## Pluto

“Vanitas!” Ven’s excitement gets the better of him as he bursts out-of-breath into the green room. He sprinted over as soon as he saw Vanitas’s name on the cast list. It was right next to Ven’s, just like old times.

The face that greets him is not so excited. Vanitas scowls at him from his place on the couch, scrolling through something on his phone—something that Ven *knows* isn’t social media because Vanitas doesn’t use it. Ven’s searched all over for him for six years! Six years since their old show ended and they were pulled apart. No, this is all wrong. There’s not even a glint of their old friendship in Vanitas’s face. Nothing of the pranks and inside jokes in the dark corners of backstage, of the soft touches and playful arguments, or Ven’s embarrassing whining over their lack of a kissing scene—because if Terra and Aqua get one, then *it’s only fair*.

But now, he looks at Ven with nothing but bitterness. It’s the same face he would make when they were forced to go to premiers or interviews or really anything that wasn’t filming. “It’s you,” he spits like the words are poison.

They must be, because they burn within Ven’s chest. “What’s wrong?”

“I should’ve known.” He gets to his feet with a huff. He’s taller than Ven now. Only by an inch or so, but enough for Ven to notice. “It had to be *you*.” Ven doesn’t know what that

means. Vanitas marches to the door, and their shoulders slam together as he passes, knocking Ven back a step.

“Wait—”

“Don’t bother,” he hisses. “You won’t use me again.”

Ven doesn’t know what that means, either, but he doesn’t follow. He doesn’t fight it. He only clenches his fist over his chest like that could somehow stop the ache.

When the day passes and Vanitas doesn’t return, Ven knows he can’t leave it like this. He knows just the thing. A hot white chocolate mocha latte with a sweet vanilla drizzle. Extra whipped cream and made with decaf because caffeine makes him jittery. Ven has had this order memorized for six years. Vanitas’s favorite. What a sour attitude for such a sweet tooth.

Ven writes ‘Vani ♥’ on the cup in the neatest letters he can muster—which is still kind of sloppy. Ven was never good at that sort of stuff. Vanitas was always the one doodling in the margins of his scripts whenever they had downtime. Ven wonders if he still does it.

But first: the coffee. Ven leaves it on the vanity in the green room. Vanitas disappeared in a huff yesterday—what a diva, but unlike him—so hopefully he shows up for the cold reading, at least. Ven ducks out before he’s spotted and

loiters on set, watching the production crew move set pieces around in a dance of trial and error. He doesn't notice Vanitas until he's towering over him with the coffee in his fist: "Tell me... if I dumped this on your head, would it burn you enough for permanent disfigurement, or just enough for you to leave me alone?" He's not even smirking. "Although, I guess I win either way."

Ven bats his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb," he scoffs. "Only you would ever leave me something so tooth-rottingly sweet."

"Really? What is it?"

Vanitas visibly twitches. "You know damn well what it is. It's a white chocolate mocha decaf with extra vanilla. The sweetest, least-caffeinated thing on the menu."

"Caffeine makes you jittery," Ven shrugs. "Sounds like someone knows you really well."

"Oh, lay off it," he mutters, voice dripping with malice. "Just stop. We're not kids

anymore. I'm not as gullible as I used to be. I don't need your pity," and he shoves the coffee into Ven's hands. It's still full.

Ven glances between him and the cup, dropping all pretenses and fumbling words. "Do you not like it?"

"*What?*"

"It thought it was your favorite..."

"When I was *twelve*."

"So you don't like it anymore?"

"What does it matter? Just leave me alone." He storms away, probably back towards the green room.

"Wait—Vanitas!" Ven starts after him, but freezes up. His legs stop working altogether. Is there something he's missing? He and Vanitas used to bicker, sure... They used to poke and prod at each other until one of them would actually snap, but it was all in good fun... right? They used to play and joke... sneak into the dark corners of backstage and hide from all the stage lights and adults.

They used to *l a u g h* .

Vanitas used to smile.

Ven used to have fun.

It may all be in the past but what could have *c h a n g e d* ?

Vanitas keeps saying things that don't make sense. He doesn't need Ven's pity? Of course he doesn't. Why would Ven pity him? Why would Ven want to *use* him?

The coffee is turning cold. It almost bursts through the lid from his trembling hands. This isn't right.

Ven's heart is in his throat. He doesn't realize what he's doing until he throws open the door of the green room. Lukewarm coffee drips between his fingers, sticky from all the added sugars.

Vanitas sits there as he always has. His glare is ice cold. He slams his can of decaffeinated soda onto the vanity and Ven watches it foam over. "Are you slow? I told you to *leave me alone.*"

Ven sits the coffee before him with a force. It drips down the sides and into a sticky ring at the bottom of the cup. "What's your problem?" he demands. "How are we supposed to work

together like this?"

"You think I want to be here?" he snorts. "I'm only doing this show because I *have* to."

"What does that mean, Vanitas?" Ven snaps. "I don't understand what you're talking about, not one word of it, but you'd rather make mean faces than *talk to me!*"

Vanitas stands up so fast his chair is knocked over. "How could you *not understand?*"

"How am I *supposed to?*"

He's seething, but still not saying anything. He just stands there, trembling and gasping in what can only be rage.

*We used to be friends!*  
*We used to be friends!*  
**"We used to be friends!"**  
*We used to be friends!*  
*We used to be friends!*

Ven shouts desperately. The ache in his chest has reached a fever pitch. And Vanitas laughs. A sharp, disbelieving laugh.

*Were we?*  
*Were we?*  
**"Were we?"**  
*Were we?*  
*Were we?*

Ven feels the floor drop from beneath him. He doesn't understand. He doesn't understand anything.

*Wh... What else could we have been?*  
*Wh... What else could we have been?*  
**"Wh--What else could we have been?"**  
*Wh... What else could we have been?*  
*Wh... What else could we have been?*

“We were costars,” he says. “We were just climbing over each other to see who would reach the top. But I was the only one who didn’t know he was in a race.” His shaking hands curl into fists. “I was just a stepping stone for you and your career. After the show ended, you went off to do whatever you wanted, and I was stuck with the leftovers. Typecast as a villain or deuteragonist. Never as good as I *was* or *used to be*. I was just second-rate. Stuck doing slop that no one else wanted and no one ever cared about!”

Ven sucks in a breath. “Wait—”

He sticks a finger in Ven’s face. “So *don’t* act like we were friends when you didn’t care about me. Not as an actor. Not as person. You *never cared*.”

Ven clasps that hand with both of his own. “Wait!” he shouts, and Vanitas finally stops. His breath is deep and fast. “What are you *talking* about? Of course I care. I’ve seen everything you’ve ever been in. I kept up with all of your work.” He only looks skeptical. Ven’s fingers coil tighter over his hand. “I remember the time you had a guest appearance on that sitcom you were too good for. I went to see you perform when you did that off-Broadway tour. I had no idea you could sing like that... And that independent film you starred in last year—where you were the law student whose roommate was murdered—it made me cry. It still does...” Vanitas’s mouth drops open. “You’ve only gotten better. I don’t... understand why you’re so mad. You’re so good in everything you do.” Please let Vanitas believe it. “I miss working with you. I think you pull out the best in me. And besides, ever since our show ended, acting has gotten more and more like... work. I miss when it was fun. It was only fun when I was with you.”

Vanitas doesn’t move. “You don’t... mean that,” he stammers.

Ven steps forward, until there’s barely any space left between them. “I mean it! I always wanted to work with you again! It’s all I’ve ever wanted!”

Vanitas bows his head. He can’t seem to catch his breath. Ven feels it, hot against his face. “You... you actually watched *Advanced Theory*?”

“I bought it,” he grins. “I’ve probably watched it ten times. It’s so good. *You’re* so good.”

This time, his laugh is nothing but air. But it’s real. Ven would know it anywhere. “So, I’ve spent the last few years blaming you... for something you didn’t do?”

“Huh, if only there was some kind of device that fits in your pocket that can connect you to anyone, anywhere, at any time.”

“Shut it,” Vanitas grumbles. “You know how I hate that.”

“Give me your number *right now*.”

“You have to let go of my hand first.”

Ven pauses. He tightens his grip instead. “Okay, it doesn’t have to be *now*.”

Vanitas laughs again, and their foreheads gently touch. “Whatever you say.”

“I can’t believe you thought I’d used you like that...” he mumbles. “I’m sorry for hurting you. I didn’t mean to, but still...”

“Ven...” Vanitas says his name at last, and Ven’s heart flutters. “My entire life has been defined through being by your side. No one knows who



I am without you there.”

“But *you* know. That’s what matters, right?”

“Maybe... I don’t know...”

“I thought you wanted to go your own way, and be your own person. So I left you alone.”

“I thought...” Vanitas swallows the ache in his throat. “I thought you’d washed your hands of me. That you’d abandoned me.”

“No,” Ven insists, their faces so close he can’t see anything but bright gold eyes. “No, I’d never do that. I never wanted that. If it’d been up to me, the show would’ve never ended. I could’ve stayed there with you forever.”

He just snorts. “That’s not very practical.”

“Yeah... That’s why they don’t let me direct.”

“What a train wreck that would be,” he laughs.

“Hey! You weren’t supposed to agree so quickly!” Ven pouts, and Vanitas keeps laughing. Bright, genuine laughter. Warm against Ven’s face. “I missed you.”

His free hand hesitates at Ven’s cheek. “I... missed you, too. Even though you were better off without me...” Ven makes a face. That’s not true! “I missed the past.”

They can agree on that, at least. “We were best friends back then, weren’t we?”

“We were a little more than that,” he chuckles.

“What do you—?” he’s stopped by Vanitas’s thumb tracing his lip.

That grin is so sly. “Weren’t we?”

And Ven knows he remembers. The kissing scene thing! It was a joke! Ven’s nervous laughter bubbles to the surface before he can stop it. All at once there’s the darkness of backstage—the soft touches and giggling—the feeling that his heart is about to leap out of his mouth! “Don’t remind me of that,” he overflows. “It still keeps me up at night.”

“Me too.”

“You aren’t supposed to remember it at all,” he groans.

“Why would I ever forget that you wanted to kiss me, you loser?”

Ven’s breath halts in his lungs. Vanitas asks the question so candidly. Ven can’t say anything. He can only stand there and stare at those gleaming eyes and thin smirk on soft pink lips like flower petals and Ven thinks: *I still kinda want to.*

“After everything, I thought you were making fun of me,” Vanitas mumbles. “You were just trying to manipulate me.”

“I don’t think I’m smart enough for that,” Ven chuckles.

“So, you actually meant it?”

Ven did. He meant all of it. He feels his face burning a bit. Feels the pinpricks of Vanitas’s fingertips still propped beneath his chin. But the only words that come out of his mouth are: “Do you hate me?”

Vanitas blinks at him in shock. His eyes search over Ven’s face for an eternity, chewing on words too big to swallow. “No,” he says at last. “I never did.”

The relief that floods Ven’s body is enough to make his legs weak. “That’s good to hear.”



Michy



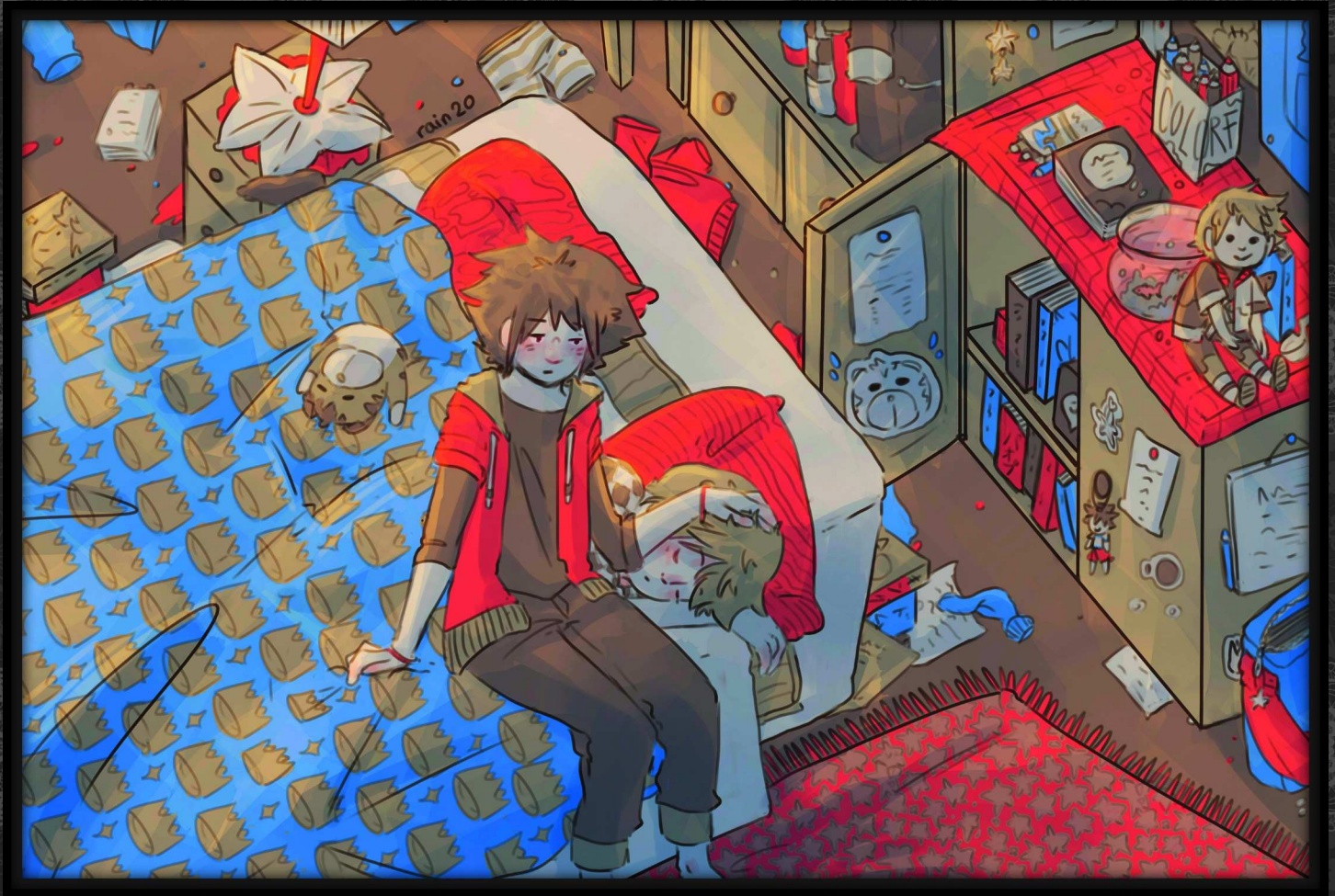
OnnieDoodles



Passerby-Gamer



Priscilla



Rain



Redbearuniverse



Reioux



# Never Forget

by

Saory Emannelle

Ventus had always had more self-control than him.

Ever since they met back in school until when they went to college together and eventually started dating. Even now, after 25 years of marriage. He was always the one who thought better before making decisions. The one who'd tell Vanitas that everything would be alright, the one who'd make him feel warm and safe no matter the circumstances.

But not on that day. Not after they left the doctor's office with the diagnosis that would completely change their lives and that made Ventus choke up with tears with each step he took. He kept himself together as best as he could but as soon as they got into their car he couldn't anymore and broke down.

Vanitas was sad. More than that, he was angry! He couldn't accept it, couldn't understand why such a thing had to happen to him, to his dear Ventus, the sweetest and kindest person he'd ever known. He didn't deserve that. He was too young for that. But the exams and the doctor they'd left behind said otherwise.

"Shh..." He pulled Ventus into his arms.

"I-I'm scared, Vani. I'm so scared...!"

Tears gathered in Vanitas' eyes. He was too. He was very, very scared.

"I am here with you, I'll always be here. We will make it through this, together, okay?"

Ventus didn't answer, too shaken to speak. He didn't believe that. And Vanitas knew he didn't.

He felt nervous.

That night, he woke up to his husband's sobs next to him. He felt like crying too, just like he had done earlier while hidden in the bathroom, but he couldn't. Not now. Not in front of him.

"Honey..."

"What's going to happen now?" Ventus curled up, his back turned to Vanitas, and clung to his pillow. "What's going to happen now?!"

"Ven..."

"I don't want to forget! I don't want to forget anything or anyone, w-why is this happening to me?!"

His crying got louder and he covered his face with both of his hands, ashamed. Vanitas reached for him and gently, carefully pulled him into his arms.

"Ven, you won't..." *You won't forget*, he meant to say, but that would be a lie. He knew, deep in his soul, he would be lying.

“You’ll undergo treatment and... And everything will work out alright.”

“What if it doesn’t?!” Ventus asked again, burying his face against his chest, his fingers closed around the fabric of Vanitas' shirt. “What if it doesn’t, what if I forget everything, what if-”

“Sweetheart...”

He felt lost.

Ventus didn’t want anyone to know at first. He didn’t want his parents or his brother to worry, and Vanitas had agreed upon not telling them.

It was easy at first. They had managed the treatment well and Ventus’ response to it had been fairly positive - Or so he liked to believe. But time went by and what was easy soon became harder and harder as Ventus’ mind deteriorated.

It all started with simple things like dates or belongings he couldn't remember where he'd put. Now, just a few months later and he started to forget where certain rooms were in their house or important things like their address and even the names of people he talked to on a daily basis. Despite everything they were doing, there was no sign of him getting better, only worse.

Other people needed to know, Vanitas decided. But as soon as he told them so began the fights,

the endless calls from familiars and friends, the criticism from Ventus’ family who seemed to blame Vanitas for what was happening to him. His routine had turned upside down. He couldn’t focus on his job. He couldn't take care of himself.

He felt tired.

Even at home with Ventus right by his side, Vanitas couldn’t relax and it only got worse when he was out for work. He knew that it was only a matter of time until Ventus wasn't able to handle himself on his own; what if that time was now? What if he was at home, lost and afraid and calling for him? He'd already spoken to his manager, asked for earlier vacations so he could be with him 24/7, but even then he knew that was impossible. And that scared him.

“Van...” Sora called one day when visiting them. Vanitas was doing the dishes when he approached. Ventus had already gone to bed.

“Brother...”

“I’m okay, Sora. I mean it, I’m just tired.”

“You have dark circles under your eyes. And... You barely ate during dinner too.”

Vanitas didn’t answer this time. He picked the next plate and started washing it.

“Brother, you know you don’t have to lie to



me, right?" Sora put a hand on his shoulder. "I know it's been hard for you. There's no shame in asking for help."

He swallowed dry. Yes, it had been very hard. But that was Ventus he was talking about. His husband! In sickness and in health! He could and would take care of him, he *wanted* to!

"We are fine, Sora. Ventus is getting treatment and... And we're doing exercises every day to help with his memory-."

"You said the same thing three months ago, Van."

Vanitas looked at him. Had it been that long already? He ran his hands through his hair, sighing. His eyes were burning.

"We're doing fine-"

"Brother... You took enough care of me already. Let me help you this time."

*What are you going to do when it becomes too much?*

Vanitas looked down for a moment and told himself to calm down.

"He... He's getting worse. And... In such little time..."

But this time he couldn't and his voice broke midsentence.

"Sometimes... Sometimes he can't tell where he is... Even at home, sometimes he can't even find some rooms. Yesterday he woke up and just... Did nothing, just stood there. A-and when he looked at me, he looked so lost. It was for just a moment, but I..."

Tears started to fall down. He covered his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I-I don't think he recognized me...!"

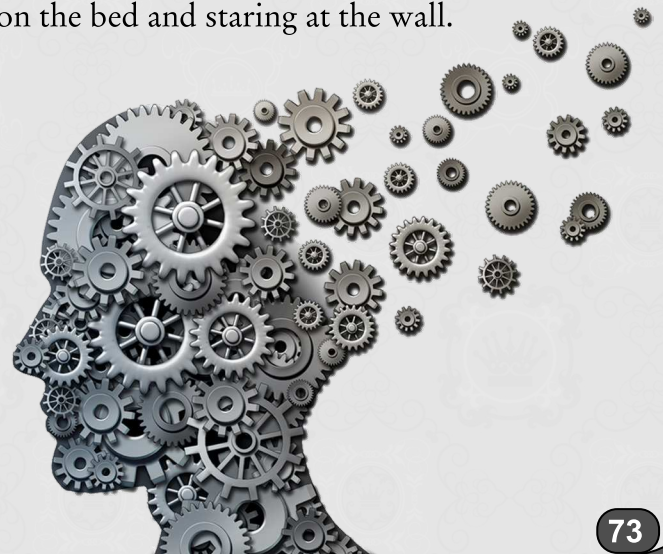
"Oh, brother..."

Sora closed his eyes for a moment. He hugged his big brother tight and Vanitas held on to him. Shaking and crying and sobbing like a part of him had just been torn from him. Like his heart had just broken into a million pieces.

*He felt guilty.*

Guilty for losing his temper after saying he wouldn't. Guilty for screaming at Ventus like he did. Vanitas knew he just wanted to help, but he kept making the same questions and losing his focus over what they were doing! Ven was happy for being there, happy for being useful! And even then, he had lost control and screamed at him.

"Ventus..." He called softly just a few minutes later when he went to their bedroom and found the person he loved the most there, now sitting on the bed and staring at the wall.



“I want to be admitted.”

“... Ventus, what are you talking about?”

“They... They will take care of me there. It’s part of their job.”

“But-”

“Part of their routine, you know? To... Care for people like me. And... And after their shift, they can just go home and rest and live their lives. They can rest and... And enjoy life. They can be happy.”

“I can take care of you from here-”

“I don’t want to be a  
burden anymore,  
Vanitas!”

Ventus looked up at him. His eyes, once full of life, bright blue eyes, were now fragile and weak. Hurt and desperate.

“I don’t want to put you through this anymore! You’re brilliant, Vanitas! You have a whole life ahead of you, and I don’t want you to spend it caring for-”

“Ventus, please...”

“-an ill useless person like me!”

Vanitas rushed to him, taking both of his hands in his own.

“Sweetheart, please, don’t say that...”

“I’ve never seen you so tired before, V-Van... And I know, I can tell you’ve had enough...!”

“No, no, I... Ventus, I... I was stressed, the day was... I-I didn’t mean to talk to you like that, I’m sorry...”

“All I’ve done lately is bother you! I just... I want you to be happy, love-”

“I am! I am happy, honey, as long as I’m with you!”

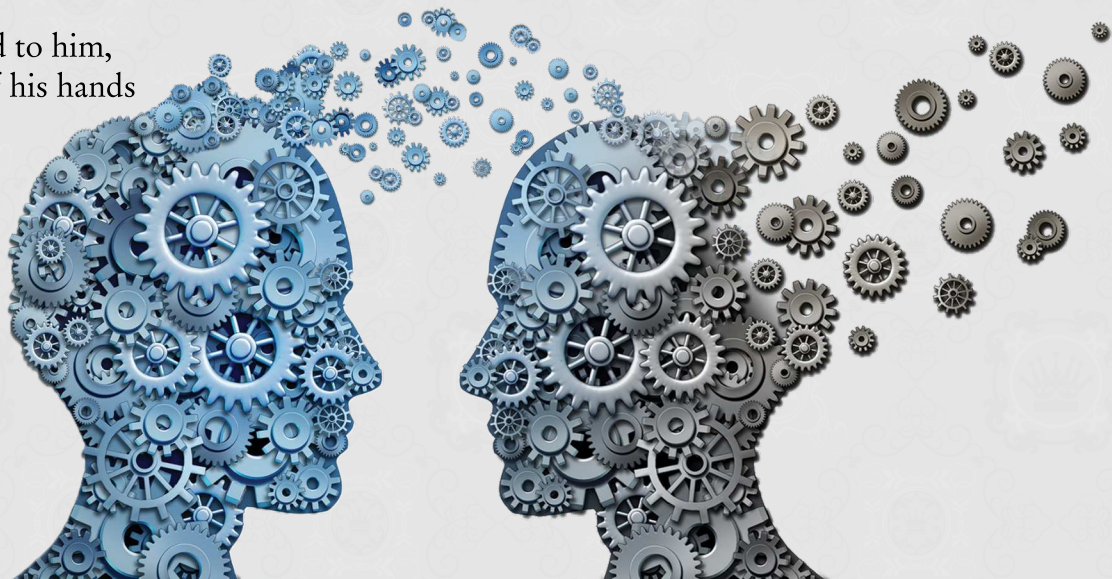
He pulled him into an embrace and felt a lump in his throat when Ventus clung to him.

“Oh, Ven, I’m so sorry...!”

He felt fragile.

But laying on that bed, the same one they had shared for years, the pain and fear felt at least bearable. Ventus seemed to agree for, whenever they lay down and Vanitas read to him like this, he’d put his arms around him and smile to himself.

Vanitas loved that smile. He still remembered the first time he saw it and the first time he was responsible for it. It made him feel warm and happy. Calm and peaceful. Ventus always did that to him.



He stopped reading for a moment and Ventus looked up at him, curious. Vanitas put the book aside, gently stroked his husband's cheek and kissed his lips.

"You're so beautiful." He whispered and Ventus' eyes shined, filled with all the life and love he had to give, looking at Vanitas like he was the most precious person in the world.

"You are too! The most beautiful!"

Vanitas giggled. When it was just the two of them in their own world like this, he could forget. The disease, the treatment, the hard days, everything. Because despite everything, that was still his Ventus. He leaned closer to his beloved and gave him an eskimo kiss, Ventus' happy laugh filling his heart with hope. Yes, he had hope. But...

He felt scared.

The days felt longer. It was harder to have a conversation that could flow like before or even one that made sense. Most of the time, that man who once could barely stay still now would just sit on the couch or bed and stare at nothing. There were times when he would try to say something, but he couldn't express himself as well as before which only made him feel angrier and more frustrated.

Vanitas couldn't take it, that lost and sad look in Ventus' eyes. It hurt to see him like that, to know that he'd get worse with each day,

that there was no getting better from here!

He felt...

He breathed in. They were sitting on the couch, just letting time slowly go by, when Vanitas looked at the radio behind him across the living room and stood up.

"What is it?" Ventus asked.

"Nothing. I just... Remembered something. Hold on."

He went to their bedroom, opening the wardrobe with a sudden wave of excitement, searching for their old CD case. It had been a long time since they even used the radio but it should be working. He let out a sigh of relief when he found it and walked back to the living room, taking the CD he wanted and putting it on.

A warm feeling washed all over him once the music he was waiting for started to play. He walked back to Ventus, who was still sitting on the couch and looking at him.

"Do you know this song?"

Ventus looked down for a moment. He felt it was really important to him and also to Vanitas but couldn't tell where it was from. He shook his head, disappointed, but Vanitas simply approached him and held him by his hands.

*Dance with me?*  
**"Dance with me?"**  
*Dance with me?*

*Dance with me?*

Ventus hesitated at first but eventually agreed and smiled at Vanitas, who knew better than anyone just how much Ven loved to dance and also how good he was at it. He put his hands on Vanitas' waist, who held him close to himself as they swayed from one side to the other with gentleness and care. Slow, so Ventus could keep up.

"It was one of your favorites. It played at our wedding. You chose it yourself. And..." He lay his head against his husband's shoulder, taken over by too many emotions, feelings from a lifetime spent together that made him tear up. "And we danced to it..."

"Like we're doing now?" Ventus asked. His voice overflowed with innocence but there was also something more. A trace of memory, maybe no longer in his mind but forever in his heart.

"Yeah... Just like this..."

*What are you going to do when it becomes too much?*

Vanitas looked down at his sweetheart through his tears. He looked so peaceful. So content and happy as they danced together.

*When he can't tell where's home or when he no longer has the memories you made together?  
What are you going to do-*

Vanitas closed his eyes.

*-when he forgets who you are?*

"Babe?"

Vanitas looked down at him again, caught off guard. It has been so, so long since Ventus called him that. It had been so long since he looked at him the way he did now.

*Well... When that happens...*

"I love dancing with you."

*I will still be there for him.*

Ventus gently cupped his cheeks and Vanitas leaned into his hands, his tears now flowing endlessly. He didn't try to stop them.

*And I'll help him eat. I'll help him bathe. I'll take him on walks and I'll cook his favorite meals. And I'll cherish him every day of my life.*

Ventus stood on his tiptoes to kiss his forehead before drying his tears with his thumb. Vanitas, finally laughing with joy after so long, softly held Ventus' face with both hands.

*And no matter what happens, even if everything he knows becomes strange to him, I will be there. I will always be there for him, always. Because even if he forgets who I am-*

"I love dancing with you too, Ventus."

*-I didn't forget who he is.*

Ventus smiled again but, this time, Vanitas felt something different. Even though there was still confusion in the beautiful, shining eyes that stared at him, he could tell Ventus was trying to tell him something. As he leaned closer to him, moving to the slow rhythm of the music, Ventus still made him feel complete like he'd always done. Even though silent, Ventus still made him feel warm and safe, cherished and loved.

And Vanitas...

V a n i t a s   w o u l d  
n e v e r   f o r g e t .



Reikacchan



Rhys





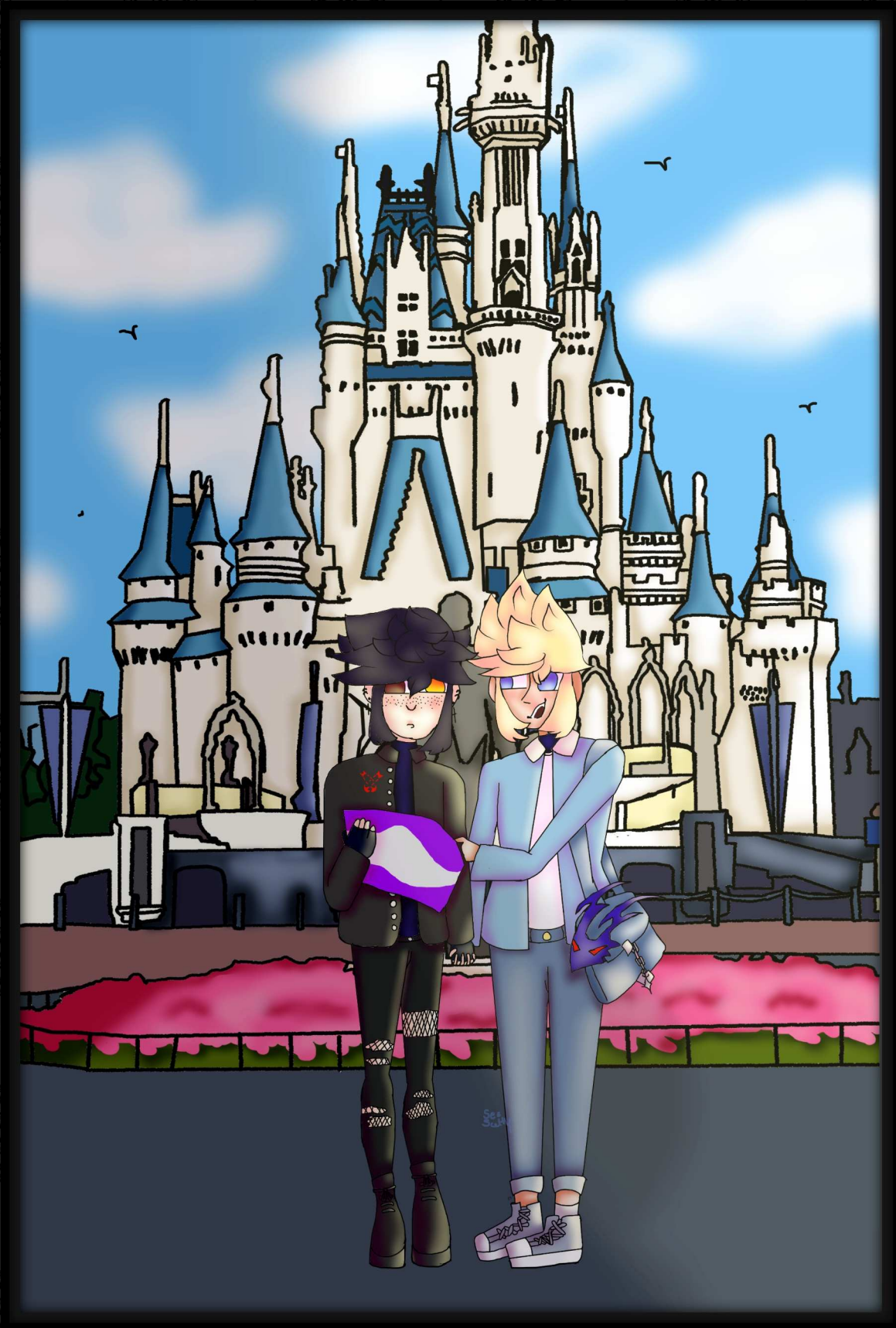
▷ Continue?

Sara Moon



Saturn

# Saturn Grimm



SeaSalty

# Split Down the Middle

by

Talys Alankil

Aqua might have promised Ven that they would be able to go back home once the Keyblade War was over, but he and Terra had other plans. They'd seen so much since leaving the Land of Departure; there was no way they could just go back there and stay without having another journey— together, this time.

They reconnected with many friends they'd made before, some of them much older than they had once been, but all happy to see the three of them together at last.

It was exactly what they needed—or so Ventus thought. But then they reached Olympus, and Hercules invited them to the theater for the evening. As the play unfolded, Ven could feel Aqua and Terra's gaze on him.

That night, they knew to say goodbye to him.

"I have to do this," Ventus told them.

"I can't pretend we're  
whole until then.

But I promise I'll come back." Summoning his armor, he opened a portal to the Lanes Between. "Come on, Chirithy."

Following his heart was something Ven had some experience with—even more so after spending so long buried within Sora's heart. Still, it took some searching before they made a breakthrough, in a gloomy back alley of the now-empty Traverse Town.

"What's that?" Chirithy asked, voice full of wonder.

When Ven turned around, he summoned his Keyblade by reflex. His Chirithy was holding a familiar, blue creature.

"Watch out!"

He almost struck down the Flood, until he noticed that it wasn't attacking. It jittered in Chirithy's arms, but seemed more at ease than Ven had ever seen such a creature before. Curious, Ven knelt in front of Chirithy, examining the Unversed.

"You're—different."

"Can we keep it?" Chirithy asked, holding up the Flood as if to hand it over to Ven.

"Uh—pretty sure they're not pets, Chirithy," Ventus replied, nervous. He pushed himself to his feet. "Still, this is good news. If there are Unversed here—"

"Aw, if you were looking for me, all you had to do was call out for me." The voice came from behind Ven, dripping with sarcasm and painfully familiar.

"Vanitas!" Ven whirled around, his voice sounding more forceful than he'd intended. He forced himself to relax, dismissing his Keyblade and adopting what he hoped was a friendlier pose. "I wanted to find you."

"And so you came to the world where

all those who were stranded by Darkness came before.

## Trying to become a poet, Ventus?"

Ven couldn't hold back a chuckle at the remark, even though it was as acerbic as Vanitas had ever been. "You haven't changed a bit."

"Why are you here," Vanitas said, and it didn't feel like a question, nor a threat; his tone was a flat, resigned drone—tired, even.

"Why don't you take off the helmet, so we can talk? I don't even know why you're still weari—"

"If you want to fight—"

Ven refused to let himself get cut off—or provoked. "I really just want to talk."

Vanitas scoffed audibly, but after a still moment, his helmet disappeared in a shimmer of molten light. "There. Happy now?"

"I should ask *you* that question," Ven pointed out. *What I am is darkness*, he'd said, and it had taken Ventus some time to piece out what he meant. "I heard a story that made me think of you."

As if against himself, Vanitas raised an eyebrow. "Oh?" Ven didn't remember ever seeing him be curious before. It was a good look on him.

"It's this legend, in Thebes. You've been there, right? I fought Unversed there, back in the day."

"By all means, remind me of all the Unversed you destroyed. You do so have a way to lighten my mood."

"I—" Ven bit his lip, sensing in Vanitas's tone that he'd said something wrong, but he doubted asking what it was would be the right course of action—not now, anyway. Perhaps later, if all went well. "Sorry." He cleared his throat, nervous. "Anyway, they say

that people used to be different from how they are now—that they had two heads, two pairs of arms and legs, and they lived in perpetual happiness. But Zeus, the king of Olympus, got so scared of their potential, of the power they could have, that he split them in two, down the middle." He paused, catching the look of understanding in Vanitas's features, but Vanitas remained silent. "So now people are as we know them—one head, two arms, two legs.

And ever since, all people live their lives trying to find that lost part of them. Trying to reclaim that happiness."

He'd hoped that by now, Vanitas would have said something, but Vanitas remained painfully silent, crossing his arms. Still, at least he hadn't left or derided Ventus yet. It was a start. Out the corner of his eye, Ven noticed Chirithy staring between the two of them. The Flood had started sauntering around Chirithy curiously, and the Dream Eater carefully reached out to pet it.

Distracted, Ven didn't notice when Vanitas moved. One moment he was a few paces away, the next he was standing right in front of Ven. Even knowing what his powers made him capable of, the move still took Ven by surprise, and he recoiled, startled. He almost tripped and fell, but Vanitas grabbed hold of his upper arm and held him steady.

"You came to tell me a fable? Tell me you don't believe this nonsense."

Seeing Vanitas from up close like this, without any weapons between them, it was hard to remember to breathe. "It's not about believing in it," Ven finally managed to say.

"But doesn't it remind you of—us?"

"Last I recall, Xehanort was anything *but* afraid of our power." His words remained mocking, but his tone had lost its edge. He was toying with Ven—challenging him, even.

"I was thinking more of the end of that story. Of—trying to find that lost part." Ven mustered all the strength he could, and added, "You *do* realize that the story is a metaphor for love, right? People really *are* looking for someone else to make them feel whole. And—" He paused, suddenly short on breath. His heartbeat felt fast enough to burst through his chest. "And so have we."

"I remember you found friends to make you whole again, Ventus."

"I did." He couldn't deny that. "But the whole time, I could feel an ache at the same time. When I found out who you were, I thought it was just the pain of missing you, but—there's more to it than that, right? I was feeling *your* pain at being replaced, too."

Vanitas narrowed his eyes, and his grip loosened on Ven's arm. Before he could pull away, Ventus put his other hand on Vanitas's, keeping it still.

"But you weren't being replaced. I was still missing you, even if I didn't know it. Just look at us, Vanitas. Your whole life, you've been chasing me. And the moment I found out who you were, I've been chasing *you*, too."

At that, Vanitas looked away. "Don't say that." His voice broke as he said, "Why would you *say* that?"

It took a moment for Ven to follow his gaze, and see that it had landed on Chirithy and the Flood. A smile tugged at Ven's lips as he looked back to Vanitas. "It's made of your emotions, right? And Chirithy is a manifestation of my dreams.

They know how we  
really feel, even  
if we don't."

His smile grew wider, out of control. "Or at least, even if we won't *say* it."

"Stop it," Vanitas growled. Despite his words, he drew closer to Ventus, his other hand finding Ven's hip and clinging to it hard.

"Maybe I should take you to Thebes," Ven teased. "I also met a woman who told me all about how she wouldn't say she's in love."

"Will you *shut up*?"

"To quote our last meeting: *make me*."

Ven leaned in even before Vanitas was pulling him closer, anticipating his movement as if they were one mind. Vanitas kissed him hard, hungrily, desperately, greedily. It was a kiss long awaited, long refused to oneself, a kiss that felt like it might never end, a kiss that felt like it would be the last.

Ven refused to let it be the last. When Vanitas broke the kiss, desperate for air, Ven reached into his hair, keeping him close. "Stay," he said.

*I told you I'd bring you home*  
*I told you I'd bring you home*  
*I told you I'd bring you home*  
*I told you I'd bring you home*  
**I told you I'd bring you home.**

"I told you I'd bring you home. All you have to do is agree to come with me." He sounded like he was pleading, and it should have felt embarrassing, but it was how he really felt. And if any occasion demanded honesty, this was it.

To his surprise, Vanitas didn't try to

pull away. Instead, he pressed their foreheads together. "I told you. I don't want to disappear into you."

"I didn't say anything about that. I rebuilt the darkness in my heart that you took with you. I can help you build the light you were always missing."

*I didn't say anything about that.  
I rebuilt the darkness in my  
heart that you took with you.  
I can help you build the  
light you were  
always missing.*

"And I also told you. I am darkness."

"Yes. I get that now. You are defined by your pain, your hurt, your trauma. And mine—the one you took with you when you left. And that *is* okay. But it doesn't have to be all you are."

Slowly, hesitantly, he inched backwards and cupped Vanitas's face with his free hand. He pressed his lips to Vanitas's, and to his relief, Vanitas returned the kiss, until they were moving as one again. They

would never be one person again, one heart, but Ventus didn't want to go back to that.

"Just come home with me," Ven said, breathless.

Vanitas's golden gaze held on him for a moment, staring at him as though he was a gaping precipice and Vanitas was teetering on the edge. Then, with a deep breath, he said:

"I'd like to try that."



Shuuta





Ujotr

# Completely

by Juliet Alayne

The flood had clearly returned from visiting Ventus, flashing to Vanitas, wildly rushing around him, as if he'd been given tacit permission to shower him with the overt affection it had been holding in reserve, nearly smothering him as it rubbed against his face. Vanitas wanted to be angry, but his mind instantly flashed to a time when Ventus had, in an unusually bold display of bravery, snapped at Vanitas when he'd pushed away the flood, "If you won't let anyone else close to you then at least let them convey how they feel more clearly."

"They don't have *feelings*," he'd snapped.

"You don't really believe that, but for arguments sake I'm just gonna let you imagine that I accept your version of reality—but, you should know—I share my emotions with the floods because I want them to feel what I feel too, so that they can then share my feelings to you..."

The memory was soft in Vanitas' mind, of a defiant Ventus informing him that he would continue to share his heart with the floods until 'you get your thick, stubborn head out of the notion that love is a weakness', the words warm and tender as they wove through his memories—not unlike the flood who was still almost manically trying to get his attention.

Vanitas couldn't help but smile because it *was* cute even if he absolutely loathed it at the same time—two diametrically opposed emotions constantly at war within himself over this situation that Ventus was directly responsible for.

*He drives me insane.*

His mind's eye flashed to Ventus sitting *right there* in the graveyard with *this* particular flood, his defense being some strange power and connection he felt with the creature, but all Vanitas knew was that a corrupted flood was a *useless* flood as far as he was concerned. His thoughts began to swirl with discussions he'd

had with Ventus about the matter—or it would probably be more apt to say strongly worded warnings...laced with ample threats of bodily harm...and torture...possibly death.

"Don't be nice to them, they are not meant to be treated kindly, not meant to be handled that way."

"Like you?"

"Like me *what*?"

"Not meant to be treated kindly? ... handled that way?"

"Just shut up! You don't know anything!"

"Oh, simmer down, you don't really care enough about me saying it to get so worked up."

*And damn, if he wasn't completely right.* It was becoming more and more difficult to build up his false sense of outrage toward Ventus, and that caused him to take pause, because he really considered it was probably the only weakness within himself.

Still, he could get lost in the colorful images that somehow made it feel like all of the darkness and hardships faded into stories of someone else, of a different time and place, as the overwhelming feelings of comfort and acceptance, and dare he even entertain such an exquisite ideology?

*Love?*

He froze when something shiny caught his eye, wrestling with the flood until he could wrench the item from around his neck, shoving the flood away, growling, aggravated, irritated, feeling too much, hissing, "Go away!"

His eyes narrowed in warning, but the flood had absolutely no idea what he was on about, skittering away to leisurely bat about a small pebble like a house cat, causing Vanitas to snap in frustration, "I swear, he's ruined you."

*Completely.*

When his attention returned to the item he'd retrieved from the flood's neck his mouth went dry, his form becoming as if stone, eyes dilated and affixed to the shape dangling from the long red ribbon, swirling in the air to cast a colorful display against his black armor as he held it suspended in the air.

*It..it can't be...*

*A w a y f i n d e r .*





Wendi



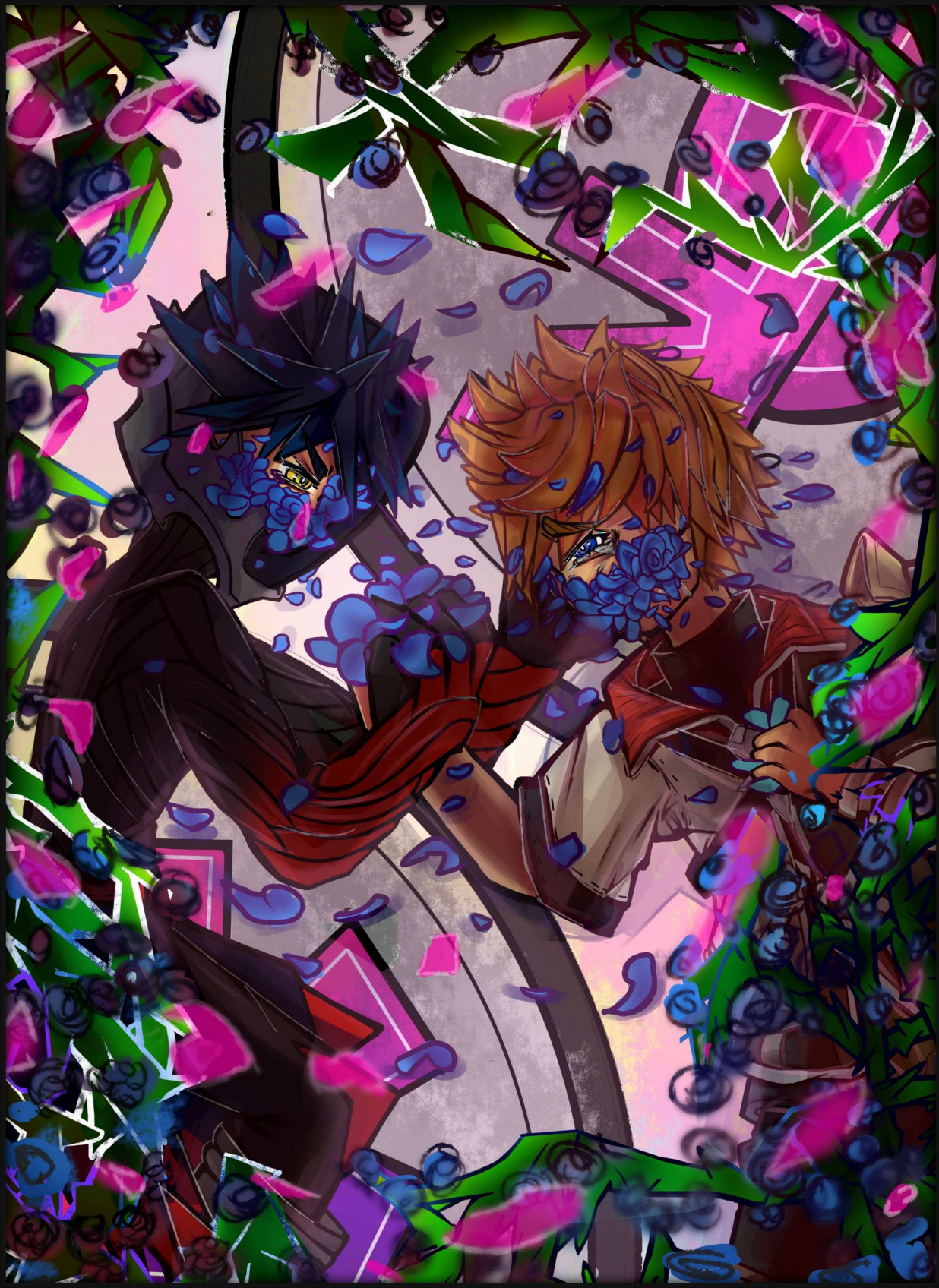
Victoria



Witchyehuu



Xarinesca



♂ Zaubzer

# Everlasting Arms

by

Waywardriot

It's a beautiful Monday morning, bright and sunny, when Ventus's world gets flipped on its axis—along with himself, as he suddenly finds himself sprawled on the ground with his book bag spilling out at his side. It's a terrible way to start the day, but what Monday doesn't?

Squinting from the always-too-bright sun, he looks up to find someone with beautifully distinctive eyes staring at him, and an apology is on his lips when the stranger interrupts him.

"Watch where you're going, idiot."

Well, any apology Ventus was about to make dissipates with the realization that this stranger isn't worth his reflexive politeness. Really, this wasn't entirely Ventus's fault, so he decides he'll die on this hill if he must.

"You weren't watching either, asshole,"

he retorts, angrily gathering up the things he dropped and shoving them back into his bag haphazardly.

With all his focus on his belongings, he doesn't see the stranger touch his sternum like he's been injured, and it's only once Ventus has put his last textbook back that he realizes—he said *it*, the white words written vertically down his back and between his shoulder blades.

Finally, the sentence that denotes his soulmate, for *real*.

In an instant, he changes his mind and decides that this is the absolute best way to start his day, actually.

"Wait!" He stumbles up onto his feet and nearly falls over as he lunges forward to grab one of the stranger's wrists before he can walk away. "Wait."

"What," the stranger replies, flat and testy. He spares a condescending look back, one that makes Ventus want to snap at him once again, but he suppresses the urge if only because this is one of the most important moments of his life.

Butterflies sit in his stomach as he takes a deep breath to hype himself up for this: an opportunity he absolutely can't lose. "I, uh... well, um, you see—" he starts to stutter out. Once again, he's interrupted. "Spit it out. I have places to be."

Rude. Just Ventus's luck. "Um, well, you... actually said what's on my tattoo... so... thatastomeanwe're soulmates," he gets out in an incomprehensible rush of words, feeling embarrassed and nervous.

"You didn't say what's on my tattoo," the stranger replies without missing a beat.

Nothing has ever made Ventus's heart plummet into his stomach as fast as that did, and a wave of nausea hits him. Of *course*, he's one of the unlucky ones who doesn't get their soulmate right on the first try. Once again, Mondays are the most terrible things in the world, and he sighs.

There's no reason to continue to interact with this person who he's now made things very awkward with, and he can tell that the last thing he wants is to speak to Ventus. Well, better luck, try again next time...

But because he's objectively an idiot,



Ventus can't help but stupidly ask, "What's your name?"

Tugging his wrist away from Ventus, the stranger rolls his eyes. "I'm not your soulmate, kid. Get lost."

"N-no, I know that!" he insists, waving his hands in front of him, "I just—"

*'I feel like we have a connection... even though we're not soulmates.'*

That's the honest truth, but Ventus is absolutely sure that saying some cheesy stuff like that would result in him losing this person forever. "I, uh, my class starts in 45 minutes and I always get coffee in the student union first, sooo..." he says purely on impulse, mentally slapping himself afterwards.

The stranger glances back at him and gives a look so blank that it's like he's a robot, and Ventus is already debating on the merits of self-flagellation when he finally replies after a long pause. "...I was going to get coffee anyways, so..." He sighs through his teeth and runs a hand down his face. "I *guess* you can tag along."

\*\*\*

Sitting in the coffee shop, Ventus with a frappuccino and the stranger with a—frankly disgusting—black coffee, he finds out his name is Vanitas and he's also a sophomore. From the initially awkward conversation they start, Ventus realizes that they're polar opposites in pretty much every sense. '*Opposites attract*,' his brain reminds him, and he tells it to shut up.

The odd thing is, it feels so... natural to talk to Vanitas right from the start. Sure, he's ornery and obviously trying as hard as possible to annoy Ventus until he leaves, but Ventus persists. Quickly lost in discussion, they sit in the coffee shop so long that he only realizes the time once his class has been in session for 40 minutes.

At this point, it doesn't make sense to not skip—so Ventus does, despite his almost

perfect attendance record, in favor of avidly debating with Vanitas about whether or not the school's famed albino squirrel actually exists and isn't just a cash grab for selling paraphernalia (it *does* exist and Ventus *has* seen it, for the record).

When they finally part, Vanitas's number now in Ventus's phone, Ventus walks on air back to his dorm and completely forgets his second class of the day.

\*\*\*

Weeks and weeks pass by where Ventus does his best to worm his way into Vanitas's life, no matter how hard Vanitas tries to stop him—weeks full of 3AM texts and giggling into his pillow and ignoring fate.

Eventually Vanitas acknowledges one of many their outings as a date out loud, and Ventus is so ecstatic that no words in the world could change his mind.

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The first time they kiss, Ventus initially stops Vanitas by holding a finger up to Vanitas's mouth while he worries at his own lip. "Are you really okay with this? I mean, we're not soulmates..."

It almost looks like Vanitas winces for a moment, but he recovers in a split second. "Why would I care about that?" he asks, moving Ventus's hand and lacing their fingers together.

"I don't know..." Ventus murmurs, eyes fixed on their linked hands. "It's just—I'm taking away your first kiss. It doesn't feel fair."

"Again, why would I care?" Vanitas says dryly as he rolls his eyes. "It's just a kiss. Besides, I want it to be with you."

Ventus's heart flutters in his chest, anxious and enamored and hopeful.

"Really?"

“Duh. But the question is, do you want it to be with me?” Idly touching his chest, Vanitas hesitates. “Since you’re the one who actually cares about the soulmate stuff.”

“Of course I want it.” Ventus has thought long and hard about this, but the conclusion was very simple to come to—he likes Vanitas a lot more than anyone he’s ever met in his life, and sometimes he wonders if he’ll like his soulmate this much. Can fate be wrong? “I’ve been waiting for you to kiss me for months, you know,” he chuckles.

Scoffing, Vanitas rolls his eyes and waves a hand. “Are you going to interrupt me if I try to kiss you again?”

The annoyingly smug smile is wiped off his face when Ventus leans in and kisses him first, twisting his hand in the front of his shirt to pull him in.

“Nope!” he chirps.

Vanitas looks so incredibly stunned that Ventus can’t help but laugh loudly, covering his mouth with his hand to stifle his snorts. “I would’ve kissed you way sooner if I knew you’d react like this,” he gleefully teases while he moves closer. “It’s so cute.”

“I’m *not*—” Vanitas viciously starts to retort, but Ventus kisses him again before he can finish his sentence.

He doesn’t pull away afterwards, and neither does Vanitas, not until they’re both late to class again and far too kiss-stupid to even consider going.

\* \* \*

So much more time full of ignorant bliss passes as Ventus falls in love with Vanitas, hard and fast and a little terrifyingly.

Vanitas lags behind, emotional

baggage weighing him down, but Ventus never cares. Of course, he hopes for it above all else, but he allows Vanitas all the time he needs.

One day, Vanitas abruptly sits up from where he’s been draped over Ventus’s lap as they rest in Ventus’s dorm room. “I... have something to tell you,” he mumbles, drawing his fingers down his sternum.

A flicker of concern passes over Ventus, and he hopes, like he’s started to do more and more lately, that it’s not what he fears—Vanitas ending their relationship because they’re not soulmates. Sure, Vanitas talks about how he doesn’t care about the concept, but Ventus isn’t sure Vanitas can avoid the pull of fate forever; surely he won’t be able to, either. “What is it?” he asks, sitting up a little straighter. “Are—are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Vanitas says, the words coming out in a rush, so obviously anxious. “I just—uh, well...”

“Take your time,” Ventus replies graciously. Taking one of Vanitas’s hands in his own, he fidgets with it and draws his fingers along the creases of his palm as he distantly wonders what his love line says.

Turns out, it’s exactly what he’s wanted it to say.

Vanitas drags his free hand down his face and then roughly scrubs it through his hair. Honestly, he looks a little constipated, but Ventus says nothing; this is obviously difficult for Vanitas to confess, so he doesn’t want to make it harder.

“Iloveyou,” Vanitas blurts out suddenly, which is decidedly *not* what Ventus expected to hear.

“Huh?” is all Ventus says dumbly at first, his jaw hanging a little slack. “You... you *what*?”

Vanitas buries his face in both of his hands and looks like a wilting flower, and

Ventus can almost feel the embarrassment coming off of him in waves. Actually, it'd be a lot funnier if his brain hadn't spontaneously ground to a halt. "I love you," Vanitas repeats, cringing so hard that it's like he's a turtle receding into his shell.

Ventus is awe-struck; that's the only way to describe it. He gapes at Vanitas for a moment as he tries to process this, and he eventually settles for just straight-up throwing himself at Vanitas, who makes an embarrassingly endearing squawk. "I—love—you—so—much!" Ventus proclaims as he meticulously covers Vanitas's face with kisses, each word punctuated by one.

"Ugh, stop it!" Vanitas complains, trying to push Ventus's face away from his. "I get it, okay! You love me!"

Ventus laughs, delighted, and manages to plant one more kiss on Vanitas's nose. "I know you know, Van. I just want to say it because I can."

Vanitas sighs and shakes his head, laying down and placing his head in Ventus's lap again. "You're sappy."

"Yeah, but you still love me," Ventus replies proudly. Just saying those words makes him feel like he's being drowned in a wave of affection; he's had an inkling for a while now that Vanitas is also in love with him, but having it confirmed increases his feelings tenfold. A hundredfold. A thousandfold, millionfold, billionfold—whatever.

"I do," Vanitas agrees without hesitation.

In response, Ventus can't help but resume his onslaught of kisses despite the renewed protests, which are muffled away soon enough.

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More months pass by, months where Ventus ignores the words between his shoulder blades that burn at night and tell him that this can't end well.

When Vanitas smiles at him, it almost feels like Ventus's fate doesn't exist. When

there's nothing but them and the lack of space between them, the neat script doesn't matter.

...Until it eventually does.

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"Do you ever worry about this?" Ventus asks out of the blue one day, curled into Vanitas's side as he watches him play a game on his phone.

Vanitas doesn't look to him, eyes still focused on his screen. "Worry about what?"

Nervous, Ventus purses his lips and sits up straight. "This. Us," he continues, gesturing between the two of them. "Like, I know this whole entire thing is going against fate—and I love being with you, I really do... but what if one or both of us finds our soulmate soon? Do we just abandon this? Pretend it never happened?" Wringing his hands in his lap, he squeezes his eyes shut tight and shakes his head like he can chase these fears away. "I'm scared. I don't want to lose you. Ever. Even if that's not how it's supposed to be."

Vanitas rolls over onto his back and draws his fingers down his sternum as he stares at the ceiling, an obvious attempt to steadfastly avoid Ventus's eyes. "It's..." he starts, and then he stops, looking as if he's deliberating hard on something. "I haven't been truthful to you."

Ventus suddenly has the horrifying thought that this conversation might be the catalyst for Vanitas breaking up with him. What if this is how everything ends, how Vanitas tries to let him down easily?

“Wh-what?” he frantically asks, looking down at Vanitas. “What are you talking about? I—”

“Calm down.” Vanitas gives him a look as he sits up as well, and Ventus could almost swear he heard a tremor in his voice. He takes a deep breath that makes it look like he’s gearing up to say something, and Ventus flinches in on himself, before Vanitas does the unexpected.

In a careful motion, he pulls his shirt over his head and gingerly sets it down at his side. For a split second, he presses his hand to the center of his bare chest, then he lays it down again. “Look.”

Ventus would ask what he’s supposed to be looking at, but it’s obvious immediately. Now, he’d never questioned why Vanitas hadn’t taken off his shirt during their time together, but *this* must be why. A line of silvery writing, neat and orderly, goes right down the center of his chest, almost like a zipper. Ventus desperately wants to feel around for the pull and start to tug it down, to feel each tooth slip free until Vanitas’s heart is exposed to him... but maybe that’s what this moment is supposed to be.

Ventus’s eyes dart up to Vanitas’s for a moment to check if this is *really* okay because there must be a huge reason why Vanitas hasn’t shown him his soulmate tattoo just yet.

All Vanitas does is purse his lips and avert his eyes, and Ventus takes that as the only clear indication he’s going to get. A little scared himself, he tilts his head sideways until he can decipher the vertical script and leans in closer, running his fingers along the words as he reads.

*‘You weren’t watching either, asshole.’*

It takes a split second for Ventus to puzzle over this before he remembers their very first interaction all that time ago. Gasping loudly, he sits up like he’s been struck by lightning, grabs the pillow behind him, and solidly whacks Vanitas with it. “Are you serious?!” he demands. Vanitas pulls the pillow off of him and tries to say something, but before he can, Ventus grabs the other pillow and whacks him with it as well, putting more force into this hit. “You told me I didn’t say it! You suck!”

Vanitas’s mouth may be full of feathers, but he still laughs gleefully at Ventus. Once he’s thrown both the pillows far out of Ventus’s reach, he combs his hair out of his face with his fingers and gives him a *look*. “You know I didn’t want a soulmate. I didn’t intend to get so... attached.”

“Asshole. You had me so *worried*,” Ventus huffs, crossing his arms. “Such an asshole that it’s literally permanently on your body.”

He’s about to start majorly pouting when he processes what exactly this really means, and a painfully large smile splits across his face. “Soulmates, huh?”

Vanitas shifts his gaze to the side, an obvious sign that he’s too embarrassed to even look Ventus in the eye, and quietly says, “I would’ve chosen you even if we weren’t soulmates, anyways.”

A beaming smile spreads on Ventus's face in response to those words, and he immediately grabs Vanitas's face with both hands and plants a kiss on his lips. "Me too. Even though you're giving me grey hair," he hums, pecking a small kiss on his nose just to tease.

"You're never going to let this go, are you?" Vanitas groans. The face he makes is so cute that Ventus can't resist kissing him again, of course.

"Yup!" Ventus chirps happily, running a finger down the words on Vanitas's chest. "Your fault for not telling me."

Vanitas has the wherewithal to look a little guilty about all this, but before he can apologize, Ventus interrupts him—payback for all the times Vanitas has done the same to him. "I love you so much," he sighs happily, nuzzling up to Vanitas. He presses their cheeks together and just breathes Vanitas in, so grateful to have this.

"I do. I really, really do, Van."

When Vanitas speaks, his voice is uncharacteristically soft, almost as much as Ventus's.

"I love you, too, Ven."

Careful as can be, Vanitas laces their fingers together, and Ventus stares at their hands, mystified. Every single time they've done this, he's marveled over how well they slot together, but it's become even more obvious with this realization. The empty spaces between Vanitas's fingers perfectly accommodate him, and his chest swells with even more warmth as he thinks about the reason why.

Perhaps he should be angrier about this—feeling betrayed, or lied to, or even scorned, but that really doesn't matter to him right now; the love he feels and has felt eclipses every other emotion. Finally, he can let out a breath he's been holding for months, so many feelings pent up inside of him and terrified to leave. For so long, he was desperately watching for the end, and now... it's nowhere in sight.

It never has been,  
not once, and never  
will it be—not with his  
*soulmate*,  
the one he chose on his  
own and will continue  
to choose, by his side.



ZerOnize



